GIDEON BOHAK

ANCIENT JEWISH MAGIC

A HISTORY

CAMBRIDGE

ANCIENT JEWISH MAGIC

Gideon Bohak gives a pioneering account of the broad history of ancient Jewish magic, from the Second Temple to the rabbinic period. It is based both on ancient magicians' own compositions and products in Aramaic, Hebrew and Greek, and on the descriptions and prescriptions of non-magicians, to reconstruct a historical picture that is as balanced and nuanced as possible.

The main focus is on the cultural make-up of ancient Jewish magic, and special attention is paid to the processes of cross-cultural contacts and borrowings between Jews and non-Jews, as well as to inner-Jewish creativity. Other major issues explored include the place of magic within Jewish society, contemporary Jewish attitudes to magic, and the identity of its practitioners. Throughout, the book seeks to explain the methodological underpinnings of all sound research in this demanding field, and to highlight areas where further research is likely to prove fruitful.

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Acknowledgments

Scholarship is an eminently social thing, and the present study is no exception. Its ultimate origins lie in my Princeton days, when John Gager initiated me into the study of ancient magic. Its initial growth took place in Ann Arbor, when I was allowed to teach several courses on ancient magic and to curate an exhibition of ancient magical artifacts from the University of Michigan's rich archeological and papyrological collections (see Bohak 1996). But the book itself began to take shape here, at Tel-Aviv University, while teaching at the Department of Jewish Philosophy and the Program in Religious Studies and enjoying constant feedback from colleagues and students alike.

Many people have helped me along the way, with criticism and advice, and it is both a duty and a pleasure to thank them here. Ithamar Gruenwald, Yuval Harari, Reimund Leicht, and Dan Levene have been arguing with me on different aspects of ancient Jewish magic for many years now, and have commented on several chapters of this book when still in draft form. Shaul Shaked shared with me his unpublished work on the Genizah magical texts, without which this study would have been much the poorer, and provided helpful advice on numerous other occasions. And the anonymous readers of the original manuscript, who have left no stone unturned in their searching criticism, have surely helped me build a sounder scholarly structure. Finally, my students Ortal-Paz Saar and Bar Belinitzkey read the entire manuscript and improved it with many useful comments and suggestions, and my colleague Meir Shahar read it and assured me that some of it would make sense even to a Sinologist.

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Ritner, Ishai Rosen-Zvi, Peter Schäfer, Jeffrey Spier, Jacques van der Vliet, and Ada Yardeni. And if I have forgotten anyone, it was with no malice in mind, for I am forever grateful to all those who helped me in word or deed.

During the many years in which this book has been growing, I also had the occasion to present parts of my work on ancient Jewish magic in lectures, seminars, and conferences in Israel, Europe, and the USA. Listing all the places and occasions where I presented my work would make for a very tedious reading, but I would like to thank all these audiences for their helpful comments, criticism, and additional references, most of which have been incorporated into the present study. I would also like to thank the staff of the Tel-Aviv University Library and of the Institute of Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts in Jerusalem, for permission to study the microfilm copies of many Genizah fragments, and to the staffs of Cambridge University Library, the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary, the Bodleian Library, and the British Library for granting me access to the actual fragments.

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Last, but by no means least, I wish to thank the Rothschild Foundation (Yad ha-Nadiv) for that fateful phone-call on 13 May 2001, informing me that I had won the Michael Bruno Award (sometimes seen as the Israeli version of the MacArthur Fellowship). This prize enabled me to take a leave of absence from all my university obligations for eighteen months, during which much of the research that went into this book was conducted. It also gave me that confidence which only comes with recognition and with

financial security, and enabled me to write the kind of book I have always had in mind. At a time when young academics are often forced to prostitute their half-baked wares to the goddess of productivity, I have been blessed with the challenge to produce the kind of monograph that would justify a prize I have already won, and with the opportunity to do so. I will always cherish the experience, but whether the final product indeed justifies the initial investment is only for you, the reader, to decide.

Introduction

> 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.

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

"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.

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

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.

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

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.

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.

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 *Maḥanaim* 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.

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

understand why scholars are wrong in assuming that Jewish magic does not and could not exist, we had better spend some time looking at each of these claims and assumptions. It must be stressed, however, that while embarking upon philosophical, theological, and phenomenological issues, our interest here is less in a theoretical analysis of all the different manners in which the existence of Jewish magic could perhaps be explained, but rather in those explanations which are of relevance for the study of ancient Jewish magic. In later periods of Jewish history, and in Christian, Muslim, or other cultural traditions where magic plays an important role, both the formulation of the problem and the nature of the solutions might prove quite different, but such issues will have to be dealt with elsewhere.

BIBLICAL PROHIBITIONS AND BIBLICAL PARADIGMS

Given the repeated, and well-known, biblical prohibitions against dabbling in magic, sorcery, witchcraft, augury, and all related arts, one might expect magic to be practiced, if at all, only by Jewish deviants and heretics.[7] And yet, as the present study will amply demonstrate, magic was widely practiced by Jews at least from late antiquity onwards, and was in no way limited to apostate Jews, or to some religiously lax strata of Jewish society. How, then, are we to explain the enormous gap between the letter of the law and the spirit of the people?

One possible explanation would be that the Jewish readers of the Hebrew Bible found creative ways to overcome its prohibition of magic. Religious systems, and especially the so-called "book religions," often are forced to deal with the gap between their changing norms and those ordained by their sacred Scriptures, and can display amazing ingenuity in the process.[8] In the Jewish case, we may note how the biblical demands for "an eye for an eye" justice were reinterpreted by the rabbis of late antiquity and turned into a system of monetary fines and compensations, or how the prohibition against lending money on interest to other Jews, and the injunction to annul all such debts every seven years, were creatively subverted from the Second Temple period onwards by social and religious leaders who realized how impractical they were. We may also note how the prohibition against the fashioning of any images was interpreted very literally in some periods of Jewish history and in certain circles of Jewish society, and very liberally

[7] This, for example, is how Margalioth viewed *Sepher ha-Razim* (Margalioth 1966, p. xv).
[8] For such processes, see Smith 1993, esp. chapter 5, and Halbertal 1997, pp. 11–44.

in others. In the sphere of magic, too, we shall see some such ingenuity – as when we discuss (in Chapter 6) the rabbinic injunction that one may not *practice* magic, but one may *study* it, and even *teach* it to others (including, of course, some hands-on demonstrations!) – but such examples can hardly explain the pervasiveness of Jewish magic in antiquity. Nowhere in the ancient Jewish discussions of *halakha* (the Jewish legal system, which encompasses every aspect of the traditional Jewish way of life) will we find a systematic and concerted effort to legalize magic, as it were; if we are to understand how magical practices could become so popular within Jewish society of all periods, we must look for a different type of explanation.

Another possible line of reasoning would take the opposite route. If magic was pervasive, perhaps this was due to the willingness of a large number of Jews to ignore the biblical prohibitions on this score, and if so, perhaps these Jews ignored other biblical injunctions as well.[9] Here, however, we are sliding down a very slippery slope, for one of the greatest difficulties in the study of ancient Jewish society is to know which Jews – and especially how many Jews – observed which types of *halakha*, and which Jews ignored it altogether. As we shall see in Chapter 4, ancient Jewish magicians often were quite willing to borrow powerful names, signs, and practices from their non-Jewish neighbors, including some which were not strictly "kosher." And yet, we shall also see (especially in Chapter 5) that the same magicians often went to great lengths to avoid transgressing the basic biblical commandments, and that almost all of their activities lay well within the borders of the normative Jewish behavior of their time. Thus, while we have some evidence of Jews who completely abandoned the Jewish way of life (what the ancient Jewish writers who mention them call "apostates"), or of Jews who went so far in allegorizing the biblical legislation that they no longer observed its literal precepts, such Jews hardly are suitable candidates on which to peg the magical activities we shall examine in subsequent chapters, much of which is entirely Jewish.[10] Similarly, while rabbinic literature often speaks of *minim* (a blanket term covering different types of "Bible-reading heretics") as dabbling in magic, and even describes magical duels between rabbis and such *minim* (see Chapter 6), when we read the actual Jewish magical texts we find nothing in them that would support reading them as connected with such *minim*. In fact, as we shall see in Chapter 5, the Jewish magical texts of late antiquity are very Jewish, and in some ways even more conservative than other strands of Jewish culture

[9] This, for example, is the view of Goodenough 1953–68, esp. vol. I, pp. 3–33.
[10] For apostate Jews in antiquity, see Barclay 1998 and Bohak 2002, both with further bibliography.

at the time. Thus, the question of the gap between the biblical legislation and the actual behavior of Torah-abiding Jews remains.

If the difference between what the Bible seems to say and what Bible-bound Jews seem to do lies neither in their deliberate attempts to legalize magic nor in their conscious decision to ignore the biblical injunctions on this score, its roots may be sought in the Hebrew Bible itself, and especially in two different aspects of the biblical dealings with magic. First, in the nature of the prohibitions against magic, which upon a closer examination turn out to be much more complex and less straightforward than is commonly acknowledged. Second, in the biblical stories about men of God and the miracles they performed, and in some of the rituals whose practice the Hebrew Bible describes, tolerates, and even prescribes, both of which could serve as powerful paradigms for post-biblical Jewish magicians. It is to a brief survey of these issues that the present section is devoted.[11]

One final point of introduction. Given our interest in post-biblical Jewish magic, the following discussion does not seek to offer a survey of all passages in the Hebrew Bible which have something to say about magic, or to study the magical practices of the Jews of the First Temple period. Its object is much more modest – to show how post-biblical Jews could dabble in magic without seeing themselves as transgressing the laws of the Torah. It is also for this reason that the following analysis will ignore such issues as the textual criticism of the Hebrew Bible, or the sources of the biblical laws and stories, as well as most of the voluminous output of modern biblical scholarship. Rather than search for what the biblical writers may have written and what they may have had in mind, we focus here on how the texts found in the Hebrew Bible may have been read by those post-biblical Jews who saw it as sacred and binding.

Some biblical prohibitions

Reading the laws of the Torah (=the Pentateuch), one is struck by its recurrent condemnation of a wide range of magical and divinatory practices and practitioners. And yet, looking more closely at these prohibitions, one also discovers how ambiguous their overall effect must have been for some of their post-biblical readers. To begin assessing this issue, let us first focus on the most detailed and comprehensive set of biblical prohibitions of magic and divination. It is found in the Book of Deuteronomy, which purports to consist of Moses' first-person farewell speech to the sons of Israel as

[11] For what follows, see also the important study of Kuemmerlin-McLean 1986.

his death was approaching, and is embedded in a set of laws concerning legitimate types of religious and political leadership for the future Jewish polity. Following some descriptions of the nomination and roles of judges, inspectors, levites, and priests, and even a king (Dt 16.18–18.8), we find out whom the Israelites may not appoint or consult:

> When you come to the land which YHWH your God is granting you, you shall not learn to do like the abominations of those Gentile nations. There shall not be found among you one who passes his son and his daughter through the fire, a *qosem* of *qesamim*, a *me'onen*, a *menaḥesh*, and a *mekhasheph*. And a *ḥover* of *ḥever*, and one who asks an *'ov* and a *yide'oni*, and one who seeks of the dead. For whoever does these is an abomination to YHWH, and it is because of these abominations that YHWH your God uproots them from before you. Innocent shall you be with YHWH your God. For these Gentile nations whom you shall supplant listen to *me'onenim* and *qosmim*, whereas you, not thus has YHWH your God granted you. A prophet from among you, from your brothers, like myself (i.e., Moses) shall YHWH your God raise up for you; to him shall you listen. (Dt 18.9–15)

The passage goes on to describe the roles and functions of God's prophets, and especially the touchy issue of how to distinguish between God-appointed and self-appointed ones, but such issues are of less interest for the present inquiry. For our study of the biblical attitudes towards magic and divination we must note that the prohibitions here are not so much on certain *practices* as on certain *practitioners*, who are presented as the exact opposite of the God-sent prophet. To him one may listen, to them one may not. This is an extremely important observation, for it seems quite clear that neither magic nor divination are forbidden *per se*, and that one might even expect God's legitimate priests and prophets (or other Jewish leaders) to provide God's followers with many of the services that these forbidden practitioners provide for the Gentile nations whom the Jews are about to supplant. Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, this implicit distinction is made patently clear, as, for example, in the story of Saul, whose attempts to consult YHWH through dreams, the *Urim and Thumim*, and the prophets is considered legitimate, while his turning to a *ba'alat 'ov* is not (1 Sm 28.6, 15), or in the story of King Aḥaziah, who is rebuked not for trying to foretell the future, but for consulting "Baal Zebub the god of Ekron" rather than the Jewish God (2 Kgs 1.2–6, 16).[12] As we shall see many more such examples below, we may now stress that the formulation of the biblical prohibitions as against practitioners and not against practices is the norm in other parts of the Pentateuch as well, even in contexts which

[12] See also Fishbane 1971, pp. 30–37, and Lust 1974.

have nothing to do with legitimate or illegitimate types of leadership. In Ex 22.17, the terse injunction that "a *mekhashepha* you shall not let live" (which takes only three words in biblical Hebrew!) is embedded in a miscellany of laws on entirely unrelated subjects. And in Lv 19.31 and 20.6, the prohibition against turning to the *'ovot* and the *yide'onim* is inserted in a long set of laws designed to preserve the Israelites' ritual and moral purity. Within that unit, one also finds the prohibition, "you shall not *tenaḥashu* and you shall not *te'onenu* (Lv 19.26)," a rare example of a Torah passage in which the actual practices are prohibited, and not just those who practice them. Finally, in Nm 23.23, Balaam testifies that "there is no *naḥash* in Jacob, and no *qesem* in Israel," an emphatic statement which some readers happily seized upon as the ultimate proof that there is no such thing as Jewish magic. Here, as in many other cases, Yahwistic wishful thinking was turned by the biblical narrators into a statement of fact (and put in the mouth of the greatest non-Jewish expert in the art of magic!) and was adopted as such not only by some medieval Jewish philosophers, but even by some modern scholars.

A second striking feature of the long list of forbidden practitioners in Deuteronomy 18, and one which is of even greater importance for the study of post-biblical Jewish magic, is that it consists mostly of technical terms whose meaning is far from clear. Modern scholars, equipped with all the tools of philological and historical inquiry, and with an ever-growing corpus of Ancient Near Eastern magical texts with which to compare the biblical injunctions, are far from agreeing on the exact meaning of each of these biblical terms, or on how to translate them (soothsayers, wizards, augurs, sorcerers, magicians, diviners, fortune-tellers – English too has an extensive, and quite vague, vocabulary for such professionals!).[13] It is for this reason that we are better served by transliterating these technical terms than by translating them, for most of these terms admit of no certain translation. Needless to add, they would have been much more puzzling to their ancient readers, who had no access to the lexical, textual, and archeological evidence accumulated by modern scholarship, and very little awareness of its possible uses.[14] And when such readers turned to the other passages in the Hebrew Bible in which these terms appear, in order to learn more about their exact meanings, they learned very little about the

[13] See, for example, Robertson Smith 1884–85; Davies 1898, pp. 40–59 and 78–90; Jeffers 1996; Seidel 1996, pp. 15–66; Schmitt 2004, pp. 107–16; see also Kuemmerlin-McLean 1986, pp. 60–106 and 114–33.

[14] And see, for example, Sifre Dt 171–72 (pp. 218–19 Finkelstein) and Midrash Tannaim to Dt 18.9–11 (pp. 109–10 Hoffmann), for the rabbis' divergent identifications of many of these technical terms.

practices involved (the one exception being the *ba'alat 'ov* of Endor, in 1 Sm 28, whose activities are described in some detail). In many instances, they found further insistence that these were evil customs, practiced by non-Israelites and by "bad Israelites," and highly displeasing to God.[15] But in other cases they found the very same terms in textual contexts which only made their meaning even harder to fathom. Thus, to give just one example, the prophet Isaiah warns his audience that God would soon remove from Jerusalem and Judea all its leaders, and lists them in detail as "a hero and a man of war, a judge and a prophet and a *qosem* and an elder; a commander of fifty soldiers and a man of noble status, and a counselor and a man wise in *ḥarashim*, and an expert in *laḥash*."[16] How is it that a *qosem*, who certainly is one of the "bad guys" in Deuteronomy 18, here appears side by side with the judge, the prophet, and all the other legitimate Jewish leaders?[17] And what about a man wise in *ḥarashim* or an expert in *laḥash* – what exactly is it that they do, and, if it is an activity relating to magic or divination, why are they listed here, and why are they never even mentioned in the Torah's legislation on these issues? Post-biblical readers of the Hebrew Bible certainly were puzzled by such exegetical conundrums, as can be deduced from their very different renderings of and commentaries on this and similar passages in the Hebrew Bible.[18]

And this brings us to the third and final problem with the list of magical and divinatory practitioners provided by Deuteronomy 18, namely, that it is neither consistent nor complete. The first item on the list, "one who passes his son and his daughter through the fire," has generated much scholarly discussion, but it is commonly agreed that the religious custom to which it refers has little to do with magic or divination. Thus, it seems as if the underlying connection between these prohibitions is not that they deal with magic and divination, but that they are religious customs common to the pre-Israelite dwellers of the Land of Canaan. This might also explain the absence from this list of other types of magicians and diviners who happen to be mentioned elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, such as *ḥarṭumim*, *gazrin*,

[15] Non-Israelites: See, e.g., Nm 22.7; Jos 13.22; 2 Kgs 9.22; Is 47.9, 12; Na 3.4. "Bad Israelites": 2 Kgs 17.17, 21.6; Is 2.6; Mi 5.11; Mal 3.5; 2 Chr 33.6, etc.

[16] Is 3.2–3.

[17] See also Jer 27.9 or Prv 16.10. Of course, readers of the Hebrew Bible would have known that some of the technical terms may have undergone semantic changes during the biblical period itself, as is made clear by 1 Sm 9.9.

[18] For other ambiguous passages, see, e.g., Ez 21.26 (are belomancy, divination by the *teraphim* and hepatoscopy all subcategories of *qesem*, or independent parallel practices?); Jer 27.9 (why are prophecy and divination by dreams included in the list? Are all the practices mentioned here forbidden, or is it just the answers they provided which irritated Jeremiah?); Neh 3.12 (*Ben ha-Loḥesh* as a personal name); etc.

ashaphim, or *casdim* (Chaldaeans), who are always associated with the courts of the Egyptian or Babylonian kings.[19] But while the absence of such practitioners from this specific passage may be clear enough, their absence from the other biblical prohibitions of various practitioners of magic and divination is far more striking. Were we to adopt the intuitive assumption that what is not explicitly forbidden by the law might in fact be permitted, we could even conclude that the Hebrew Bible forbids consulting a *qosem* but permits the consulting of a *casdi* or an *ashaph*. This would, of course, be the wrong conclusion to reach, but it does highlight the incomplete nature of the biblical legislation on this score. Equally defensible, and much more important for the study of post-biblical Jewish culture, would be the claim that the use of *laḥash* – which literally means "whisper" and which is used, for example, to charm snakes – is permitted, since it is never forbidden by the Torah and is actually referred to quite favorably in other books of the Bible.[20] As we shall see in the subsequent chapters, the whispering of secret curses, biblical verses, and magical incantations was a favorite pastime of many ancient Jews, including some of the leading religious authorities of their time.

The lacunose nature of the biblical legislation concerning magic may be highlighted by looking at one more example. In Leviticus 24, a story is told of a man of mixed parentage (his mother was an Israelite but his father an Egyptian) who, in a fight with an Israelite person, "*naqav*ed the Name . . . and cursed." He was immediately brought to Moses and put in confinement, until God would instruct Moses as to what must be done in this case. The verdict was sharp and clear – the culprit was to be stoned to death by the entire community. To this verdict, God appends a more general ruling:

> And to the sons of Israel you shall say thus: Whichever man curses his God will bear responsibility for his sin. And he who *noqev*s the Name (of) YHWH will surely die, the whole community will surely stone him; whether a *ger* or an Israelite – if he *noqev*s the Name, he should die.[21]

The story is striking in three major ways. First, here is an interesting attestation of what is perhaps the oldest continuous practice in the history of Jewish magic, namely, the use of God's Name to achieve beneficial or aggressive results. We shall have much more to say about the development

[19] *Ḥarṭumim*: Gn 41.8; Ex 7.22 etc.; Dn 1.20 etc. *Gazrin*: Dn 2.27 etc. *Ashaphim*: Dn 1.20; 2.2. etc. *Casdim*: Dn 2.2 etc.

[20] For *laḥash*, see Ps 58.6; Is 3.3; Jer 8.17; Eccl 10.11; and cf. Is 3.20; Neh 3.12.

[21] Lv 24.10–16.

and offshoots of this practice in subsequent chapters of the present study. Second, that although the prohibition formulated here is not against consulting a certain practitioner but against a specific practice, the exact nature of this practice (which seems to require no special knowledge and may be known even to a half-Israelite) is not entirely clear. The verb used here, *naqav*, usually means "to perforate, make a hole in" but is also used for the marking of names on a list and even for saying or expressing a single name.[22] It may also be connected with the root QB(B) "to curse," but the prohibition against cursing God is made clear by many other biblical passages, and our culprit does not seem to have cursed God, but his rival.[23] Once again, we are left wondering what post-biblical readers of this passage had to make of it, especially when elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible they found numerous protagonists uttering YHWH's Name, and in at least one case – that of Elisha, to which we shall return below – they found an eminent man of God cursing his rivals "in the Name (of) YHWH" (2 Kgs 2.24). In this case too, it would seem, the Bible was sending its readers some very mixed messages about what was forbidden and what was not.

But the third and most surprising point about this story is that the praxis mentioned here – which we would readily identify as the magical use of God's powerful Name – is conspicuously absent from the prohibitions of magic and divination in Deuteronomy 18, Exodus 22, or Leviticus 19 and 20. Once again, we are forced to admit that the laws there dealt not with "magic" and "divination" as such, but with foreign practitioners and practices which the Jews may not follow, and for which God's prophets would provide proper and acceptable substitutes. The misuse of God's Name apparently fell under a very different rubric.[24]

This, then, is the heart of the matter. Unlike the biblical prohibitions of murder, of homosexual relations between males, of lighting a fire on the Sabbath, and of numerous other activities, which are phrased in ways that leave no room for doubt about what exactly is forbidden, there is no clear-cut biblical prohibition of magic or divination. What the Pentateuch did provide its readers was a partial list of magical and divinatory practitioners to whom one may not turn, or whom one should not even let live, and occasional references to such practices which are forbidden to Jews and

[22] Marking names on a list: e.g., Nm 1.17; expressing a single name: see esp. Is 62.2.

[23] For the possible connection between NQB and QBB see Fishbane 1971, pp. 277–8. For the prohibition of cursing God, see Ex 22.27, and cf. 1 Sm 3.13 (with the *tiqqun sophrim*); 1 Kgs 21.10, 13; Is 8.12; Jb 2.9, etc.

[24] And cf. the prohibition, in Ex 20.7 and Dt 5.11, against "raising" God's Name in vain, which may or may not have had some magical connotations.

which (if we may take Balaam's words for it) they indeed do not practice. But the Torah never provides clear indications as to what exactly to include under each of the many rubrics it mentions, and no overarching explanation of why it is that these practices are forbidden, except for the fact that they were foreign and caused defilement, and that they might pose a threatening alternative to the legitimate leadership which God had provided for His people Israel. The misuse of God's Name to gain immediate benefits also was forbidden, but apparently was classified under a different category. Thus, when post-biblical Jews wanted to know whether a specific practice common in their own times was forbidden by the biblical legislation, they had a very hard time finding it there. Are exorcisms forbidden by the Torah? Is the use of amulets forbidden? Does the adjuration of demons and angels contravene any biblical injunction? And what about the use of spells and incantations, of *materia magica*, *abracadabra* words, or arcane magical signs and symbols? Of course, those Jews who wanted to prohibit all such activities could easily subsume them under a blanket term such as *qosem* or *mekhasheph*, and thus "prove" that they were forbidden by Torah.[25] All other Jews, however, could go on practicing their magical and divinatory activities and honestly insist that these were not forbidden by the biblical legislation. If we charge such Jews with duplicity, it only testifies to our inability to understand the complex relations between a religious community and its sacred texts.

Some biblical paradigms

When post-biblical Jews read the Hebrew Bible, they found in it not only the disjointed and vague set of prohibitions which we have just surveyed. They also found in it a large set of stories, descriptions, and injunctions from which they could deduce that certain types of practitioners and certain types of practices actually were accepted, and even applauded, by the biblical legislator and narrators. Such descriptions could therefore serve as powerful paradigms upon which these readers could model their own behavior without any fear lest this would somehow involve them in actions displeasing to God. Let us therefore first focus on what is by far the most important paradigm for the study of later Jewish (and Christian!) magic – that of the holy man and his activities; we shall then turn to another set of

[25] As was done, for example, by Maimonides in his *Mishneh Torah*, Hilkhot 'Avodah Zarah 11.4–16. Well aware of the *lacunae* in the biblical legislation, Maimonides provides an extensive list of *practices* forbidden (according to his view!) by the Torah.

powerful paradigms, that of the use of the great powers inherent in God's sacred objects and those who handle them.

The man of God

Certainly the most striking biblical stories relating to the actual practice of what by most modern definitions of magic would fall under that rubric are those dealing with the wonder-working men of God, and especially Elijah and Elisha.[26] Unlike such prophets as Isaiah, Jeremiah, or Ezekiel, Elijah and Elisha were not great orators and preachers who sometimes accompanied their verbal messages with striking symbolic actions. Unlike Moses, they were not great military or political leaders and legislators who also worked many miracles on the way. For these two, wandering around and bending the laws of nature to their own will seems to have been both a hobby and a vocation. How exactly Elijah became such a holy man we are never told, but from his first appearance in the biblical text – declaring to King Ahab that "there will be no dew or rain throughout these years except according to my own command" (1 Kgs 17.1), his self-confidence is quite astounding. The biblical narrator does not record Ahab's response to this impertinent threat, but does describe Elijah's immediate flight to the regions by the Jordan river, where, at God's command, some ravens provide him with fresh bread and meat (1 Kgs 17.6). And when the drought he had ordained makes living in Palestine impossible, and presumably quite dangerous for the man who had brought this hardship upon the helpless peasants, he leaves the Israelite territories and temporarily settles in Ṣarphath, a village in the hinterland of Sidon, where he performs two impressive miracles. First he produces *ex nihilo* a seemingly endless supply of flour and oil for the poor widow with whom he is staying (1 Kgs 17.14–16), and next he resuscitates her dead boy by praying to YHWH and stretching himself three times over the fresh corpse (1 Kgs 17.19–24). Two years later he is back in drought-stricken Samaria and in King Ahab's court, where the king's chief servant is convinced that his long absence had been due to some marvelous vanishing act (1 Kgs 18.10–12). He then beats Baal's priests in a competition for the production of instantaneous fire by merely praying to God (1 Kgs 18.30–39), and finally produces the rain which he had stopped two years earlier by sitting on the ground, placing his head between his knees, and repeatedly sending his servant-boy to look for the approaching rain clouds (1 Kgs 18.41–45). In spite of the heavy rain which begins to fall,

[26] For an intelligent reading of the Elijah and Elisha stories from a Central African perspective, see Wendland 1992.

he manages to outrun the mounted Ahab (1 Kgs 18.46), and then marches for forty days and forty nights after eating one small cake and drinking a cup of water (1 Kgs 19.6–8). Several years later, he is back at it again, producing two more instantaneous fires, each of which consumes fifty armed men and their commanders (2 Kgs 1.9–12), and cleaving the Jordan river in twain by merely beating the water with his garment, so that he and Elisha can cross it on dry land (2 Kgs 2.8). Finally, he caps his achievements by mounting a chariot of fire and vanishing high in the sky (2 Kgs 2.11).

With Elijah gone, Elisha – who had been chosen by God to succeed him (1 Kgs 19.16), was "ordained" when Elijah threw his garment upon him without any prior warning or training (1 Kgs 19.19–21), and is now in possession of Elijah's garment (2 Kgs 2.13) – is immediately revealed as a worthy successor. Stuck on the farther side of the Jordan river, his first feat is to re-cleave it in twain by consciously imitating his vanished master (2 Kgs 2.14). He then settles in Jericho, and is soon approached by the locals with a request worthy of his rising reputation – to sweeten the city's water-source, which currently is undrinkable (just as Moses had done at Marah (Ex 15.25)). He does this by taking a new dish with some salt, throwing the salt into the water-source, and emphatically stating that "Thus says YHWH: I have cured these waters, there shall be no more death and miscarriage from there" (2 Kgs 2.20–22). Nine centuries later, we may add, the water was still drinkable, and was even used to bring fertility to barren women – all as a result of Elisha's ancient miracle. This, however, is a point to which we shall return in the following chapter.

Having just helped the people of Jericho, Elisha soon reveals the darker side of the man of God's great thaumaturgical powers:

> And he went up from there (towards) Bet El, and as he was going up the road little boys came out of the town and made fun of him and said to him, Up you go, baldy; up you go, baldy! And he turned around and saw them, and he cursed them in the Name (of) YHWH; and two female bears came out of the forest and mangled forty-two of these children. And he went from there to Mt. Carmel, and thence returned to Samaria.[27]

This gruesome story is an extremely important corrective for our rosy perception of the man of God as a kind and righteous precursor of Robin Hood, helping the widows, producing rain for the poor farmers, and punishing the wicked priests of Baal. In thinking of such holy men, we must always remember that it was Elijah himself who had sent the drought upon the poor farmers in the first place, and recall how the quick-tempered and

[27] 2 Kgs 2.23–25.

vindictive Elisha sent the bears upon the children who had teased him, and did not even stop to tend to the wounded.[28] When all is said and done, the most characteristic feature of the man of God is not his community services, or even his divine message or exceeding piety, but his great powers. And when the power is there, the abuse of that power is never far behind.

Arresting as this scene might be, Elisha's feats do not end here. First, he produces *ex nihilo* an abundant supply of oil (2 Kgs 4.2–6), just as Elijah once did, but outshines his master's example by foretelling to his hostess that she would soon bear a child (2 Kgs 4.16–17). A few years later, the boy whose birth fulfilled the prophecy duly dies of a sunstroke, enabling Elisha to retrace Elijah's footsteps once again. Apparently bent on accomplishing a feat never performed by his master, he first sends his servant to place his staff on the boy's face, in an attempt to heal him telepathically. Only when this procedure fails (an interesting demonstration of the limits of Elisha's powers!) does he resuscitate the boy in person, by praying to God and lying upon the corpse (2 Kgs 4.29–35). He then cures a stew into which some poisonous bulbs were mistakenly thrown, a feat he performs by merely throwing some flour into the cauldron (2 Kgs 4.38–41). Some time later, he is asked by the king of Israel to heal Naaman, the great military commander of the kingdom of Aram (Syria), of his leprosy. The wretched colonel comes in person to Elisha's own home, expecting him to "come out and stand, and call by the Name (of) YHWH his God and raise his hands over the (afflicted) part and gather the leprosy away," (2 Kgs 5.11) and is quite insulted when Elisha sends him to bathe seven times in the Jordan river. But his servants convince him to follow Elisha's advice, and when he bathes in the river his leprosy immediately vanishes (2 Kgs 5.13–14). When he wishes to pay Elisha for this service, the man of God emphatically refuses (2 Kgs 5.16), and when his servant surreptitiously charges a fee from the Syrian general, Elisha telepathically discovers the crime and vengefully sends Naaman's leprosy upon him and his descendants (2 Kgs 5.25–27). Once again, we are reminded not to fool around with a man of God.

Elisha's subsequent feats include making a sunken iron axe float by merely throwing a piece of wood on the water's surface (2 Kgs 6.6), and telepathically discovering all the war-plans devised in the council of the Syrian king (2 Kgs 6.8–12). Incensed, the king orders his arrest, but Elisha is undisturbed by the forces besieging his home. When his servant panics, he prays

[28] For the rabbis' displeasure with this repugnant behavior, see bt Sot 46b–47a. And note how, in 1 Kgs 17.18, the widow is convinced that it is Elijah's presence which has brought death upon her son, and castigates him accordingly.

to God to open the servant's eyes until he realizes that Elisha in fact is protected by a cohort of invisible fiery chariots – an interesting hint of the presumed sources of his great powers (2 Kgs 6.16–17). Elisha now prays to God to strike the besiegers with a temporary blindness, and then leads them, like the Pied Piper of Hamelin, into the hands of the king of Israel (2 Kgs 6.18–20). After one more feat of telepathic eavesdropping (2 Kgs 6.32), and two accurate predictions of future events (2 Kgs 7.1–2, 16–20), he removes himself to Damascus and correctly foretells the sad fate of its current king and the future actions of the king's successor (2 Kgs 8.10, 12).[29] This is almost his last great feat, for we next hear of his illness (2 Kgs 13.14), and – after one more clash with the king of Israel and one more accurate foretelling of future events (2 Kgs 13.19, 25) – of his death. This all too human finale, so different from the glorious vanishing act performed by his master Elijah, sealed his future history – he would never follow his master in becoming a wandering mediator between the Jews and their Maker and a herald of the coming Messiah. It did, however, have one small advantage, in that it enabled him to demonstrate the magical powers of his dry bones, something Elijah could never do. For when a year passed and Elisha's corpse had already decomposed, a funeral procession surprised by an enemy ambush dumped the corpse it was leading to burial into Elisha's tomb and fled the scene, "and the (dead) man touched the bones of Elisha and came back to life and stood up on his feet" (2 Kgs 13.21).[30]

Elijah and Elisha are, of course, not the only biblical protagonists to perform miracles and wonders, and one could easily adduce a long set of amazing feats performed by prophets, men of God, and political and military leaders, including Joshua's successful stopping of the movement of the sun and moon, and the many wondrous feats performed by Moses, the great leader and lawgiver himself.[31] But rather than rehearsing all these examples here, we may merely stress some of their wider implications for post-biblical Jewish (and Christian) readers of these stories and for the development of post-biblical Jewish magic. First, we must note the long and variegated list of supernatural feats performed by such men of God. They can cure one patient of an illness or send it upon another, bring the dead to life or kill whomever they will, hear faraway voices, divine future

[29] In this case, however, one might claim that it was Elisha's prediction that triggered Ben Hadad's murder (2 Kgs 8.15), which is how the prediction was fulfilled.

[30] That later Jewish readers were impressed with this feat may be seen, for example, from Ben Sira 48.14.

[31] Men of God: see, e.g., 1 Kgs 13.1–6; 1 Kgs 20.35–36, etc. Joshua: Jos 10.12–14; Moses: numerous examples, including Ex 14.21, 27; 15.25; 17.6, 11–12, etc.

events, and stop the rain or restart it, stop the sun and the moon in their courses, make iron float, cure poisonous substances, resuscitate the dead and do away with the living, and so on. With such a strong thaumaturgical paradigm embedded so deeply into sacred Scriptures, later readers of the Hebrew Bible would have a very hard time accepting any claim that such feats are intrinsically impossible, because of some philosophers' insistence on the fixed laws of nature which cannot easily be bent.[32] If Moses, Joshua, Elijah, and Elisha could bend the laws of nature to their will, there was no real reason to cast doubt on the claims of latter-day holy men and magicians who insisted that they too could perform similar feats. Some of the claimants may be lying, but the claim itself was in no way deemed implausible by all but the most extreme rationalists.

A second point of some importance has to do with gender. In the Hebrew Bible, the men of God are always men, and while females sometimes perform great deeds – be it Deborah's leadership in times of war or Yael's courageous murder of an enemy general – no biblical woman is ever portrayed as reviving the dead, curing the sick, or performing any of the other feats performed by the men of God. As we shall see throughout the present study, this would remain an important paradigm in later Jewish history (in contrast, for example, with later Christian history), with only a few hints in ancient Jewish literature that women too could sometimes perform miracles. From its very beginning, Jewish thaumaturgy was a deeply engendered affair.

A third point which bears stressing is the recurrent emergence of a close connection between holy men and politics. In the case of Elijah or Elisha, this can be seen from their frequent encounters with kings and commanders, both Israelites and foreigners, who wish to tap their powers, and from their frequent clashes with the political establishment. But the involvement of such men with politics can take other shapes too. In the case of Joshua, we see how a military leader not otherwise identified as a man of God can stop the sun and moon in their course when the exigencies of a battle so demand. And in the case of Moses, we see how a man of God who also is the supreme secular leader of his people – a status that no other biblical man of God ever achieved – uses his miraculous powers to strengthen his social control over the lost sheep of Israel. Time after time we find the great leader confronted with the hardships of life in Egyptian bondage or in the desert wilderness and challenged by his flock to improve their situation or make way for other leaders, and each time he rises to the occasion by

[32] See, e.g., Robinson 1983 and Kreisel 1984.

performing a great miracle on their behalf or annihilating the opposition. As we shall see in subsequent chapters, the use of miracles and magic to gain public influence or social control was well known to later Jewish leaders as well.

A fourth point to be stressed here is that in the many stories of the men of God and their miracles the Hebrew Bible complements its anti-magical legislation by ensuring us that while turning to non-Israelite practitioners is not to be tolerated, there are adequate substitutes for such practitioners within Jewish society itself. If you lost some property, you could go to the Israelite seer or prophet or man of God (1 Sm 9.6ff) who would help you find it, and if your child died, or your food got poisoned, or you needed an accurate prediction of future events, you could turn to a prophet or a man of God, and he would solve your problem in a way that was entirely acceptable to the biblical narrators. Thus, there is no real need to turn to any of the forbidden practitioners, for anything they can do the man of God can do better. In light of such precedents, the fact that later readers of these stories had no qualms about turning to Jewish holy men and magicians in their own society should hardly raise an eyebrow. Moreover, the Hebrew Bible makes it clear that when Aaron and Moses were confronted by actual magicians (something which never happened to Elijah or Elisha), they beat them at their own game with a striking series of signs and miracles (Ex 7.8ff). As we shall see throughout the present study, this too could serve as a powerful paradigm for subsequent readers of the Hebrew Bible, who had to devise their own attitudes towards troublesome magicians and their boastful challenges.

And here we come to the most important issue, namely, the clues provided by these biblical narratives for a possible distinction between holy men and magicians in a Jewish context, a distinction which is necessary in light of the fact that these two types of wonder-workers often appeared in similar social settings and performed similar feats. This distinction is of great importance, if only for the fact that the label "magician" has often been used – both in ancient literature and in modern scholarship – as a pejorative appellation affixed to people who saw themselves, and were seen by others, as men of God, a polemical bias which has done much harm to the study of Jewish magic.[33]

Looking at the biblical men of God, we find that some of their actions are in the service of God and nation, but others are motivated by purely personal reasons, be it Elijah's desire to help the widow who had helped him

[33] For a pertinent example, see Smith 1978, rightly criticized by, e.g., Garrett 1989.

or Elisha's rage at the puerile pranksters who made fun of his receding hairline. In most cases they help their Israelite brethren, but they also cater to non-Israelite admirers and clients, be it a poor widow from the Phoenician hinterland or the Chief of Staff from Damascus. Some of their actions are noble and moral, some – like Elisha's posthumous resuscitation of a corpse – are unintentional, and some are vindictive and downright reprehensible. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, the range of techniques they employ to perform their feats is itself quite impressive: in some cases, a simple verbal command or a short prayer is all it takes; in others, they use bodily movements and gestures, and perhaps also certain acts of supreme concentration (1 Kgs 18.42); and in many cases they use various implements, devices and materials, be it a garment, a staff, a plate with some salt, a piece of wood, a pinch of flour, or the water of the Jordan river. In most cases, these are readily available, daily objects and substances, ones which would take no effort to procure, and yet the very fact that such objects are needed at all is noteworthy, for no attempt is made by the biblical narrators to claim that holy men could work their miracles by their will, or by their word, alone. More surprising, perhaps, in some cases it is God Himself who instructs Moses on which ingredients to use to perform his miracles, be it some soot from a furnace to get a plague going (Ex 9.8–10) or a piece of wood to cure a bitter water-source (Ex 15.25).

What all this adds up to, in other words, is an extremely useful set of paradigms for post-biblical Jewish practitioners to choose from. Both the holy men who were so common in later Jewish (and Christian) history and the magicians, who were no less common, and in some periods and places much more so, could easily justify most of their claims, aims, techniques, and social aspirations by appealing to the biblical precedents provided by Elijah, Elisha, Moses, and their like. Viewed from this perspective, it would seem that the magicians of post-biblical Judaism differed little from the holy men of their time or of the biblical past. Like them, they too practiced their rituals for the sake of themselves and of others (both Jews and non-Jews), aimed both for morally commendable and for reprehensible results, and used a wide range of techniques and implements. Unlike the holy men, they probably charged a per-service fee, but even this is far from certain,[34] and holy men too often relied on their clients for accommodation and provisions, as Elijah and Elisha used to do, or expected some kind of compensation for their efforts, as the young Saul took for granted

[34] As we shall note in subsequent chapters, the sources at our disposal are such that we know much more about what the Jewish magicians of antiquity did than about how they were paid for their services.

(1 Sm 9.7–8). Unlike the holy men, who would often describe themselves, and be described by some of their followers, as on a mission from God, the magicians would usually make no claims of an ulterior mission behind their praxis. And unlike the holy men, who catered only to some of the needs of the wider population, the magicians responded to more of their clients' needs, and especially their personal needs – including, for example, erotic magic, in which the men of God never (or rarely) engaged. On the other hand, there were some activities, such as resuscitating the dead or producing rain, in which the holy men frequently engaged but which the magicians tended to avoid.

These distinctions notwithstanding, the biggest difference between the Jewish holy men and the magicians seems to have been that the former relied on their own innate powers, and on readily available paraphernalia, to perform their miraculous deeds. The magicians, on the other hand, relied on an *acquired body of technical knowledge* – whose changing contents are the main focus of the present study – and often also on specifically magical implements, materials, words, and symbols, to perform their own miracles. Thus, the manner by which Elisha became a man of God, when Elijah merely threw his garment upon him (1 Kgs 19.19–21), is extremely instructive, precisely because it involved election, not instruction. The garment with which Elijah had performed some of his miracles has now been passed on to his heir, who will use it in a similar fashion, but no technical advice on how to use it, or how to perform miracles, was passed along with it. As we shall see in the following chapters, it is the exorcistic manuals of the Second Temple period and the magical recipe books of late antiquity which provide us with the best clues that their Jewish owners and users were not holy men, but technical experts, that is, professional exorcists and magicians.

As we shall see throughout the present study, there were many people in ancient Jewish society who could work miracles (or, at least, saw themselves and were seen by others as performing miracles) by their innate powers, which they viewed as God's gift. There were many others, however, who could perform similar feats (or, at least, saw themselves and were seen by others as performing similar feats), but did so by virtue of techniques and spells which were transmitted to them, either orally or in writing, from their masters and colleagues, or devised by themselves for those purposes. Had they had the power to perform such deeds without this special technology, they would probably never have bothered to learn it at all. But as not all of us are holy men, some of us must learn how to do what to others comes naturally – or by the grace of God.

The uses of the sacred

While the man of God had it within him to bend the laws of nature to his will, this was not the only manner by which, according to the biblical narrators, the Israelites could achieve supernatural feats. One other mode of access to great powers involved the manipulation of sacred objects, that is, objects connected with the cult of YHWH. That such objects had great powers is demonstrated by the sad fate of Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron and nephews of Moses, who were burnt alive for approaching God's altar in the desert Tabernacle in the wrong manner (Lv 10.1–2, etc.). It is made even clearer by the similar fate of Uzza, whose sole sin was his desire to prevent the Ark of the Covenant from falling down and being crushed to the ground; as he sent his hand to touch it, God became furious and killed him on the spot, a numinous behavior which King David found both infuriating and frightening (2 Sm 6.2–9).[35] Such passages provide ample evidence of the immense power associated with God's holiest objects, and certainly explain why not everyone was allowed to handle such objects, and why even authorized personnel had to take extreme precautions and observe strict rules of purity and propriety in order to approach any space or artifact connected with God (see, e.g., Ex 3.5, Jos 10.14). But like nuclear energy, quite dangerous to use but too useful not to, this power made such objects and spaces not only frightening, but also potentially useful in many ways, and some of these uses were already made clear both by the biblical legislation and by some biblical stories. Even the passage immediately following the Uzza story tells us that when the Ark had to spend a few months in the home of Oved Edom, his house was greatly blessed by the presence of the sacred object (2 Sm 6.11–12), a blessing which many others probably coveted. And as we shall soon see, the use of the power inherent in such objects often entailed a recourse to the priests who were in charge of guarding and handling them.

Beginning with the legislation, we may focus on the *soṭah* ritual of Numbers 5.11–31, by far the clearest example of the close connections between the sacred objects, God's priests, and rituals that we would readily identify as "magic," were it not for their presence deep within the Judaic religion of the time. In this specific case, a wife suspected by her husband of adultery (but not caught *in flagrante* by himself or by others) is brought to the Tabernacle (or, in later periods, to the Temple) so that God would decide her guilt or innocence. She is brought by her husband, who brings

[35] For other examples, see, e.g., 1 Sm 6.19, where God kills 50,070 people in Beth Shemesh because "they saw the Ark of YHWH." For Uzza's sin, cf. 1 Sm 5.1–6.14, which makes it very clear that the Ark can manage on its own.

along an appropriate offering, and is placed by the priest before YHWH (11–16). The priest then takes holy water in a clay vessel, adds some dust from the Tabernacle floor, dishevels the woman's hair, places the offering in her hands and adjures her with two elaborate formulae, whose exact wording is provided, and to which she responds Amen, Amen (17–22). The priest then writes these curses down, washes the text into the water, and makes the woman drink the resulting brew (23–24). He then takes the offering from her hands and places it on the altar, after which he makes the woman drink the water (once again?). If she is guilty, the water would make her belly swell and her thigh fall, thus proving her guilt. And if she is not guilty, no such effect would be discernible, and she shall be declared innocent and have sex with her husband (as his way of confirming the verdict) (25–31). This is, of course, a typical ordeal, and one for which many parallels have been adduced by modern scholars, from many different cultures worldwide.[36]

For a modern reader, such a ritual immediately provokes a psychological analysis – it is the guilty woman's great fear, in such awesome surroundings and with such a frightful ritual centered around her – that would make her guilt so physically manifest, while an innocent woman would remain calm throughout. Such readings were not unknown in antiquity as well, but they were dwarfed by the far commoner assumption, that it was the sacred location, the power of the holy water, of the dust from the Tabernacle or Temple, of the priest, and especially of the sacred oath (including YHWH's powerful Name) which made the ritual so effective. It worked, if we may borrow a phrase coined only much later and in a non-Jewish context, *ex opere operato*, for it tapped into great reservoirs of numinous power. In the same vein, we may note that when the Israelites sinned and made themselves a Golden Calf, one of Moses' first actions was to grind the Calf to dust and make them drink it in their water.[37] Apparently, the power of sacred objects extended even to such "anti-sacred" objects, which had to be consumed by their suspected producers as an effective ordeal, proving their guilt and punishing them at the same time.

The biblical *soṭah* ritual may be the most striking example of the use of the innate powers of sacred objects and God's priests for rituals which have little to do with the service of God and much to do with the service of men, but many other instances show that such powers were employed

[36] For Babylonian parallels, see Fishbane 1971, pp. 231–60, and Fishbane 1974. For other parallels, see the extensive collection in Frazer 1918, vol. III, pp. 304–414.

[37] Ex 32.20, but note the different account in Dt 9.21. For the comparison between Moses' behavior and the *soṭah* ceremony, see already t AZ 3.19 (p. 465 Zuckermandel); pt AZ 3.3 (42d); bt AZ 44a.

in other contexts as well. Still focusing on the biblical legislation, we may note how Aaron, or the high priest, confesses all the sins of the entire nation and then "places" or "transfers" them upon the head of a hapless goat which carries all the sins of the Israelites into the desert (Lv 16.7–22).[38] Or we may focus on the ritual of the priestly blessings, in which God's priests bless God's people that God will bless them, guard them, and bring them peace (Nm 6.22–27). This passage is of some importance, since we now possess even archeological evidence confirming the popularity of these verses, and perhaps also of the ritual they describe, in the form of two silver amulets, found in a First Temple period tomb at Ketef Hinnom, Jerusalem, and dated to the late seventh or early sixth century BCE.[39] This is, we may note, the only evidence we have of the Jewish use of written amulets in the First or Second Temple periods, an issue to which we shall return in Chapter 2. It is also the first attested use of the Priestly Blessing for magical and apotropaic purposes, a practice to which we shall return in Chapter 5.

Thus far, we have limited our survey to the uses of the sacred in the biblical legislation, but when we turn from the legal sections to the more historical narratives of the Hebrew Bible, we find many more examples of the practical uses of the sacred, especially in times of war. In the war against the Midianites, for example, Moses sends 12,000 warriors into battle, as well as a priest and some sacred vessels which presumably help clinch the victory (Nm 31.6–12). And when confronted with the need to cross the Jordan with the entire people, Joshua sends the priests and the Ark first, and once the priests' feet touch the water the Jordan is cloven in twain, and the whole nation crosses on dry land, with the priests and the Ark standing in the dry river-bed. Only when the last persons have passed, do the priests carry the Ark to the other bank, and the blocked-up river returns to its normal flow (Jos 3.5–17, cf. 4.7). Not long after, God instructs Joshua how to conquer Jericho, and the latter then commands his army to wheel around the besieged city in a peculiar formation – first come some military forces, in dead silence, then seven priests blowing the sacred trumpets, then more priests carrying the sacred Ark, and then more military units, they too observing a complete silence. This colorful parade circumambulates the city walls once a day for six days, and on the seventh it completes seven more circumambulations. Only then are the forces ordered to sound

[38] For this ritual, see Gruenwald 2003, pp. 202–30.
[39] See Barkay 1992; Yardeni 1991; Barkay *et al.* 2004.

the battle cry and mount a concentrated attack, which proves remarkably successful – the walls of Jericho crumble, and the city is captured (Jos 6.2–20). But while the narrators' insistence that the miracle indeed took place is hardly unusual – most biblical stories assume that, *Deo volente*, anything can happen – the need for such an elaborate ritual is quite telling. Rather than waiting for God to fulfill His promise to Abraham and give them the Holy Land on a silver platter, or standing around the walls of Jericho and begging God to destroy them, Joshua and his men embark upon a stylized ritual procession. And while their actions could be interpreted in a psychologizing mode – as something akin to a war-dance, encouraging the besiegers and disheartening the besieged – its effects are not described as psychological, but as entirely physical. Thus, no reader would fail to note how the ritual use of sacred objects, at least when performed by the right people, in the right manner, and for the right cause, could have highly beneficial effects, including the complete subversion of the ordinary laws of nature. And, perhaps most interesting, no reader of this story would have failed to note that it was God Himself who had come up with the elaborate plan.

As we noted in the previous section, biblical men of God could work miracles, but their powers were not without limits, and sometimes they failed to achieve the results they had aimed for. Thus, when Elisha tried to heal a boy by merely sending his staff and performing the feat telepathically, the procedure proved an abject failure. The same, we may now add, holds true for the sacred appurtenances, whose power also has its limits. In one case, after losing a battle against the Philistines, the Israelites decided to take the Ark of the Covenant from the Shiloh sanctuary and bring it, together with the two priests – Eli's sons, Ḥophni and Pinḥas – who were in charge of it, to the battlefield. The Ark's arrival had a dramatic effect in boosting the spirits of the Israelite warriors and depressing those of their opponents – a sure sign of the psychological effects of the presence of powerful sacred objects. But after the initial shock, the Philistines decided to redouble their efforts, and their enthusiasm brought them a glorious victory. The Ark's priestly handlers were slain, along with 30,000 Israelite soldiers, and the Ark itself was captured by the Philistines (1 Sm 4.1–11). From the narrators' perspective, the failure was preordained, the result of the priestly transgressions of Eli's two sons (1 Sm 2.11–17, 22–37; 3.11–14). From a reader's perspective, however, it was an important reminder that powerful as God's holy objects might be, their effect was in no way automatic, and depended in part on the status in the eyes of God of those who were about

to use them. Clearly, this was a Doomsday weapon, to be used only in extreme emergencies, and only as a last resort.[40] Moreover, this was not the only object which possessed great power by virtue of its contact with the divine, and we may note such items as Samson's flowing hair, which he let grow as a result of a nazirite vow, and which gave him superhuman powers, or God's different temples, where a prayer would be more efficacious, or God's very Name, not really a material object at all, but a source of great power in its own right.[41] We have already noted above how the Bible forbids the *naqav*ing of the Name in order to harm an opponent, or for any other purpose; we also noted Elisha's use of the Name in cursing the children who offended him. In later periods, the power of the Name and of its many substitutes will become a mainstay of Jewish religious belief and magical praxis, as we shall see in the following chapters.

To all these paradigmatic examples of the power of God's sacred objects, one more example must be added, one which even some ancient Israelites, or at least some biblical narrators, apparently found quite disturbing. For when the Israelites encamped in a desert full of vipers, it was God Himself who told Moses to make a bronze serpent and place it on a flagpole, so that anyone bitten by a viper may see it and live – a solution which proved remarkably successful (Nm 21.6–9). What is unusual here is not the magical use of a sacred object, but the fact that this was not one of the regular paraphernalia of God's cult, or an existing instrument such as Moses' staff, but a purpose-built implement which had no existence prior to this incident and no cultic uses after it. It thus comes as no surprise when we read that many years later, King Ḥezekiah annihilated the bronze serpent which Moses had made, "for until those days the sons of Israel would make incense-offering to it" (2 Kgs 18.4). The powerful implement had become a cultic object in its own right, one not sanctioned by Torah and lacking a fixed position in the Temple cult, and therefore had to be destroyed. Here, in other words, the biblical narrative provides an interesting example of an object which tries to move from the realm of "magic" into that of "religion" and is eventually rejected, even if it was originally produced at God's own behest. As we shall see below, and throughout the present study, such movements, and the attempts to stop them, were quite common in the history of later Jewish magic and religion as well.

[40] And note how the Philistines, marking the Ark's arrival on the battlefield, insist that "this has never happened before" (1 Sm 4.7). On the other hand, the Ark seems to have been used in more than one military campaign – see 1 Sm 14.18 and 2 Sm 11.11.

[41] For Samson, see Jgs 13.4–5; 16.17–22. For God's temples, see 1 Sm 1.9 and 1 Kgs 8.27–49. See also Ez 40.9, 12, for the healing properties of the stream that would one day flow from the Temple.

Surveying all these powerful objects and the people who used them, we may note how the Hebrew Bible displays a deep-seated conviction that many striking feats – from the cleaving of rivers to the destruction of mighty walls – could be achieved not only by men of God, but also by the correct manipulation of God's sacred objects. But while holy men could come from any segment of Israelite society and rise to prominence by means of their innate powers, the use of sacred objects to achieve supernatural feats also granted a monopoly on such powers to the Israelite priests, who had regular access to the divine objects and knew how to approach and manipulate them without endangering themselves or others.[42] And here too, just as in the case of the men of God, it is only men, and not women, who are involved in such thaumaturgy, since women were a priori precluded from access to God's holiest objects. Moreover, here too we find persistent links between magic and politics or magic and social control, be it the uses of the Ark and other sacred vessels in times of war, or Moses' use of the bronze serpent to solve an urgent problem which made his flock restive to the point of rebellion. Finally, here too we find the flip-side of the Torah's legislation against magic and divination, for while turning to a long list of magical and divinatory practitioners is forbidden, using the power inherent in God's holy object is quite acceptable. Sometimes it is even very clear that God's sacred objects and priests are used as a *substitute* for non-Jewish practices and practitioners – as when the Bible condones and encourages divination by means of the *Urim and Thumim* while utterly forbidding any contact with non-Israelite diviners.[43] In all these cases, we may note how the insistence on the powers of such objects would create an enormous temptation to use them even for aims not specifically sanctioned by the biblical legislation. In this regard, it is interesting to compare the crossing of the Jordan by Elijah and Elisha with the crossing of the same river by the entire people, led by the priests and the holy Ark. The action is the same, but the means are different, and whereas the Ark and its priests can cleave the Jordan for a whole nation to pass through, the holy men's efforts suffice only for their own crossing. Here, then, we have one more powerful paradigm that would shape the growth of later Jewish (and Christian) magic, and some of the inner-Jewish debates about the borderlines between the permitted and the forbidden

[42] The priests' monopoly over such knowledge may be seen in other cases too, such as 2 Kgs 17.24–28.

[43] For this divination technique, and the different attempts to ascertain its exact nature, see Van Dam 1997, pp. 9–103, 215–32. For the priests' great powers, see also the manner by which Aaron stops the plague by using some incense in Nm 17.11–15.

uses of the power of the sacred. This, however, is an issue to which we shall return in subsequent chapters.

Summary

Incomplete and sketchy as they might be, our surveys of the biblical passages pertaining to magic should suffice to highlight the two main features of the biblical handling of this topic. First, that the legislation against magic and divination is far from precise when it comes to what exactly is forbidden and what is not. Second, that other sections of the Hebrew Bible make it clear that many magical activities are permitted, and even encouraged, as long as they are conducted by the right people and in the right manner. The paradox inherent in the possible contradiction between the prohibitions and the paradigms is, of course, not unique in the history of religions; it is not even unique in the Hebrew Bible itself. As an instructive analogue, we may note how the Pentateuch places the prohibition of murder as one of its central commandments, and how in this case, at least, the plain sense of the law hardly is in doubt (Ex 20.13; Dt 5.17). And yet, while the Pentateuch forbids murder, it also describes, and quite approvingly, several interesting cases of judicial and extra-judicial killings. When Moses kills an Egyptian who was roughing up a Jewish slave-laborer (Ex 2.11–12), we may perhaps speak of self-defense; when he orchestrates the execution of religious offenders (Lv 24.23; Nm 15.36), we may perhaps quote all the arguments adduced by the modern defenders of the death penalty as the ultimate barrier against social anarchy. But when the same Moses orders the murder of women and children war-captives (Nm 31.14–18) or the summary and random execution of 3,000 members of his own community (Ex 32.26–29), or instigates and approves of the cold-blooded murder of an amorous couple bent on the pursuit of happiness (Nm 25.5–8), we can only conclude that from the perspective of the biblical narrators, murder in the Name of the Lord is permitted, and even desirable.[44] And as any student of Jewish history would readily concede, some post-biblical Jews insisted on following the biblical legislation on this score, while others – and not only in the days of Josephus, but in our own days as well – took their cue from the biblical paradigms, whose implicit message is very different from that of the explicit prohibition of murder in the Ten Commandments.

[44] There are, of course, many more examples outside the Pentateuch, be it Samuel's cold-blooded murder of a war-captive (1 Sm 15.33), David's genocide in Edom (1 Kgs 18.40), Elijah's slaughter of Baal's priests (1 Kgs 11.15–16), and numerous other instances.

This complex Jewish attitude to murder is a useful analogue with which to think about the relationship between post-biblical Jewish magic and the Hebrew Bible. Those Jews – be it Philo, the Karaites, Maimonides, or the modern *Maskilim* – who sought to ban all or most magical activities from the Jewish polity could easily adduce the biblical legislation as a proof that this indeed is what God had ordained. They did so, however, not because this is what a careful reading of the Torah convinced them to be true, but because other aspects of their religiosity and theology (which, in many cases, boils down to direct or indirect contact with Greek philosophy and its consequences) convinced them that magic was unacceptable. And those Jews who were unaware of this line of thought, or knew it and consciously rejected it, could easily insist that the biblical prohibitions did not refer to the beliefs and practices in which they indulged, and also point to the many biblical paradigms with regard to similar beliefs and practices as a proof that they were in no way "un-Jewish." It is not for us to judge which of the two camps was more faithful to the actual letter of the law; what we can say, however, and with some degree of certainty, is that the latter camp attracted a much larger following, and had a far greater impact on the development of Jewish magic, and of Jewish culture as a whole, throughout most periods of Jewish history.

MAGIC AND RATIONALITY

One of the oldest and most pernicious hurdles confronting the academic study of magic is the question of the complex relations between magic and rationality.[45] More than with any other noun, "magic" seems to go hand-in-hand with "superstition" and all its derogatory connotations in Western discourse from antiquity to the present. And regardless of whether we subscribe to Frazer's understanding of magic as a misguided form of primitive science, to Lévy-Bruhl's elaborate reconstructions of the savage mind and its pre-logical thinking, to Freud's view of magic as the most infantile stage in human development, or to the cultural anthropologists' stress on the meaning of magical rituals in terms of the cultural frameworks in which they are embedded and the symbols they manipulate, they all have one thing in common, namely, the insistence that magic is inherently irrational, or, at best, non-rational. This is less of a problem when dealing with a pre-literate tribal society in some remote corner of the world, but is quite discomfiting when dealing with cultures which lie at the heart of

[45] For what follows, see esp. Glucklich 1997, pp. 3–96. See also Vyse 1997.

Western civilization. In the study of Judaism, the assumption that magic has nothing rational about it had one obvious implication – magic is an intrinsically un-Jewish activity. If some Jews dabbled in it, they must have been of the lower classes, the uneducated masses, those Jews whose unseemly practices the enlightened religious establishment was grudgingly forced to endure.[46]

As we shall see in subsequent chapters of this book, it is often hard to tell who exactly were the practitioners behind the Jewish magical practices in antiquity. But the preservation, at least from late antiquity onwards, of so many *written* Jewish magical texts tells us that quite a few practitioners were far from illiterate, and some of these magical texts even display the scribal hands, writing styles, and modes of textual production which come only with many years of scribal learning and practice.[47] Moreover, when we do find evidence outside the actual magical texts as to who practiced such magical rituals, that evidence repeatedly demonstrates the acceptance, and even practice, of magic by members of the Jewish elite, including the religious establishment itself. In subsequent chapters, we shall encounter Josephus' glowing descriptions of the praxis of exorcism, the exorcistic hymns recited by the overseer(s) of the Qumran community, and the favorite magical recipes of some of the foremost talmudic authorities – to name but a few striking examples. Thus, while the analysis of Jewish magic as a form of "popular" or "folk" religion is not without value – as can be seen from Trachtenberg's book on medieval Jewish magic, subtitled *A Study in Folk Religion*[48] – there is no doubt that such an analysis hardly applies to most of the "insider" sources which we shall analyze throughout our study. Most of these sources were not the product of Jewish "folk magic," but of "intellectual magic," produced by learned experts who mastered a specialized body of knowledge and consulted many different sources, sometimes in more than one language.[49] How, then, can we explain this recurrent recourse, by intelligent Jews, to practices which seem utterly irrational?

Looking at Jewish culture as a whole, one cannot help noting that the issue of rationality seldom comes up in the ancient Jewish discourse on magic and magicians. In Classical Greek and Roman literature, one can find a rational critique of magic, and an occasional mockery of the magicians'

[46] For a classic formulation of this view, see Rubin 1887, p. 12. Trachtenberg 1939 often follows this line of reasoning (e.g., on pp. 107–08).

[47] For this point, see esp. Swartz 1990.

[48] And see also Sharot 1982, pp. 9–11 and 27–44, for a similar approach.

[49] For similar conclusions regarding later periods, see Barel 1991; Etkes 1995. See also Hansen 1978, for some non-Jewish parallels.

claims and practices.[50] This is, however, part of a much wider Greek discourse of rationality, one in which the Jews began taking part in a serious and lasting manner only after the second Jewish encounter with Greek philosophy – the one that took place in the Middle Ages and involved reading Greek philosophy through its Arabic translations and Muslim interpretations. From the Geonic period onwards, we find in Jewish writings too the claim that some of the magicians' claims are just impossible, and that the magicians' practices achieve none of their purported aims. This critique reaches its climax in the writings of Maimonides, whose extensive reading of magical texts, and recurrent fulminations against "the madness of amulet writers" have often been studied.[51] Even then, however, the claim that magic does not work was based on a general assumption that magic *could* not work, since it would subvert the fixed laws of nature, and not on an empirical demonstration that magic *does* not work. In fact, as we shall soon see, Maimonides was quite ready to admit that some amulets, for example, might actually work, and that some magical practices do not work, but have a positive psychological effect. Whether the rationalistic critique of the magicians' art had any impact on the development of medieval Jewish magic is a question which has never even been asked, but which lies outside the chronological framework of the present study.[52]

The question as to why the first Jewish encounter with Greek culture, in the Second Temple and rabbinic periods, failed to produce any substantial Jewish grappling with Greek philosophy (with the partial exception of Philo, to whom we shall turn in the next chapter), has already attracted some scholarly attention, and will surely attract much more in the future.[53] For the present enquiry, however, we need look not at its postulated causes but at its apparent results. In ancient Jewish culture, religious claims were not subjected to the systematic questioning of their plausibility, reliability, or efficacy, and the basic premise of Greek philosophers from the sixth-century BCE Hecataeus of Miletus onwards – that the Greek myths contained much that was implausible, or downright silly – was not adopted by ancient Jewish thinkers with regards to the biblical stories. Similarly, the Greek distinction

[50] For the rational critique of magic in Classical antiquity, see Edelstein 1937; Lloyd 1979, pp. 15–29; Martin 2004, pp. 38–40.

[51] For disparaging remarks on the efficacy of magic, see, e.g., Hai Gaon's words in Emanuel 1995, p. 131: "A fool will believe anything"; Maimonides, *Commentary to the Mishnah*, Sot. 7.4; *Mishneh Torah*, Hilkhot 'Avodah Zarah 11.16, etc.; *Guide* 1.61; 3.37. For Maimonides' critique of magic, see Lewis 1905; Schwartz 1999, pp. 92–110; Ravitzky 2002.

[52] For the possible influence of Maimonides' rationalistic reinterpretation of the Jewish tradition on the rise of Kabbalah see Idel 1990b.

[53] For a useful starting-point, see Harvey 1992.

between "true piety" and "superstition," that is, religious behavior which simply made no sense to a rational (Greek) observer, was quite meaningless to most ancient Jews.[54] Some Jews developed a rationalistic critique of other people's religious beliefs and customs, but their own myths and rituals remained immune to such critique.[55] For a typical example of this immunity, we may look at the biblical story of the "witch" of Endor and its ancient Jewish amplifications and interpretations.[56] For the biblical narrators, the fact that the non-Israelite *ba'alat 'ov* could raise Samuel's ghost, so that he would accurately foretell to her client the unfolding future, was virtually taken for granted. The same is true, however, of the story's many post-biblical readers in antiquity, all of whom accepted the possibility of necromancy and even offered learned explanations of how it was possible at all. Only in the late Geonic period (tenth–eleventh centuries) do we find, and only among some biblical commentators, an insistence that the story as told in the biblical narrative is simply impossible, and the claim that any story in the Hebrew Bible which contradicts our reason or our senses should not be taken literally.[57] But even then, and throughout later Jewish history, this claim aroused much controversy, and was far from unanimously accepted by all Jewish thinkers, many of whom went on taking the Endor story at face value and insisting that necromancy indeed is possible.

This, then, is the first answer to the question of Jewish magic and Jewish rationality in antiquity. There never was a clash between the two, for the simple reason that the second phenomenon did not yet exist. And yet, while this answer is true on one level, it is quite unsatisfactory on another. If Jews had no discourse of rationality, and if Jews did practice magic, does it mean that they were simply irrational? This would be a disturbing conclusion not only for apologetic reasons (no one enjoys thinking of his forefathers as stupid), but for historical reasons as well. No student of ancient Jewish history and culture, and no reader of ancient Jewish literature, can fail to note the presence there of some highly intelligent figures, and of some impressive examples of rational thinking and action.[58] Thus, to give just one concrete

[54] For the Greek concept of *deisidaimonia*, often defined as "excessive fear of the gods," see Theophrastus, *Char*. 16; Plutarch, *Superst*.; Martin 2004.

[55] See, for example, Daniel's exploits in the Greek Additions to the Book of Daniel, or (Pseudo?-) Hecataeus' story of Mosollamos, as quoted by Josephus, *Ap*. 1.200–04, which will be mentioned again in the following chapter.

[56] The "witch" of Endor: 1 Sm 28.6–20 with Cogan 1995 and Smelik 1977. For a later period, see Barzilay 1974, pp. 262–65.

[57] See Brody 1998, pp. 296–99, 304–12.

[58] For a recent attempt to struggle with this issue, see Fisch 1997.