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Magic in the Ancient Greco-Roman and Ancient Jewish Worlds

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Abstract

In *Drawing Down the Moon: Magic in the Ancient Greco-Roman World*, Radcliffe Edmonds provides us with a new etic framework for understanding ancient magic, but one steeped in the emic perspectives of the actual practitioners and clients as preserved in the literary, epigraphic, and archaeological evidence. In this paper I examine Edmonds's findings in relation to the ancient Jewish magical and mystical traditions found mainly in *Sefer HaRazim*, “The Book of the Mysteries,” a late-antique ritual handbook written in Hebrew.

Keywords

magic – ritual – Judaism – Greco-Roman – Radcliffe Edmonds

1 Introduction

In his wonderful book, *Drawing Down the Moon: Magic in the Ancient Greco-Roman World*, Radcliffe Edmonds provides us with a new etic framework for understanding ancient magic, but one steeped in the emic perspectives of the actual practitioners and clients as preserved in the literary, epigraphic, and archaeological evidence.¹ Edmonds takes “magic” to be non-normative ritu-

¹ I am grateful for the feedback from my fellow panel members and the attenders in the SBL session of November 2020 devoted to the book. Special thanks to Professor Naomi Janowitz, whose perceptive comments led me to rethink my understanding of the morally challenging

alized activity which is marked by several features. The more the following features are present, the more clearly we are dealing with “magic.” Magic is viewed as either extraordinarily efficacious or entirely fraudulent. Its performance fails to fit into an approved cultural script. Its aims are culturally illicit and its practitioners inhabit a deviant social location. The same rite may be considered forbidden magic or normative ritual activity depending on the evaluation of the ancient audience. In this paper I examine Edmonds’s findings in relation to the ancient Jewish magical and mystical traditions found mainly in *Sefer HaRazim*, “The Book of the Mysteries,” a late-antique ritual handbook written in Hebrew.²

2 *Sefer HaRazim* – A Jewish Magical Handbook

Sefer HaRazim survives in complete – though corrupt – medieval Hebrew manuscripts in addition to important Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic fragments from the Cairo Geniza and a thirteenth-century Latin translation. Collation of all these sources produces a fairly reliable text. A prologue describes the origins and powers of the book. The core of the book is structured around a cosmology of seven heavenly firmaments. The first six are each staffed by a hierarchy of named angels, among whom the magical workings³ are apportioned. The first firmament contains seven camps of angels, the second has angels positioned on twelve stages, and the third divides its workings among three angelic princes. The fourth, fifth, and sixth firmaments each contain instructions for a

spells in *Sefer HaRazim*. Any errors or infelicities that remain in this paper are, of course, my responsibility alone.

- 2 The *editio princeps* of *Sefer HaRazim* is Margalioth 1966. Rebigier and Schäfer published a new edition of the text with considerably more information (Rebigier and Schäfer 2009). This paper and the translations therein are based on both editions. The only complete English translation of the work currently available is Morgan 1983. It translates the base text of the 1966 edition, but with little attention to the apparatus of variants. My translation of *Sefer HaRazim* is forthcoming in Bauckham, Davila, and Panayotov. I am grateful to Schäfer for permission to use the 2009 edition for my translation and to Eerdmans for permission to quote my translation in this paper. In this paper, citation of *Sefer HaRazim* is according to the paragraph enumeration in the 2006 edition, along with parenthetical indication of (if applicable) which firmament and which camp, stage, or ruling angel of the firmament contains the passage. (For example, “[1.7]” means it appears in the section on the seventh camp of angels in the first firmament and “[5]” means it belongs to the working assigned to the fifth firmament).
- 3 *Sefer HaRazim* uses a term that I translate “working” (Hebrew *מעשה*) to mean a complex of incantations and rituals which together aim to accomplish a particular outcome. I use “working” in the same sense in this paper.

single magical working. The practitioner deploys the powers of the angels using the rituals and incantations given for each hierarchy. A concluding hymn extols the glory of the seventh firmament and ends with a series of blessings on God.

The structure of the rites is generally familiar from the traditions Edmonds has collected. A typical working opens with a ritual that may involve a sacrifice or manipulation of *materia*. There is an invocation of the relevant angels in the hierarchy, either verbally or by inscribing their names on a metal lamella or other medium. Usually, the book provides the practitioner with the wording of a specific incantation by which to bid or adjure the angels and sometimes other divine beings. Often there is also a consolidating rite or a banishing rite for concluding the working.⁴

3 Categories of Magic in *Sefer HaRazim*

The contents of *Sefer HaRazim* fit remarkably well into the categories by which Edmonds structures the chapters of his book. In the limited space available, I will make some brief general observations about the contents of *Sefer HaRazim*, and then focus on a few areas of special interest. Most of the categories Edmonds finds in Greco-Roman magic are well represented.

There are rites for cursing one's enemies with various kinds of harm, including insomnia and using a salamander to keep a bathhouse from heating.⁵ There are binding spells to influence powerful leaders, pacify them, or thwart their plans.⁶ There are also erotic restraining spells to bind the beloved to the client or the practitioner, as well a spell to give the practitioner "alluring charm."⁷ There is a generic healing spell and specific rites for recovery from a stroke and for curing a migraine or a cataract.⁸ There are preventative protective rites to ward a city from dangerous animals or floods, to protect a woman in childbirth from evil spirits, to give racehorses stamina and speed and protection from sor-

4 Examples of workings that follow this full pattern are the necromancy rite in §§ 98–101 (1.5); the rite for invoking a spirit for divination and dream interpretation in 110–114 (1.7), quoted in full below; the rite for pacifying crowds or leaders in §§ 122–123 (2.1); the rite to make a woman fall in love in §§ 127–129 (2.2); the rite for causing insomnia in §§ 137–140 (2.4); the rite to restore a demoted leader to his former position in §§ 171–173 (2.11); the rite to prevent a bathhouse from heating in §§ 186–190 (5); and the rite to generate an illusion of bodyguards in § 235–238 (6).

5 §§ 42–54 (1.2); §§ 137–140 (2.4); §§ 186–190 (3.1).

6 §§ 65–73 (1.4); §§ 122–123 (2.2); §§ 132–134 (2.3).

7 §§ 93–94 (1.5); §§ 127–129 (2.2); §§ 95–97 (1.5).

8 §§ 38–39 (1.1); § 148–152 (2.6); § 176 (2.12).

cerous enchantment, and to give the practitioner invulnerability in battle or an escort of phantasmal bodyguards.⁹ Curative protective rites deliver a friend from legal difficulties and restore a demoted leader to his former position.¹⁰ There are divination rites using lecanomancy, necromancy, and consultation of a (presumably dead) spirit, as well as rites that grant powers of mind reading and dream interpretation.¹¹

Sefer HaRazim hints at an interest in astrology in its erotic binding spells, which aim to bind the מַזְל – apparently meaning here the “astrological sign” – of the client to that of the beloved.¹² It also has considerable interest in the movements and placement of other celestial bodies such as the moon and the sun. But there is no indication of a systematic interest in or use of astrology. Likewise, and despite the reputed importance of Maria the Jewess for the late-antique alchemical tradition, *Sefer HaRazim* shows little, if any, interest in alchemy.¹³ There is, to be sure, a rite to heat a stove in cold weather.¹⁴ It involves writing the names of the requisite angels on lumps of brimstone and adjuring it to ignite. But this shows no more than the use of sulphur in a magical rite to bring about a practical end.

4 Prayer in *Sefer HaRazim*

The question of prayer in *Sefer HaRazim* is complicated. Most of the rituals include a spoken incantation in flowery language, addressing divine beings. Activation of many of the angelic levels requires animal sacrifice or an offering of food or spices. Ritual purification of the practitioner, and sometimes the client, is crucial. None of the rites take place in a temple, although some require a specific physical setting, such as a beach or a running stream, or performance at a specific time, such as sunrise or a particular phase of the moon. Some, but not all, of the incantations are preceded by such rites. There is no use of nonsense words or *nomina barbara*, unless one counts the long lists of angel names in the heavenly hierarchies.

9 §§155–156 (2.7); §160 (2.8); §§193–194 (3.2); §164 (2.9); §§235–238 (6).

10 §§167–168 (2.10); §§171–173 (2.11).

11 §§58–62 (1.3); §§223–228 (5); §§98–101 (1.5); §§102 (1.5); §§109–114 (1.7).

12 The word מַזְל means “planet” or “constellation of the Zodiac” or “astrological sign” in rabbinic Hebrew (Jastrow, 755). It is found once in the plural in biblical Hebrew (1Kgs 23:5) meaning something like “constellations.”

13 See Edmonds 2019, 290.

14 §§143–145 (2.5).

Normally an incantation is preceded by an invocation of the angels from the relevant level of the relevant heaven, either verbally or by writing the names on a *lamella* or other object. The incantation is always introduced by the command to “recite” or “say” (אמר). It never addresses the God of Israel directly. Often it begins “I adjure you,” and addresses the angels, frequently adjuring them by God. But God is involved only for rites of healing, protection, divination, and theurgy. The incantation does not mention God if it involves a rite of cursing or binding, necromancy, or winning at the racetrack.

Some adjurations address beings besides angels. The necromancy spell adjures the “Ram-Bearer,” that is, the Greek god Hermes.¹⁵ One rite may adjure the planet Venus, named as the goddess Aphrodite.¹⁶ A rite for foreknowledge adjures the sun by the angels.¹⁷ A rite to thwart the plans of the powerful adjures the moon to intercede with the angels.¹⁸ A rite to restore a fallen leader to his former office adjures the moon by God.¹⁹

Remarkably, the only incantation labelled as a “prayer” that one should “pray” is a Greek prayer to the sun god Helios, which is transliterated into Hebrew letters.²⁰ It appears in a theurgic working to be discussed below.

Some of the incantations are not phrased as adjurations. These usually still address angels, but open with other phrases such as “I seek from you,” “I deliver (so and so) over to you,” “I transmit (so and so) to you,” and the like.²¹ Most of these rites involve cursing or binding, although one involves healing. Some of the rites for protection or healing do not include the wording of a specific incantation.²²

What theology of prayer may we abstract from all these details? Unlike many earlier incantations and prayers in the Greco-Roman tradition, there is never a sense of reciprocal claims or trading favours in these incantations. Rather, they are in some ways typical of the indirect relationship to the divine which Edmonds finds in later prayers with more elaborate hierarchies.²³ They call on lesser divinities to attend to concerns of mortals which have small importance

15 § 99 (1.5).

16 §§ 66–67 (1.4).

17 § 60 (1.4).

18 § 133 (2.3).

19 § 172 (2.11).

20 § 213–214 [4].

21 § 39 (1.1); § 123 (2.1); § 106 (1.6); § 138 (2.4).

22 § 39 (1.1). For example, the rite to heal someone who has had a stroke (§§ 148–152 [2.6]) and the rite to protect a woman in childbirth from evil spirits (§ 160 [2.8]).

23 Edmonds 2019, 157–158.

in the divine scheme of things. They often invoke God's authority as well. The texts often use biblical verses or themes to underline God's power.

That said, as noted above, God does not appear in certain types of workings. We can only speculate on the reasons for this division of labour between God and the other divinities. It may be that the composers of our spells associated the Jewish God only with what they thought of as positive workings, ones bringing this-worldly benefits, useful knowledge, or communion with the divine. They may have considered workings involving malediction, coercion, necromancy, or gambling to be morally dubious, beneath God's dignity, and perhaps best not to draw to his attention. Or they may have taken a morally neutral line that the Jewish God only offered help in certain areas, while other areas were in the province of specific pagan deities and spirits of the natural world. In favour of the latter view is that, as noted above, there is some overlap of divine realms invoked for some subjects. The sun and the moon can be invoked to work with God. Most strikingly, the theurgic rite for a vision of the passage of the sun by night both adjures the angels by God and mandates a prayer to Helios.²⁴

5 A Sample Working from *Sefer HaRazim*

It would be remiss of me to present these generalities without providing a taste of the richness and the high "coefficient of weirdness"²⁵ present in an actual ritual in *Sefer HaRazim*. Here I quote a full rite used to read the mind or interpret a dream of a king or another authority. It is excerpted from my forthcoming English translation of *Sefer HaRazim*. It appears in the section on the seventh camp of angels in the first firmament.

Go out on the first day onto the seashore or on the bank of the river in the third hour of the night and be wrapped in a new robe. Do not eat any small cattle or anything that emits blood, and do not drink wine. And take myrrh and pure frankincense and put (them) on glowing coals of fire in a new earthenware vessel. Set your face toward the water and you shall invoke the name of the overseer with the name of the angels of the camp three times. You shall savor the sight of a *pillar of fire* (Exod 13:21) between heaven and earth. And recite this:

²⁴ § 211–214 (4).

²⁵ Edmonds 2019, 18 n. 33, quoting Malinowski.

“I adjure you by Him who *measured (the) waters in the hollow of His hand* (Isa 40:12) and rebuked the waters so that *they fled from before Him* (Ps 114:3), and who made flitting spirits in the air, the attendants of His Presence, *an igniting fire* (Ps 104:4). *He rebuked the sea and it dried up* (Nah 1:4), and *the rivers He made into a desert* (Ps 107:33). In His name and by its letters I adjure you, and in the name of the seven angels of the seventh camp who attend on BW’L, that you make known to me what is in the heart of so-and-so son of so-and-so, and what is his wish, and what is the interpretation of his dream and what is his thought.”

And so in the second and the third night. You shall see that there shall be revealed to you a *pillar of fire and cloud* (Exod 14:24) over it in the likeness of a man. Ask it and it will tell you whatever you seek.

If you seek to release it, throw some of the water to heaven three times, from the sea or from the river by which you are standing and recite under your breath:

“*Unseen Lord BW’L, once sufficing us, perfect shield-bearer,*²⁶ I release, I release (you). Sink down and return to your path.”

And recite this seven times. And do everything in purity and you shall succeed.²⁷

6 Theurgy in *Sefer HaRazim* and Related Texts?

It remains to consider whether *Sepher HaRazim*, and late-antique Judaism more generally, made use of theurgy. Edmonds defines theurgy as “the art or practice of ritually creating a connection between the mortal, material world that is before one’s eyes and the unseen, immortal world of the gods.”²⁸ He finds an elite systematic theurgy of philosophers – such as Iamblichus – which was intended mostly for spiritual development and even assimilation to the divine. He also finds in the Greek Magical Papyri a likewise elite priestly Egyptian theurgy that is less theoretical and more open to addressing practical concerns.

The fourth firmament section of *Sefer HaRazim* consists of a theurgic ritual to view the sun in its chariot by day or by night.²⁹ The firmament contains the

26 The italicized phrase in § 113 is written in Greek that has been transliterated into Hebrew letters.

27 Bauckham, Davila, and Panayotov Forthcoming, “*Sefer HaRazim*,” §§ 110–114.

28 Edmonds 2019, 315.

29 §§ 201–216 (4).

“bridal chamber of the sun.”³⁰ One set of angels leads it on its daytime course. A second set leads it through the night. To see the sun in its chariot or bridal chamber by day, the practitioner undergoes a seven-day purification, culminating in self-fumigation with incense. The practitioner then recites a grandiloquent adjuration of the daytime angels seven times. To see the sun going in its chariot by the north wind at night, the practitioner undergoes a three-week purification, dresses in white clothing, and recites an adjuration of the nighttime angels twenty-one times. (Perhaps seeing the sun at night requires three times more effort than during the day!) During the vision, the practitioner falls face down and recites the abovementioned Greek prayer to Helios.³¹ Both workings end with an adjuration of dismissal.

The purpose of these visionary workings is surprisingly mundane. The instructions indicate that when the daytime manifestation occurs, “you may ask it either for death or for life, either for good or for harm.”³² Likewise, with the night vision, “ask everything that you wish.”³³ The rituals of the fourth firmament are best paralleled by some of the theurgic rites in the Greek Magical Papyri. There is no enchantment of an artifact, such as a ring or a statue. It does not involve the recruitment of a divine personal assistant. But they are much akin to rites that summon visions of the sun-manifestation of Apollo.³⁴ These rites too, have the mundane goal of divination or answering questions about the future.

The *Hekhalot* literature also describes numerous rites of visionary theurgy. A single example, briefly told, must suffice here.³⁵ The *Hekhalot Zutarti* gives instructions for the ritual ascent (“descent”) to God’s throne.³⁶ The practitioner must display a series of seal-rings, each engraved with a divine name for God, to an ascending hierarchy of angels in charge of the seven “palaces” leading to the

30 § 203 (4).

31 §§ 213–214 (4).

32 § 208 (4).

33 § 215 (4).

34 *PGM* III.187–262; IV.930–1114.

35 The *Hekhalot Zutarti* is a loosely redacted mystical work in Hebrew and Aramaic. In a *responsum* of the eleventh century, Hai ben Sherira HaGaon shows familiarity with some form of it. Fragments of it from the Cairo Geniza are of a similar date. Estimates of its date of composition range from as early as the second or third century C.E. to the early Middle Ages. For an introduction and a translation of an eclectic critical text and the geniza fragments, see Davila 2103, 187–243, 374–375, 398–402. It is cited here according to the paragraph enumeration used in the translation. This in turn follows the paragraphing of the edition of the Hebrew and Aramaic manuscripts in Schäfer, Schliiter, and von Mutius 1981.

36 §§ 413–419.

divine throne room. Each angel, thus pacified, conducts him to the next palace. The seventh angel seats him on the lap of God, whose names were found on the seven seals. Then the practitioner is told, “Make your request,” filled out with an invocation based on the description of the beloved in Song of Songs 5. The rite seems to involve two aims known from the other theurgic texts: the central aim being the temporary divinization of the practitioner via enthronement in heaven and the practical invitation to ask for whatever he wants.

7 *Sefer HaRazim* and Greco-Roman Magical Practices

We see that *Sefer HaRazim* fits comfortably within the late-antique end of Edmonds’s paradigm for ancient magic. I have not had space to comment at length on its parallels with the Greek Magical Papyri, but they are extensive.³⁷ Yet *Sefer HaRazim* is clearly a Jewish work. How has the author adapted Greco-Roman magical practices into a Jewish context? The prologue claims extraordinary efficacy for its workings. Its users may explore the seven heavens, attain mastery over their angelic inhabitants, inflict harm and provide healing, dominate demons, and divine the future. At the same time, it strives to normalize the contents by placing them in a positive cultural context and providing “celebrity endorsements.” An angel revealed the book to Noah. He passed it on to Abraham. The patriarchs transmitted it to Moses, Joshua, the elders, the sages, and finally to King Solomon. The body of the book is structured around a cosmology of seven heavens with a hierarchy of angels in each. The angels bear Hebrew or Hebrew-sounding names and are frequently described in terms that echo biblical language.

Control of these angels is the key to activating the book’s spells. To be sure, the sun, the moon, the astrological signs, Helios, Hermes, and Aphrodite have parts to play. They seem to have sole charge of some ruthlessly practical undertakings, but they occasionally work alongside the God of Israel. Spells more in the latter divinity’s province frequently reinforce the adjuration of angels by invoking the authority of God. The book is full of quotations from and allusions to the Hebrew Bible, as illustrated by the passage quoted above. Some of these references to scripture do show an astonishing disregard for their biblical context. A striking example is two introductory references to a necromantic rite which label its purpose as “to consult with a ghost.”³⁸ This phrase is lifted

37 I discuss these in detail in my forthcoming translation.

38 לְשֵׁאל בְּאוֹב; §§90, 98 (1.5).

out of 1Chron 10:13, which tells us that King Saul died for his unfaithfulness in carrying out this deed!

The composers of the spells were highly literate and steeped in the Jewish scriptures. They wrote in a fluent late-antique Hebrew. They drew freely on the Hebrew Bible and on non-Jewish magical traditions best paralleled by the Greco-Egyptian rites in the Greek Magical Papyri. They show little familiarity with rabbinic traditions, yet hint at considerable respect for the rabbis. The angels of the sixth stage of the second firmament “are fearsome as sages of the academy.”³⁹ The writers and editor of *Sefer HaRazim* strove to place their work in the context of traditional Judaism. I think they would have protested that their work was not “magic” in any sense prohibited by the scriptures. The Rabbinic sages would have disapproved of the necromantic rites and the invocation of pagan gods. To what degree they would have adopted a live-and-let-live attitude to some of the other resources in the book I leave for experts in Rabbinics to consider.

8 Conclusion

To conclude, Radcliffe Edmonds has synthesized a vast corpus of primary evidence to give us a thorough reassessment of the concept of magic in Greco-Roman antiquity. I have applied his new paradigm to another magical tradition on the periphery of the Greco-Roman arena. We find the Jewish rites of *Sefer HaRazim* fit well within his paradigm, while filtering the traditions through a Jewish cultural perspective. This indicates that his paradigm is of considerable value not only for study of Greco-Roman magic, but also for magical traditions in other regions and cultures in the ancient world.

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39 נוראים כחכמי ישיבה; §147 (2.6).

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