

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-87457-1 - Ancient Jewish Magic: A History
Gideon Bohak
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

ANCIENT JEWISH MAGIC

This is a pioneering attempt to write a broad history of ancient Jewish magic, from the Second Temple to the rabbinic period. It is based both on the ancient magicians' own compositions (and products) in Aramaic, Hebrew, and Greek, and on the descriptions and prescriptions of non-magicians, in an effort to reconstruct a historical picture that is as balanced and nuanced as possible. The book's main focus is on the cultural make-up of ancient Jewish magic, with special attention paid to processes of cross-cultural contacts and borrowings between Jews and non-Jews and to inner-Jewish creativity. Other major issues are the place of magic within ancient Jewish society, contemporary Jewish attitudes to magic and the identity of its practitioners. Throughout, it seeks to explain the methodological underpinnings of all sound research in this demanding field, and to point out areas where further research is likely to prove fruitful.

GIDEON BOHAK teaches in the Department of Jewish Culture, University of Tel Aviv. He is author of *Joseph and Aseneth and the Jewish Temple in Heliopolis* (1996).

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-87457-1 - Ancient Jewish Magic: A History
Gideon Bohak
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

ANCIENT JEWISH MAGIC
A History

GIDEON BOHAK



Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-87457-1 - Ancient Jewish Magic: A History
 Gideon Bohak
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
 Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi
 Cambridge University Press
 The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK
 Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
 Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521874571

© Gideon Bohak 2008

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2008

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Bohak, Gideon, 1961–

Ancient Jewish magic: a history / Gideon Bohak.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-521-87457-1 (hardback)

1. Magic, Jewish – History. 2. Magic in rabbinical literature. I. Title.

BFI622.J45B64 2007

133.4/3089924–dc22 2007046052

ISBN 978-0-521-87457-1 hardback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Contents

<i>List of figures</i>	page vi
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	vii
Introduction	I
1 Jewish magic: a contradiction in terms?	8
2 Jewish magic in the Second Temple period	70
3 Jewish magic in late antiquity – the “insider” evidence	143
4 Non-Jewish elements in late-antique Jewish magic	227
5 How “Jewish” was ancient Jewish magic?	291
6 Magic and magicians in rabbinic literature	351
<i>Epilogue</i>	426
<i>Bibliography</i>	435
<i>Index</i>	480

Figures

3.1 A bronze amulet from Sepphoris. IAA negative no. 331414. Courtesy of the Israel Antiquities Authority.	<i>page</i> 151
3.2 Amulets found in Ḥorvat Ma'on. IAA negative no. 19171. Courtesy of the Israel Antiquities Authority.	152
3.3 Inscribed clay sherds from Ḥorvat Rimmon. IAA negative no. 138528. Courtesy of the Israel Antiquities Authority.	157
3.4 A magical gem showing Daniel feeding the Babylonian snake-god. KM 26125, Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, the University of Michigan.	160
3.5 An amuletic bronze ring with a holy rider. KM 26165, Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, the University of Michigan.	163
3.6 A Babylonian incantation bowl with two bound male demons. KM 33756, Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, the University of Michigan.	186
3.7 A magical gem with hybrid deities. KM 26054, Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, the University of Michigan.	188
3.8 A magical gem with King Solomon. KM 26092, Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, the University of Michigan.	213
3.9 A Genizah fragment of a magical recipe book, Cambridge University Library, Taylor-Schechter AS 142.146. Courtesy of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.	218
4.1 A Genizah amulet, Cambridge University Library, Or. 1080.14.13. Courtesy of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.	273
4.2 A Genizah magical fragment, Cambridge University Library, Taylor-Schechter K 12.60. Courtesy of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.	275

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.

Many other scholars have helped me with specific advice, and shared some of their extensive knowledge with me. I am especially grateful to Tzvi Abusch, Avriel Bar-Levav, Jeffrey Chajes, Jacco Dieleman, Edna Engel, Esther and Hanan Eshel, Chris Faraone, Alexander Fodor, Mark Geller, David Jordan, Hagai Misgav, Matthew Morgenstern, Michael Morony, Shlomo Naeh, Arpád Nagy, Joseph Naveh, Bill Rebigier, Stefan Reif, Robert

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.

Finally, four institutions deserve special thanks. The Israel Science Foundation funded my research project on “Jewish Magical Recipe Books From the Cairo Genizah” (Grant no. 725/03). With this money, and the help of dedicated research assistants (Irena Lerman, Shani Levy (who also compiled the index for the present volume), and Karina Shalem), I have been able to survey hundreds of unpublished Genizah magical texts, and while the full results of this project shall be published elsewhere, they have done much to enrich my understanding of ancient and medieval Jewish magic, as shall be seen from the many references to unpublished Genizah fragments throughout the present study. The German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) funded a month-long stay with Peter Schäfer and his research team at the Freie Universität, Berlin (September 2002), which enabled me to coordinate my research efforts with theirs. And the Institute for Advanced Study, at the Hebrew University, sponsored a research group on ancient magic (headed by Shaul Shaked, Yuval Harari, and myself) from March to August 2006. It was during that half year, among magic-oriented colleagues and friends, that the final version of this study was revised for publication.

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

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-87457-1 - Ancient Jewish Magic: A History
Gideon Bohak
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Acknowledgments

ix

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.

This history of ancient Jewish magic, from the Second Temple to the rabbinic period, is based both on the ancient magicians' own compositions and on the descriptions and prescriptions of non-magicians. It studies developments arising within the Jewish tradition as well as cross-cultural borrowings from Greco-Egyptian sources.

Ancient Jewish Magic, by Gideon Bohak. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. 483 pp. £70.00 / \$135.00. Magical techniques were apparently considered to "work" even where it is very difficult for us to see what effect they could have had; one might note that many of the practices of ancient medicine seem to have survived a similar shortcoming. 2: "Jewish magic in the Second Temple period" and 3: "Jewish magic in late antiquity - the 'insider' evidence." Jewish mythology is a major literary element of the body of folklore found in the sacred texts and in traditional narratives that help explain and symbolize Jewish culture and Judaism. Elements of Jewish mythology have had a profound influence on Christian mythology and on Islamic mythology, as well as on world culture in general. Christian mythology directly inherited many of the narratives from the Jewish people, sharing in common the narratives from the Old Testament. Islamic mythology also shares The diversity existing within ancient Jewish magic and the essential contradiction between witchcraft and monotheism are in themselves evidences of foreign influence on the system. The scholars of the first centuries of the present era refer frequently and unanimously to Egypt as the original home of magic arts (Blau, l.c. pp. 37-49). In the Bible the real homes of all varieties of witchcraft are given as Egypt (Ex. vii. et passim) and Babylon (Isa. xlvi). Ancient Jewish magic, Early Jewish and Early Christian Demonology. Review of: Gideon Bohak, Ancient Jewish Magic. A History. Save to Library. The application of magical signs is attested since the 1st century CE in Greece, Great Britain, France and Egypt, and it can still be observed today, but a detailed study of the origin, applications, and functions of the signs remains a desideratum.