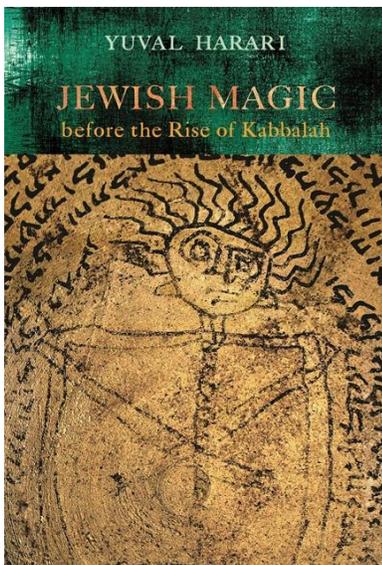




Reviews of the Enoch Seminar 2019.08.08

Yuval Harari, *Jewish Magic before the Rise of Kabbalah*, trans. by Batya Stein. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2017. ISBN: 9780814336304. Pp. 604. \$64.99. Paper Cased.

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Jewish Magic before the Rise of the Kabbalah begins with a counterintuitive affirmation: “Magic is a rather boring matter.” If the author, Yuval Harari, does not find excitement in the concrete practice of magic, his 450-page discussion on magic texts demonstrates the opposite feelings for the scholarly study of what he groups under the umbrella term “magical culture.” He focuses on the Jewish world in late antiquity and the early Islamic period, yet he does not downplay the importance of the academic approaches to magic outside the field of Jewish Studies. In fact, his interest in methodology renders this book valuable for theoretical discussions of magical practices beyond Judaism or the late antique period. This English edition, an updated version of the Hebrew original, takes into consideration recently published research on methodological issues, which are presented in the first part. The second part is dedicated to the description of Jewish magic texts and artifacts, complementing the main work in the field, Gideon Bohak’s *Ancient Jewish Magic*. Harari, however, also tackles the question of Merkavah and Hekhalot literature and introduces the idea of a magical culture within ancient Judaism.

Chapter 1, “Magic and the Study of Religion,” introduces the critical study of magic in scholarly literature from as many points of view as possible. Harari discusses the main stances on magic, mainly chronologically, beginning with the evolutionist perspectives of Edward Tylor, Herbert Spencer, and James Frazer. Although their comparisons between magic and religion pioneered the analysis of magical phenomena, they did not go beyond the study of magic as an inferior form of religion to explore magic as a stable category. The early twentieth century scholarship—represented, among others, by Wilhelm Wundt, Sigmund Freud, Daniel O’Keefe, and Robert Marett—shifted its interest towards the psychological dimension of the magical act, considering it either an infantilized expression of the human will or a mechanism whereby human beings cope with incomprehensible events or unrealizable desires. For other scholars, magic has different coordinates at societal level. On the one hand, sociologists such as Marcel Mauss, Émile Durkheim, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, or Robertson Smith, differentiated between religion and magic by their degree of institutionalization. Anthropologists, on the other hand, focused on the function of magic and its immediate goals, as opposed to

the performative nature of the religious ritual (Bronislaw Malinowski). The topic has also been approached from a power relations perspective by Stanley Tambiah, Edmund Leach, and Mary Douglas. The comprehensive review of most sources related to the field makes this chapter the ideal introduction to the scholarly study of magic and can serve well students and scholars who seek to familiarize themselves with this topic.

Chapter 2, “Magic, Mysticism, Religion, and Society: The Study of Early Jewish Magic,” moves from general to specific to assess the scholarly literature on Jewish magical artifacts and texts. Harari points out the difficulty in defining magical practices according to modern theories. He also provides a historical context for their study in the Greco-Roman world, before reviewing scholarly approaches to ancient Jewish magic. Beginning with an account of the arguments within the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* movement, which dismisses magic as superstition, he pursues the twentieth century path to the legitimization of the academic inquiry into magical practices. This chapter parallels the previous one, although not always explicitly. Approaches to magic within Judaism seem to follow a similar path to those outside Judaism presented in the first chapter. Jacob Lauterbach, Ephraim Urbach, and Saul Lieberman, for example, following Tylor, Spencer, and Frazer, relocate magic to the space of the Other, magic being referred to as a non-Jewish influence within the halakhic practice of Judaism. While some theorists propose a hierarchy of religion and magic, with magic at the bottom, as a primitive variant of the first, others indicate the intertwining of the two in aggadot and in the production of artifacts. Michael Fishbane and Meir Bar-Ilan, similar to Douglas, discuss the two concepts from a gender studies perspective. In addition to socio-cultural theories, Harari introduces in this chapter the question of Hekhalot and Merkavah literature, and extends the discussion to the magical use of mystical narratives. The idea that this particular genre evolved from the practice of the rituals described in it, put forth by Rebecca Lesses and James Davila, is supported by Harari’s endorsement of the use of speech act theory as the methodological basis of his analysis in the second part of his work. The last section of this chapter presents scholarly work on Jewish artifacts, from incantation bowls and amulets to recipes and treatises.

While the first two chapters are mainly descriptive, the next two illustrate Harari’s own approach to magic. In Chapter 3, “Religion, Magic, Adjuration, and the Definition of Early Jewish Magic,” the author makes use of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s theory of family resemblance as applied by Henk Versnel. Thus, the focus shifts from a fixed definition of magical practices *per se* to a number of characteristics that would delimit magical culture. The eight common features presented include the explicit definition of an artifact as a magical object (be it an amulet, an adjuration, an incantation, etc.), the language used (magical formulae, specific phrases, Hebrew roots belonging to the lexical field of supernatural powers, expulsion, threat, etc.), as well as the tone (demanding rather than supplicatory). Harari notes the relative extent to which these features are all present in a single magical text, in order to emphasize the dynamic nature of the phenomenon.

Chapter 4, “How to Do Things with Words: Speech Acts and Incantations,” begins by summarizing John Austin’s speech act theory, and evaluates performative utterances in ritualistic contexts, applying the same principles in the description of Jewish magical acts. Harari explicitly avoids the pitfalls of essentialist theories, which, although reliant on the same principle of family resemblance, have the tendency to focus on the mental processes behind the production of an action. He develops his hypothesis within an emic understanding of the cultural framework instead, which leads to a fruitful discussion on the differences of a speech act in the views of Austin and those of ancient Jewish practitioners of magic. According to Austin, in order for a ritual to be considered efficacious, the linguistic formula, the authoritative status of the practitioner, as well as their intention and the accompanying actions need to be socially recognized as valid. For early Jewish magicians and communities, argues Harari, this was not the case. The divine origin of the ritualistic text, with its purification techniques and holy names, is enough to ensure the efficacy of the magical act. A departure point for textual analysis, this important argument changes the main terms of the equation: the practitioner can be any individual with access to divine knowledge, the target audience is no longer restricted to those who can understand the ritual actions, and the magical texts must claim supernatural provenance. With no concluding remarks for this chapter, however, the author conveys this essential piece only implicitly.

The second part of the book, chapters 5-7, presents Jewish magical culture categorized into Jewish magical texts and artifacts (Chapter 5), Jewish and non-Jewish sources on Jewish magic in late antiquity (Chapter 6), and rabbinic literature with references to magic (Chapter 7). Chapter 5, “Jewish Magic Literature: Magical Texts and Artifacts,” relies heavily on textual evidence and is replete with examples from amulets, gems, pendants, and even human skulls, but it also deals with magic treatises and recipes in detail. Harari describes the artifacts and notes their potential uses and history of production, indicating the bi-directional cultural influences, mainly Hellenistic and Babylonian, that characterize the late antique Jewish culture.

Chapter 6, “Angels, Demons, and Sorceries: Beliefs, Actions, and Attitudes in Nonmagic Literature,” presents a plethora of texts that expose the various views on magic in non-magical literature. Harari divides the sources into Second Temple period literature, Hekhalot and Merkavah literature, Karaite writings, Hai Gaon’s Responsa, and Maimonides’ works. The variety of the literary genres involved justifies the choice of methodology. Jewish ancient authoritative texts, such as those of the Enoch tradition or the book of Tobit, the New Testament, apocryphal works such as the Testament of Solomon, and the works of Philo and Josephus are brought together under the umbrella of textual discourse. Harari works fruitfully with the family resemblance concept to show how adjurations, magical names of angels, demons, and God, among others, are present in descriptions of magical rituals in texts with different goals, intended readership, and stances on magical practices.

The final chapter, “Knowledge, Power, and Hegemony: Sorcery, Demonology, and Divination in Rabbinic Literature,” presents various rabbinic views on magic in its multi-faceted forms: sorcery, demons and evil spirits, divination, the interpretation of dreams, and astrology. Alongside the two Talmuds, sources from the Tosefta and the Midrash are also brought into the picture. Harari emphasizes the heterogenic nature of the opinions on magic, demonstrating convincingly that different practices were encouraged or discouraged according to their goals, magical efficacy being only seldom dismissed by the rabbis. He also demystifies the notion that only certain peripheral social groups made use of it, analyzing texts that reflect the power relations between Jews and Gentiles, women and men, rabbis and laypeople. Magical practices, argues Harari, are a concern for the rabbis, insofar as they are under women’s or Gentiles’ control. Otherwise, as long as magic is used for beneficial purposes and does not include foreign religious elements, it can be used to prevent attacks or to undo the harm done by malevolent forces. Noteworthy is also the idea that magic is authorized by the rabbis in what Harari names “hagiographic” literature, i.e., texts that portray Jewish religious figures in a saintly manner, whereby their supernatural powers lay as proof for their spiritual achievements. The conclusion marks the main question arising from the study, namely the extent to which the numerous sources reflect Jewish magical culture in historical context.

Harari’s clear and well-structured work assembles a vast array of late antique material on magic and Judaism. While other scholars concerned themselves with either methodological questions or a small number of particular texts and genres, Harari has managed to summarize an impressive amount of information in a way that does not compromise the value of the content. Not only does he approach critically previous scholarship in the field of magic from many points of view, but he also grapples creatively with textual editions and manuscript variants. His codicological notes on rabbinic units, as found in different manuscripts, represent a point of departure for further comparative studies.

The inevitable shortcomings of such an encompassing work, most notably the need to study texts in their historical-cultural context, have already been pointed out by the author. The author’s choice not to work with cognitive theories would be the only questionable one. A closer and critical reading of such approaches to magic reveal the fact that they can be applied to the study of the differences between religion and magic as well as to the study of Jewish magic in a halakhic context. Notwithstanding a certain purism from the part of notable cognitive theorists such as Jesper Soeren, who disregard the pragmatically different use of magic and religion when focusing purely on the mental processes, a cognitive description of the meaning construction

in Jewish culture through the mapping of mental spaces related to magic and religion would complement efficiently the concept of “family resemblance.” In any case, the lack of a cognitive approach does not render Harari’s analysis less valid.

From a structural point of view, the bi-partite nature of the book, divided into “Research and Method” and “Sources,” allows for the selective use of the work for different scholarly purposes. This, however, comes at the expense of textual unity, evident particularly in the second part, where the author employs sociological methods without references to their analysis in the first part. The book, as clearly-framed as it is, could have been published as two separate volumes without losing textual cohesion.

The volume does not benefit from a comprehensive conclusion either; a four-page, purely descriptive epilogue summarizes briefly the hypothesis and the contents. This linear feature of the book helps the reader navigate easily. At the end, however, there is almost no attempt to discuss his views on how artifacts, beliefs, and authoritative responses to magic inform each other. As the author himself points out, the book does not go beyond a description of elements that constitute Jewish magical culture. Whether such a culture existed at all has not been called into question. As such, a second edition would be greatly improved by a more generous analysis of this aspect, together with a conclusion that blends together the wealth of information presented independently.

These rather minor aspects do not overshadow this book’s contribution to the academic field of Jewish magic. The work represents an excellent critical introduction to the scholarly study of magical practices in general, from which anybody tackling the issue either anthropologically, historically, or philologically could benefit. *Jewish Magic before the Rise of Kabbalah* complements all the other case syntheses on individual Jewish magical texts and demonstrates the complexity of the field of study.