

JUDAISM, MAGIC AND GLOBALIZATION:
THE TRANSMISSION OF THE *NOMINA MAGICA* SESEN,
SINUI AND SEMANGLOF

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In the last two decades many scholars have focused on the study of magic and ritual power in Late Antiquity as an important manifestation of the culture and ambiance of the period. This interest led to the deepening of our knowledge about antique mentalities and has opened new venues for our, in many ways, patchwork knowledge of that age. Since the pioneering work of Preisendanz, a plethora of editions of texts in several languages have flooded the scholarly world, causing a textual “inflation” that has multiplied the evidence at our disposal. In a parallel way, the huge primary bibliography attests clearly the popularity of such texts¹.

However, if one takes a look at these secondary sources going beyond their philological analysis, the scenery changes in a radical manner. Putting it in a simplistic way, scholars have focused on what, less on how and almost nothing on why this kind of texts and the practices they described were so popular and widespread in the whole Mediterranean *oikoumene*. This situation seems to be caused mainly by the perdurance of certain theoretical approaches that impose categories alien to the texts and the society that produced them. These categories derived from the dichotomy Religion-Magic and the old Western scholarly bias toward the second concept, an attitude that keeps appearing, although in very subtle ways, in modern research².

Every scholar has engaged in the discussion about Magic and ritual power on the comparative grounds laid by that antithesis. Magic was then a precedent, a sub-product, a by-product, an epiphenomenon or a derivation of religion, depending from which point of view (historical, theological, sociological) the evidence was studied. Somehow, with each of these approaches we have tried to legitimize not only our study but the object of study itself, introducing an alien ideological component that further disturbs the already blurred images from the everyday realities of Late Antique society that those texts reflect.

¹ PREISENDANZ 1973-1974; SCHÄFER-SHAKED 1994-1997; NAVEH - SHAKED 1985; NAVEH - SHAKED 1993; SCHIFFMAN - SWARTZ 1992.

² See different approaches to it in GOLDIN 1976; BOHAK 2008, 8-69; REMUS 1999; GAGER 1992, 24-25; VERSNEL 1991; HARARI 2005; IDEL 1997; SCHÄFER 1997.

Things get even more complicated if, following the path marked by modern anthropology, we try to introduce a third factor in the equation, science; again Western contemporary bias looks for explaining those texts by reducing them to a link in the chain toward a vision of the world defined quantitatively in scientific terms³.

It is not an easy task to clarify the relationship between what we usually defined as Magic and what is understood as Religion in Western culture, since the very concept of religion seems to be a Western category applicable in the best of cases to a medieval Mediterranean society and / or to modern Western monotheistic religions⁴. However, it should not be automatically superposed over the reality of the Mediterranean *oikoumene* in Late Antiquity. This situation is even more conspicuous if the complex relations between Judaism, Christianity and so-called Paganism are taken into account. Therefore a re-definition and a critique of the category of religion in Late Antiquity is needed if we are to better understand a manifestation as socially ubiquitous as Magic and ritual power were. This redefinition could have an impact not only on the way Magic is considered in general but also on the prevalent and specific role that Jewish practitioners seemed to have according to “Christian” and “Pagan” sources alike.

To tackle this conundrum I will follow the path set in the last years by Shaye Cohen, Seth Schwartz and Daniel Boyarin among other scholars⁵. Their quest is different, for they strive to answer two divergent albeit interrelated questions: first, when did what we called Judaism come into being as a separate and identifiable entity? Second, was the process that led to such result exogenous or endogenous, i.e., is it the consequence of internal development or of external confrontation?

Some of the conclusions they reach and the starting point from which they launch their analysis prove valid and applicable also to the study of the relationship between Judaism and Magic in Late Antiquity. Shaye Cohen opened the question up by considering the “beginning” of Jewishness; he showed the development of a non-ethnic conception of Jewishness that consisted in an amalgam of religion and culture. Cohen underlines the fact that “the identity system that would attain canonical form in rabbinic Judaism was a union of disparate elements, Jewishness as a function of religion and Jewishness as a function of descent”⁶. In the same way, he shows how the rabbinic texts are the only texts of antiquity to imagine Jews as distinctive and unassimi-

³ See TAMBIAH 1990.

⁴ On the impact of these ideas on our view of Judaism in Late Antiquity see SCHWARTZ 2001.

⁵ SCHWARTZ 2001; BOYARIN 2004; BOYARIN 2007; COHEN 2000.

⁶ COHEN 2000, 341-349.

lable; in fact, the boundary between Jew and Gentile was not only not strictly marked, but it was crossable as well. At the end of the period, Rabbis would be acknowledged by Christian and Islamic states as the religious leaders of their communities defined in opposition to Christian and Islamic societies, which also defined themselves against Judaism. Cohen's hypothesis focuses mainly on the uncertainty of Jewishness in Late Antiquity; it does not explain why and how Judaism became distinctive in that precise period and accepts without criticism the preeminence in Jewish life of the rabbinic postures, a detail that is quite dubious according to the present *status quaestionis*. However, the landscape that he lays before our eyes breaks some assumptions about Jewish specificity that have plagued much of the modern discussion; it has a clear impact in our understanding of the ambivalence and no linear relation between cult and culture in late Antiquity and indirectly opens new venues in the study of magic.

Cohen strived to show that the adjective 'distinctive', when applied to Judaism in late Antiquity, should not be understood as a synonym to 'opposed' or 'isolated'. Schwartz goes beyond Cohen's hypothesis by asking about the very existence of such a distinctiveness in the aftermath of the Jewish revolts of the first and second centuries CE. He states that what emerged after the revolts differed radically from the previous situation. On theoretical grounds furnished by structural functionalism, this author examined "the question of whether the Jews constituted a group in Antiquity and, if they did, of the character of that group"⁷. Against such an assumption and the so-called "hermeneutics of Good will," he revisited again both secondary and primary evidence, especially archaeological data. In the same way Schwartz departs from the scholarly consensus about the multiplicity of Judaism in the Second Temple Period⁸. On the contrary and even taking into account its complex nature, he argues that it was based on Temple and Torah. After the failure of the two revolts, Jewish nation shattered; thus, according to Schwartz in the period between 135-350 CE:

For most Jews, Judaism may have been little more than a vestigial identity, bits and pieces of which they were happy to incorporate into a religious and cultural system that was essentially Greco-Roman and Pagan. Most Jews may have been Jews in the same (tenuous) way as people like, for example, Lucian of Samosata, the satirical writer of the second century, who, despite his mastery of the classical tradition and of Greek style, and his possession of Roman citizenship, nevertheless regarded himself as irreducibly "other", were Syrian⁹.

⁷ SCHWARTZ 2001, 5.

⁸ SCHWARTZ 2001, 66-68.

⁹ SCHWARTZ 2001, 15.

This statement does not suppose that the core ideology of Judaism was created anew after the revolts, but preserved and deeply altered by the Rabbis and their forerunners. The main point here is that it had in the best of cases a weak hold on most Jews, as the Rabbis themselves reluctantly confess with their rebukes of the *am-ha aretz*, i.e., the majority of Jewish population in Late Antiquity Roman Palestine. Most of Schwartz's hypothesis refers specifically to Roman Palestine, but he strongly advocates that "Jewish" cities and villages were normal participants in the urban culture or the Roman East, a culture that was permeated with pagan religiosity¹⁰. Therefore Palestine Jewish urban society was very alike as the normal Greco-Roman city without differences despite the Rabbinic attempts to rationalize such a situation.

That reality will change from 350 CE onwards when the Roman Empire becomes a Christian Empire. The advent of the Christianization of the Empire supposed the transformation of Judaism into a separate religious community centered around Torah and synagogue. This Christianization was determinant in managing the re-emergence of Judaism into a reality that previously had been depicted ideally by the Rabbis. On the one hand, since identity became inextricably linked with Religion, it tended to marginalize Jews. On the other, it meant the adoption by Jews of much of the social structures and organization that were dominant in Christian society. Schwartz puts it as follows :

Christianization, and what is called in social historical terms its sibling, the emergence of religion as a discrete category of human experience – religion's *disembedding* – had a direct impact on the Jewish culture of late antiquity because the Jewish communities *appropriated* much from the Christian society around them. That is, quite a lot of the distinctive Jewish culture was, to be vulgar about it, repackaged Christianity¹¹.

It is clear that in the same way that the Christianization of the Empire was an ongoing process that would reach well into the sixth century, the re-configuration of Judaism into a Religion had to take some time. In the same way, although Schwartz's statements expressly apply to the situation in Roman Palestine, they are also applicable to the rest of the Mediterranean *oikoumene*, especially to the eastern part of the Empire. It is likely that Jewish society was even less conspicuously Jewish in the Diaspora, if the archaeological data are to be taken into account (dedication of synagogues, etc); one could suppose that hybrid celebrations like the one described by Sozomen in Elone Mamre, where Jews celebrated Abraham, Christians the logos, and the

¹⁰ SCHWARTZ 2001, 131-161.

¹¹ SCHWARTZ 2001, 179. In fact a similar process is attested in the so-called "paganism"; see MARKUS 1990, 28.

pagans, Hermes was the rule and no the exception¹². Schwartz's chronology offers a *terminus ante quem* for the transference of much of the magical and ritual lore. After the sixth century, it seems that such transference came to a halt, quite likely due to a progressive decline in urban culture.

It seems then that Late Antiquity society cannot be reduced easily to external categories that do not take into account its intrinsic hybridity. This concept, taken from postcolonial studies, is adopted by Boyarin to explain another point of friction in our understanding of the period: the so-called parting of the ways between Judaism and Christianity¹³. Here again a re-assessment is called for: against the common view of an early separation, several authors have proposed a much more nuanced approach that delays such a division till the fourth or even the fifth Century CE. Building again on the idea of Religion as invented tradition, Boyarin strives to show that "Christian" and "Jew" were compatible identities for many centuries. As Boyarin puts it "with Christianity, cult and culture become stranded, as it separated *Romanitas* from religious practice"¹⁴.

Therefore, the relationship between "religions" in late Antiquity, and particularly between Judaism and Christianity, should not be considered in genetic terms, but rather as a *continuum* to be understood against the background of the Late Antiquity Empire. He applies the linguistic "wave theory" to social and historical realities. According to this view, he imagines a "contact zone," a space of "transculturalization" where hybridity and asymmetry are the norm and not the exception. Magic in late Antiquity fits well within this model¹⁵.

In the same sense that the hybridity of this religious dialect map reaches to groups that would understand themselves either as purely "Jewish" or "Christian", it extends also to activities that would be defined as "purely" magical or "purely" religious. This approach goes beyond the genetic emphasis of the "Stammbaum" or family tree model and insists on mixture and fusion. Boyarin claims that the religious and social reality of Late Antiquity could be an "assortment" of religious "dialects" throughout the Jewish world that gradually developed structure as clusters through diffusion and were eventually organized as "languages" (religions)¹⁶.

¹² BOYARIN 2004, 15; see also FREDRIKSEN 2007.

¹³ BOYARIN 2004, 17-22; BOYARIN 1999.

¹⁴ BOYARIN 2007, 72.

¹⁵ BOYARIN 2004, 17-33; on hybridity from the post-colonial perspective see PRATT 1992; YOUNG 1995. It is interesting to note that modern research is beginning to change many traditional approaches; see ASTELL - GOODHART 2011, for a more conventional approach see STONE 2011.

¹⁶ BOYARIN 2007, 74-83. It is from this point of view that the "parting of the ways" problems should be tackled; see LIEU 1994.

It is clear by now that the concepts of uniformity and orthodoxy applied to the religious situation of Late Antiquity should be substituted by a hybrid concept, in which a cluster of ideas, people and rituals share certain identity traits across time and place but at the same time developed new meanings in their different contexts¹⁷. The antithetical relationship between magic and religion in Late Antiquity could be redefined then in more inclusive terms. In the same way that language can be considered a social practice, magic and religion should be considered as social practices as well, mechanisms of powers, that cannot be isolated from their contexts and from each other¹⁸.

It is possible to test this approach in a concrete detail of magical practice in Late Antiquity: the transmission of *nomina magica*. Among those, the *nomina* Sesen (Sisin, Sisinius), Sinui and Semanglof are notable since they are attested during a period of almost two millennia in different incarnations; they even reach the modern period. The ubiquity of these *nomina*, the context in which they usually appeared and the transformation they experienced along the transmission period make them a good case study.

During Late Antiquity these names are found mainly in different settings linked with ritual power. Without implying a chronology, they appear in several Sassanid Seals, Aramaic magic bowls and amulets, the different Corpora of magical Greek papyri, and in a type of Greek amulets. In three of them (Bowls, Greek amulets, Sassanid seals) they share the same exorcistic context. In the Greek Magical papyri, these *nomina* undergo a slight change of formulation and are substituted by the well known *nomen* Σεσεγεν βαρφαραγγες. In this last setting, the context does not seem clearly exorcistic. These *nomina* seem to have been used in quite varied religious contexts. Examples of them are to be found in Christian, Jewish and Pagan ambiances.

How do we explain the popularity of these names, their ubiquity, and the difficulty in defining in a clear cut manner their religious milieu? The development of this triad of *nomina* is complex. Following Martin Schwartz, the name Sesen should not be mistaken with the personal name Sasan, eponym of the Sassanid dynasty. Sesen is a divine name that would derive from the Aramaic *Saesæn*^{*}, from which the Greek Σεσεγεν would eventually spring. It designates an Aramaic divinity, attested already from the fourth century BCE onwards in some theophoric names ('abssn)¹⁹. However, the first actual attestation of the name appears almost in a simultaneous way in Iranian Mesopotamia and the Late Roman Syria around the end of the second century CE and the beginnings of the third. The Aramaic divinity was taken up in Iranian and

¹⁷ BEARD - NORTH - PRICE 1998, 249.

¹⁸ BOURDIEU 1997, 96-97.

¹⁹ SCHWARTZ 1998.

Greek amulets, transformed into an apotropaic hero. Thus, in Iranian seal amulets, this hero, identified by the inscription as Sesen the Mage (*ssn mgw*), is hitting a demon that is depicted with female attributes; in some of these amulets the evil eye appears as well. The hero seems to hold a palm branch, an antique magical utensil to ward evil off in the Near East. Although most of the Iranian seals collected by Ryka Gysellen are dated in the Sassanid period, it is likely that they took over a previous model²⁰.

In Roman Syria, there is a type of magical amulets that shares several traits with the Iranian Seals; they are known as “seals of God” (*σφραγίς θεου*) or “Seals of Solomon” (*σφραγίς Σολομών*). They usually depict a nimbus-crowned rider who is spearing a prostrated female demon; this rider appears identified in Greek as Solomon, but in some amulets he is flanked by Sisinnios and Sisinnarios. These amulets can have other iconographic themes such as scorpions, snakes or the evil eye pierced by three knives. Sometimes the motif of the palm branch appears as well. Most of them are usually accompanied by the inscription *εις θεος ο νικων τα κακα* (“one God who conquers evil”). In some cases, the following inscription can be read “Flee, Oh hated one, Solomon pursues you, Sisinnios, Sisinnarios”. These Greek amulets apparently were mass-produced from the third century CE on a few workshops in Syria and Palestine till the sixth/seventh centuries. The final models seems to have been thoroughly christianized²¹.

It is clear that both types of amulets are linked since they share iconography, the name of Sesen / Sisinnios and the exorcistic context. The rider iconography can appear without the nominal ascription to Sisinnios; in fact, one of the oldest examples has only a set of *nomina barbara* (*grt mrty pll zybh*) that is recurrent in Jewish Magical texts from the Cairo Genizah. In some Aramaic and Syriac bowls, there is an indirect reference to the iconography: a certain Qatros of the lance (there are different versions of the name) is said to pierce with his powerful spear the heart of Lilith Halbas. A crude female figure depicting the demon appears in most the bowls²².

It is quite likely that the female demon reproduced in these amulets is a variant of the Mesopotamian Lamashtu, an evil force that attacked children and child-bearing women. The belief in this demon spread along the Roman East and the Persian kingdom at least from the third century on, it was associated with belief in Sesen as its deterrent and in Roman Syrian, Sesen was represented as a rider or knight. Some of these traits are to be found in some

²⁰ GYSELEN 1995.

²¹ See TORIJANO 2002a; TORIJANO 2002b; RUSSELL 1995; BOHAK 2008, 158-165.

²² NAVEH - SHAKED 1985; NAVEH - SHAKED 1993; GORDON 1984; GORDON 1985; GORDON 1993; SCHIFFMAN - SWARTZ 1992, 99-105; YAMAUCHI 1967.

Palestinian Jewish amulets and in the Aramaic bowls in Mesopotamia; although the earliest among them are to be dated around the fourth-fifth century CE, some details suggest that they go back to an earlier model. In at least three cases (one Palestinian amulet and two Aramaic bowls), the names *swny*, *swswny* and *snygly* appear together with a *historiola* that describes how the sons of Smamit are killed by a demon called Sideros; the text described how the names of *swny*, *swswny* and *snygly* have to be invoked to protect a woman and her son²³. This *historiola* will become very popular in the East with version in almost every language (Greek, Armenian, Syriac, Georgian, Arabic); it is interesting though, that the demon Sideros changed in these versions into Gyllou, the Christian version of the Jewish Lilith and the Mesopotamian Lamashtu. In later Jewish versions, such as the attested in the *Alphabetum Siracidis*, Sideros is turned into Lilith, the traditional Jewish Demon²⁴.

The last link in the chain of transmission and usage of these *nomina* happens to be in Greek magical papyri. This corpus is especially important because most of the evidence either predates or is contemporaneous with some of the amulets and bowls that have been studied until this moment: most of the papyri where the name Sesen appears are dated between the second and the fourth century CE. Several traits distinguish the use of the name in these texts from previous attestations. Thus, there is not holy rider iconography; only the name Sesen appears in the texts and does so in a compound form $\sigma\epsilon\sigma\epsilon\nu\gamma\epsilon\nu$ $\beta\alpha\rho\phi\alpha\rho\alpha\gamma\gamma\eta\varsigma$; and, finally, the setting of the texts is not exorcistic in many cases. The second part of the name ($\beta\alpha\rho\phi\alpha\rho\alpha\gamma\gamma\eta\varsigma$) seems to be a compound of the Aramaic *bar* “son of” and an adjective derived from the Greek $\phi\alpha\rho\alpha\gamma\chi$ (gulley); it appears in Palestinian Aramaic amulets and in late aramaic bowls either as part of the same compound, the denomination of a new figure (*bshum pharagin bar pharagin*, “in the name of Pharagin bar pharagin”) or a the name (*pharis / phargus*) of a special type of Lilith. It is also attested in Syriac texts as “Phargus. the violent spirit”. In the 31 attestations of the compound name in the Greek magical papyri, only in three cases $\sigma\epsilon\sigma\epsilon\nu\gamma\epsilon\nu$ $\beta\alpha\rho\phi\alpha\rho\alpha\gamma\gamma\eta\varsigma$ seems to designate some kind of magical persona; two of them are protective charms. Surprisingly, most of the rest of the cases responds to divination charms or erotic magic spells. In fact, the erotic context seems to be in the majority and the name has become a *nomen barbarum*, without apparent knowledge of its origin and utilization in exorcistic contexts.

As it seems evident, the transmission of these *nomina magica* is so complex that it does not allow for a simple explanation. However, it is clear that the

²³ NAVEH - SHAKED 1985, 111-122; GREENFIELD 1989; OIKONOMIDES 1975-1976; SORLIN 1991; PERDRIZET 1922; GOLLANZ 1912.

²⁴ NAVEH - SHAKED 1985, 121-122.

picture we have presented here cannot be reduced to a genetic derivation or to an identification based on neat religious attribution. The corpora that constitute the evidence are composed by primary sources but later secondary sources also attest the survival of the tradition in most of the Mediterranean. The “wave theory” gives a better explanation to the reality of multiple, and the same time, various attestations of the names. If we applied the “wave theory”, that was intended to deal with changes due to contact among languages and dialects, then the changes of this tradition would have spread outward concentrically like waves which became progressively weaker²⁵.

In this way, an Aramaic tradition around a divinity called *Sesen* would arise around the fifth century BCE as witnessed by some personal names, or even before if the Arslan Tash amulets with the inscription *SSM BN PADR* (Caquot) and the iconography preserved are to be taken into account²⁶. From there, the names and the exorcistic traditions spread and diverged; the process of convergence between traditions that can be observed from the third century onwards would be due to the role played by Jewish transference between Roman Syria and Sassanian Mesopotamia.

According to this view, Magic in construed linked with Ethnicity and therefore does not participate of the concept of Religion understood in Western modern terms, to wit, ruled by theology and / or doctrine. Magic has much to do with orthopraxy and very little with orthodoxy; this fact would explain why Jews were seen from the outside as the magic practitioners par excellence. The insistence on praxis makes easy the geographical and cultural transference of texts and techniques and their adoption with slight modifications into new cultural contexts. The perdurance of the names in Modern Jewish books such as the *Sefer ha Razi'el*, and in folk tradition in Greek and Syriac texts supports this last point clearly.

On what it has been shown here, it is possible to suggest that the existence of a society in which Religion was not a category per se invalidates the traditional antithesis magic / religion and, in consequence, any analysis or hypothesis based on that grounds: we should not explain *obscura per obscuriora*. Religion and magic should be regarded then as a cultural mediation that link cult and culture and that are an epiphenomenon of each other. Therefore, we can only speak of Christian magic, Jewish magic, Arabic magic in a very relative manner. Most of the motifs, techniques and textual formulae go back to a period when such a religious definition was not in force; we can only define

²⁵ The name appears in the following cases: DANIEL - MALTOMINI 1990-1991, amulets 10; 42; 46; 48-51; 66; 75; PREISENDANZ 1973-1974, *PGM* 2.122; 3.12; 3.79; 3.110; 3.155; 3.217; 3.436; 4.364; 4.981; 4.1025; 4.1487; 7.312; 12.170; 36.240; 36.310; XLVIII.1-21, 67,13; III.217.

²⁶ CAQUOT 1973; GARBINI 1981.

a magical text as Jewish or Christian inasmuch they share the same cultural mediation, but not from a theological or doctrinal point of view. Following this line of thought and strictly speaking, Jewish or Christian magic only came into existence in Middle Ages. In a parallel way, the discourse of heresy could have shaped the attitudes toward magic in order to define the religious identity *qua* religion of both Judaism and Christianity; this discourse though, took place at the very end of Late Antiquity and should not be applied to earlier evidence without a careful assessment of sources.

Most of the cultural, technical and religious transferences implied in the common ground that it is to be found in the magical texts of late antiquity took place before the fifth or even fourth century CE. In that period the urban culture in the Mediterranean *oikoumene* was still growing strong and there was not a radical differentiation between the diverse ethnic and cultural groups that shaped it. The gradual collapse of the Late Antiquity social system based on the town and its substitution with the alternative Christian Empire, which led to a dismembering of religion and culture, ends it and gives rise to the medieval structure where the hybridization of ethnic identity and culture was substituted with religious bonding as main feature of the new societies. From them onwards, the transferences of magic and ritual techniques were greatly diminished, and Jewish practitioners gradually lost their intermediary role. What will be later labeled as Western magic was then shaped in its main characteristics between the third and the seventh century CE.

Finally it has to be taken into account that the sheer mass of textual witnesses makes the analysis quite difficult; similarities of content and themes help somehow in shedding some light on them as texts but not as social constructs. Unfortunately, when speaking of magic, hypotheses are always quite hypothetical.

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