

## Magic

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### A problem of definition

It was to be the greatest temple of all time—built to the glory of YHWH by King Solomon, in fulfillment of a promise that his father, King David, had made. Enormous and splendid, the temple would provide a place where the ark of the covenant could safely be stored and where all of Israel could worship.

But in the course of its construction, a problem arose. Solomon's favorite workman was attacked each night by Ornnias, a vampirelike demon who stole the workman's vitality by sucking on his thumb. Solomon prayed to YHWH for help, and YHWH sent a ring to Solomon via the angel Michael. This ring, on which was engraved a device that came to be known as the "Seal of Solomon," could be used to control all the demons of the world. With help from the angel Ouriel, Solomon used the seal to stop Ornnias from attacking his workman and then to order Ornnias to invoke Beelzeboul, a more powerful demon who in turn invoked all the other demons. By interrogating them, Solomon learned what their names were and which plants, stones, and animal parts could be used to avert each one of them.

Solomon compelled the conquered demons to finish building the temple and afterward drove them into bottles, which he sealed shut with his ring. He buried the bottles under the temple, where they remained until the Babylonians pillaged Jerusalem many years later. Assuming that the bottles contained gold, the greedy invaders broke them open and once again let loose upon the world a host of demonic ills. Henceforth ordinary people, lacking Solomon's power to imprison the demons, could keep them at bay only by wearing amulets engraved with his seal or by using the techniques that Solomon had learned from the demons themselves. It was because he had foreseen the demons' eventual release, indeed, that Solomon had recorded the means of averting each one so carefully.

This story of Solomon and the demons, which is taken from a narrative

called the *Testament of Solomon* that dates back to at least the 2nd century CE, is an apt introduction to an essay on magic, for it implicitly raises an issue that looms large in scholarly studies of the topic: namely, how can we distinguish between "magic" and "religion"? Using a special seal and other techniques to control demons makes Solomon look like what many would call a magician. This accords with other ancient portraits, where he is presented as an expert in incantations, astrology, alchemy, and other arts commonly gathered under the rubric and appears on amulets against illness and the Evil Eye. And yet, it could also be argued that several elements in the story situate Solomon within the realm of religion: the fact that the seal was a gift from YHWH, Michael and Ouriel's assistance in its delivery and deployment, and Solomon's use of the conquered demons to build YHWH's temple.

The story itself concedes nothing to this problem; the cultures in which it originated and developed simply armed Solomon with the tools that they revered as efficacious against demons and legitimated both him and those tools by linking them closely to YHWH and his angels. Nor was Solomon unusual among YHWH's devotees: Moses and Aaron performed deeds that we might call magical—not only did they turn a staff into a snake (Exod. 7.8–12) but they also devised such things as love charms and invisibility spells (PGM VII.619–27). Christ raised the dead and exorcised demons, feats often credited to magicians in antiquity; his name, as well as that of lao (a variation of YHWH), empowered such things as memory charms and divinatory spells and appeared in ancient grimoires side by side with, for example, instructions for engraving silver tablets and creating (and later eating) female dolls made of bread dough (PGM III.410–66). The Greek hero Jason received the first *lynx* (a tool for making people fall in love) from the goddess Aphrodite (Pindar, *Pythian* 4.2.3–19). And on the Metternich Stele, the goddess Isis proudly claimed to teach *heka* (an Egyptian word that the ancient Greeks translated as "mageia" [magic]) to her favorite mortals. In other words, pagan divinities and heroes no more repudiated what we might call magic than did YHWH and his followers. In fact, far from rejecting such practices, ancient peoples enhanced their gods' and heroes' reputations by boasting that they knew more about such practices than did other cultures' gods and heroes.

And yet the modern scholarly quest to establish a division between magic and religion does have some roots in antiquity, insofar as both ancient and modern discussions hinge on terminology: what one chooses to call any particular activity (and, it follows, who is doing the choosing) determines whether the activity is understood as acceptable or discredited, pious or blasphemous, religion or magic. In antiquity, *mageia* (a term that I use as a shorthand way of referring to a variety of ancient Mediterranean words) almost always referred to someone else's religious practices; it was a term that distanced those practices from the norm—that is, from one's own practices, which constituted religion. Among magicians themselves, distance could lend glamour and authority—for instance, Greek magicians claimed to one another that their spells had been invented by legendary Egyptian, Persian, or Jewish magicians—but to