As Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so these men also oppose the truth, men of corrupt mind and counterfeit faith; but they will not get very far, for their folly will be plain to all, as was that of those two men.

So wrote the author of 2 Tim. iii 8-9, reputedly the Apostle Paul but possibly a writer of the next century. What is of immediate interest is that the author of the epistle, whether Paul or someone else, could presuppose acquaintance, on the part of his entire readership, with the tale of Jannes and Jambres.

That the story of the two brother magicians had indeed achieved considerable currency in the ancient and mediaeval worlds is attested by the many references to them and their altercations with Moses in Hebrew, Aramaic, Syriac, Arabic, Greek, Latin and Old and Middle English literatures. Not unexpectedly, the account that emerges from these widespread traditions is sketchy and inconsistent in various details. In the present context, it is sufficient to recall that the time-span of their activity stretches from prior to the birth of Moses to the execution of Balaam and the princes of Midian. As magicians at Pharaoh’s court, they predict the birth of Moses and subsequently counsel that he be liquidated as a threat to national security. With their father Balaam they flee to Ethiopia when their advice is not heeded, return to Egypt after some time, have a contest in magic with Moses (and Aaron), are defeated and meet their end at the Red Sea where, when in full flight above the water on wings they themselves had made, an angel of the Lord brings them down and destroys them in the Sea. Alternatively, they become proselytes, accompany Israel out of Egypt as heads of the “mixed multitude” (Ex. xii 38) and are executed at Sinai for their part in the golden-calf idolatry. A third tradition has them executed together with Balaam and the princes of Midian in accordance with Num. xxxi 8.
When and where did these traditions make their beginning? An early reference to two brothers as opponents of Moses and Aaron, whom scholars have equated, without proper qualification, with Jannes and Jambres the two Egyptian magicians, occurs in the so-called Damascus Document (hereafter CD). Col. V 17-19 reads: “For in earlier times Moses and Aaron arose with the help of the Prince of Lights, while Belial raised up Yohanah (yḥnh) and his brother.” Though the Cairo Genizah manuscripts of CD are mediaeval in date, this passage has also been identified among the Dead Sea Scrolls (DJD III, 15, 3, plate XXVI). Whereas several scholars have argued that the passage does not belong in its present context, Philip R. Davies in a recent book has shown that it is original and eminently suits its current setting. Writes Davies,

... the opening criticism of lack of understanding (V, 17) is illustrated by one historical reference only, that of Moses and Aaron and their opponents. The example is perfectly chosen; Moses and Aaron, as founders of the covenant and its law, represent divinely-inspired leadership. Against them were false leaders who led Israel astray. (The Damascus Covenant: An Interpretation of the “Damascus Document” [Sheffield, 1983], p. 121.)

Moreover, CD V 17-19 bears comparison with III 5-6 which states that Jacob’s descendants in Egypt “walked in the stubbornness of their heart in taking counsel against the commandments of God and doing each one as he thought right” (transl. Davies). What we find in these two passages of CD is a tradition about Israel’s apostasy in Egypt at variance with the account of Exodus. Elsewhere in biblical literature, however, we do find traditions that side with CD III 5-6 and V 17-19. Ezek. xx 7-8 speaks in vehement language about Israel’s worshiping of Egypt’s gods and of her rebellious refusal to mend her ways, to the point that Yahweh nearly destroyed her instead of leading her to the promised land (cf. also xiii 3). Similarly, Josh. xxiv 14 mentions Israel’s ancestors as

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