CHAPTER EIGHT

THE MAGICIAN AS OUTSIDER
IN THE HEBREW BIBLE AND THE NEW TESTAMENT

Stephen D. Ricks

Several recent studies on magic in antiquity, including essays published in this volume, have stressed its continuity, rather than cleavage, with religion.¹ According to these studies, magic in antiquity was not regarded as a separate institution with a structure distinct from that of religion, but was rather a set of beliefs and practices that deviated sharply from the norms of the dominant social group, and was thus considered antisocial, illegal, or unacceptable.² The evidence of the Hebrew Bible corresponds to this view of magic. There it is not the nature of the action itself, but the conformity of the action (or actor) to, or deviation from, the

¹ This essay represents a revision and expansion of my earlier essay “The Magician as Outsider: The Evidence of the Hebrew Bible,” in Paul V. M. Flesher, New Perspectives on Ancient Judaism V (Lanham: University Press of America, 1990), 125-34.

values of Israelite society—as these values are reflected in the canonical text of the Bible—that determines whether it is characterized as magical. Further, "magic" (as this and related words have been understood in Hebrew and Greek and rendered in versions from the Septuagint to the most recent English translations) is quintessentially the activity of the "outsider" in the Bible. The matter of the translation and subsequent interpretation of words traditionally rendered as "magic" is an important one that should not be overlooked in investigations of magic, since the choice of words used in a translation reflects a whole host of a priori assumptions made by the writer or translator, not only in a target language, such as English, but also in intermediate languages, such as the Greek of the Septuagint or the Latin of the Vulgate.

As I am using the term, "outsider" includes both the non-Israelite as well as the native Israelite whose practices deviated sharply from the Israelite norm, particularly because these acts were perceived as being performed through a power other than Israel's God. In this essay I discuss the traditional distinction between magic and religion that has prevailed in Western scholarship since the Reformation and contrast it with the view of magic and religion in antiquity. These methodological reflections, though they take us somewhat afield from antiquity, are not inappropriate for such a discussion, since questions of definition should be resolved at the outset of any study of magic. Thus, for instance, the value of Valerie I. J. Flint's otherwise admirable study, The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe, and Keith Thomas' Religion and the Decline of Magic, is somewhat undermined by rather debatable definitions of magic. Further, I consider accounts from the Bible

---

3 The matter of the translation and subsequent interpretation of words traditionally rendered as "magic" is an important one that should not be overlooked in investigations of magic, since the choice of words used in a translation reflects a whole host of a priori assumptions made by the writer or translator. For a convenient list of biblical Hebrew terms related to sorcery and their Septuagint equivalents, see G. André, "kāšap," in Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament, G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Joseph Fabry, eds. (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1984), 4.376-77.

4 Consider Flint's definition, in The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 3: "Magic may be said to be the exercise of a preternatural control over nature by human beings, with the assistance of forces more powerful than they. This combination of human and superhuman power will sometimes employ strange instruments and is always liable to produce remarkable and unaccustomed results. Thus we may expect an element of the irrational, and of the mysterious too, in a process that deserves to be called magical." But does not nearly every religious tradition have some elements that