CHAPTER NINETEEN
SATAN'S FALL IN COPTIC MAGIC

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Magical texts of all nations and periods are rich in mythological material. This may be contained in a *historiola*, a piece of structured narrative incorporated within the magical spell. The *historiola*, however, is but part of a broader phenomenon, that of the "mythical antecedent." By means of analogy, the mythical antecedent links the magician's present to an authoritative prototype with which it is supposed to merge in the course of the ritual action. The manipulation of mythical paradigms is a widespread ritual procedure, not at all limited to magic, as a study of the Christian Eucharist would show. Plain narration is only one of the means to appeal to myth. Often myths are simply alluded to, for instance by referring to an appropriate mytheme or by merely quoting names of mythological characters (gods, demons, biblical personages). These allusions, themselves frequently garbled and obscure, present a major challenge to students of ancient magical texts, especially when a myth is otherwise unknown or imperfectly known. They raise, moreover, the question whether an *ad hoc* mythology could be concocted to fit the occasion. How free were magicians to embroider upon, to change or even invent mythological material to make it suit their own purposes? Instead of dealing with these questions on a theoretical level, I propose to

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2 For a fuller treatment of the *historiola*, see D. Frankfurter's contribution in the present volume.
4 Claimed, for example, for Egyptian magic by F. Lexa, *La magie dans l'Egypte antique* (Paris: Geuthner, 1925), 1.55-56.
look at the way in which a relatively well-known Judeo-Christian myth, that of the primeval fall of Satan and his angels, is received in Coptic magical spells from late antiquity. Even though examples are few in number, they can afford us some idea of what magicians may do with myths.\(^5\)

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Judaism, in the last few centuries BCE, saw the rise and diffusion of myths describing a primeval fall of angels to account for the existence of spiritual beings opposed to both God and the human race.\(^6\) These myths acquired vital importance for the development of Christian theodicy and indeed for Christian doctrine as a whole, which may explain their rapid spread and durable impact. In Christian Egypt, too, they enjoyed great popularity. What may be the oldest of these myths, that of the angelic Watchers who fell through lust, deriving from Gen 6:1-6, was, in Coptic mainstream literature, soon superseded by two others.\(^7\) According to both of these accounts the devil was originally an angel, even God's first creature (cf. Job 40:19, LXX, on Behemoth). He revolted against divine authority and was expelled from heaven to become the plague of humanity. Both, however, give different motives for his apostasy. In the first and best known myth, the story of Lucifer, it is the devil's pride which makes him aspire to be the equal of God and which triggers his fall. In the second myth, his fall is intimately connected with the creation of human being. The angels are summoned to adore Adam, God's own image and likeness, and Satan alone refuses. He claims to be superior to humanity both because of his priority, being created first, and because of his spiritual nature, Adam being created out of matter.

\(^5\) The term “myth” is used here in a strictly neutral and technical sense to denote any more or less sacred narrative with authoritative and programmatic values, without any judgment on its veracity or inherent qualities.
