CHAPTER 8

Conceptualizing Demons in Late Antique Judaism

Gideon Bohak

The world of Jews in Late Antiquity was full of demons. This much is clear from the many passages in the Babylonian Talmud that refer to the demons’ great numbers, offer much advice on how to avoid demonic attacks, tell stories of demonic-human interactions, and discuss the production of anti-demonic amulets. To most medieval Jewish readers, these talmudic statements and stories posed no difficulty whatsoever, as their world too was full of demons, though not necessarily the same demons mentioned in the Babylonian Talmud.1 But with the onslaught of Modernity, one of whose main characteristics is the disenchchantment of the world and the disappearance of demons, the Talmudic discussions of demons became a very touchy issue. For some of the Jewish rationalists and reformers of the nineteenth century, the Talmudic claims about demons were a source of embarrassment, or a proof of the superstitious nature of the entire rabbinic project—hence their frequent appearance both in polemical and in apologetic contexts from the nineteenth century to this very day.2 More objective studies, especially of the rabbinic evidence, were also produced, but they were few and far between.3 For more recent scholarship, the subject proved too embarrassing, or too incomprehensible, the result being

* In what follows, I use the following abbreviations: AMB = Joseph Naveh and Shaul Shaked, Amulets and Magic Bowls: Aramaic Incantations of Late Antiquity (Jerusalem, 1985); MSF = Joseph Naveh and Shaul Shaked, Magic Spells and Formulae: Aramaic Incantations of Late Antiquity (Jerusalem, 1993).


that most books on rabbinic Judaism, for example, hardly devote any attention to the place of demons in the rabbis’ world. Moreover, I cannot think of a single monograph devoted to late antique Jewish demonology, even though the centrality of this topic in the rabbis’ world and the abundance of the available sources clearly call for such a monograph.

The present paper will not try to fill that glaring lacuna. Its aims are far more modest, namely, to try to come to terms with some of the Jewish conceptualizations of demons in Late Antiquity. It seeks to do so by pointing to the different sources available for any study of late antique Jewish demonology, and by offering one perspective from which these abundant sources might be examined. It is therefore divided in two parts of unequal length: in the first, I shall offer a broad survey of the available evidence, and of the kinds of data provided by the different bodies of evidence. In the second, I shall try to develop an analogy between the late antique Jewish conceptualization of demons and some of our own cultural assumptions. The aim of this analogy is to help us arrange the ancient evidence in a meaningful manner, and to highlight both the similarities between Jewish demonology in Late Antiquity and some of our own worldviews and the differences between them. It is, however, only one of many possible manners of looking at this rich material, and is in no way intended to exclude all others.

Part I: The Sources

Any study of Jewish demonology of Late Antiquity can, and should, rely on two types of sources. On the one hand, we have the rabbinic texts—the Mishna,  