

MAGIC AND RELIGION IN ANCIENT JUDAISM

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1. *The question of definition*

Although the subject of magic is more than fashionable today, there has been no serious attempt so far, either by scholars of biblical Judaism or by specialists in Rabbinic or late antique Judaism, to define more closely what is meant by using the word 'magic'. Some scholars employ it rather inflationary without giving any thought to its sociological context, others, influenced by certain modern theories of the sociology of religion, find it politically correct to avoid it in the hope to have exorcised thereby all its negative implications accumulated mainly by the history of Christianity. We are far away from any theory of magic in the religion of Judaism,¹ and I would like to state from the very outset that I do not propose to offer one here, or to put it even more strongly, that I do not find it appropriate, given the present state of research, to try to develop one. However, I do want to point briefly to some results of modern theories of religion and anthropology which pertain to our subject. This is by no means meant to be a systematic review of the field (of which I cannot claim to be an expert); it is merely a rather subjective selection of some basic approaches which I find important and/or useful for non-specialists.

The most outspoken representative of the classical theory of the distinction between magic and religion is J.G. Frazer in his famous *Golden Bough*.² Frazer is convinced that indeed religion and magic are distinct entities from the very beginning of human history, that magic arose *before* religion (his main example are the Australian aborigines), and that the fact that we have mixed forms—even in what he calls 'higher religions'—does not mean that the definition is wrong but

¹ This remark is not meant to diminish the contribution of scholars at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century like Ludwig Blau, Max Grunwald, Moses Gaster, Hermann Gollancz, Joshua Trachtenberg, and others who did pioneering research on magic. They did not make an attempt, however, to establish a 'theory of magic'.

² Second edition, London 1900, vol. 1, pp. 62–78.

marks a deplorable confusion between religion and magic. Despite these different grades of confusion, he argues, people recognized more and more the inherent falsehood and inefficacy of magic, and humanity developed gradually into ever higher degrees of religion. The climax of this development, of course, is Christianity.

It is more than commonplace today to argue that this clearcut and rather naive distinction between magic and religion cannot be maintained. To give only two examples: In an article called 'Magic and Religion: A Continuum', published in 1949,³ William J. Goode suggests that one should not be misled by the 'historical weakness' of the distinction between magic and religion; instead one should acknowledge its usefulness as a *theoretical* tool of anthropological research. Adopting Weber's concept of 'ideal types' he proposes a continuum which is limited by the two ideal poles of 'religion' and 'magic': 'Such limiting concepts open the possibility of placing a given supernatural complex somewhere near one of the two extreme poles, using a series of variables each of which finds its antithesis at the opposite pole'.⁴

Much more rigorous is Olof Pettersson in his article 'Magic—Religion', self-confidently subtitled 'Some marginal notes to an old problem'.⁵ Pettersson convincingly demonstrates, that any attempt to establish an evolutionary pattern of primitive 'magic' culture being succeeded by 'religious' culture is misguided and dependent on norms of valuation dictated by the Christianity of the 19th and 20th century. Against this he maintains that 'the ideas behind "magical" rites and beliefs are the same as those lying behind "religious" beliefs and practices'. Equally misguided are the attempts to shift the line of demarcation between 'religion' and 'magic' from the beliefs and practices to the 'state of mind of the worshipper'. 'There exists', he argues, 'no scientific method by which the state of mind among the worshippers can be determined. . . . And even if it were possible to fix the character of the state of mind among the worshippers nothing would be won . . . , because the mind among religious men may oscillate between a pure submissive attitude to God and a commanding attitude of mind. . . . Religion includes submission and command. "Magic" includes the same elements. . . . The attitude of mind of the worshippers as a dividing line between religion and magic is a scientific

³ *Ethnos* 14, 1949, pp. 172–182.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 181f.

⁵ *Ethnos* 22, 1957, pp. 109–119.