SACRIFICIAL THEMES IN JEWISH MAGIC

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One of the most promising developments in recent scholarship on magic in the ancient world is the discovery that rituals that have been called magical can be described no less accurately as adaptations of sacrificial systems.1 This insight is well suited to the Greco-Roman world, where a domestic cult had always existed and presented no conflict with the “official” municipal cults. But the relevance of this finding extends beyond Greco-Roman polytheism. For, as we shall see, the histories of magic and sacrifice are intertwined.

For evidence, one need only walk the streets of contemporary Jerusalem, where the ancient Jewish sacrificial cult infuses the iconography of popular religion, divination and magic. Objects depicting the ancient Temple and its accouterments flourish in shops selling religious objects. Not only do messianically oriented religious movements sell pop-up paper models of the Second Temple for children to assemble, but objects related to the Temple and its cult are sold as agents of good fortune. One striking example is a shadowbox, meant to hang in a house or a shop, displaying a model of the breastplate of the High Priest in the Jerusalem Temple as depicted in Exodus 28-29. The model of the breastplate is inlaid with semi-precious stones according to the manufacturer’s interpretation of biblical terms. The shadowbox acts both as a reminder of the potency of the ancient priesthood as a symbol of redemption, and as a talisman. Each stone encodes a separate tribe of Israel and at the same time offers a specific benefit for the owner. This artifact has its roots in an ancient tradition of esoteric Jewish gemology, and in ancient exegesis and poetry depicting the Temple cult in Jerusalem.2 We can certainly

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1 See below, notes 8 and 9. My thanks to Sarah Iles Johnston for her suggestions on matters relating to this topic.

2 For the esoteric gemological tradition, see Joshua Trachtenberg, Jewish Magic and Superstition: A Study in Folk Religion (1932; repr. New York: Athenaeum, 1982) 136-38 and the excerpt from Sefer Gematriot printed on pp. 165-68; and Moritz Steinschneider, “Lapidarien, ein kulturgeschichtlicher Versuch,” in George Alexander Kohut, ed., Semitic Studies in Memory of Rev. Dr. Alexander Kohut (Berlin: S. Calvary, 1897) 42-72. The antiquity of the tradition of interpretation of the breastplate is attested in the fifth-century liturgical poem Az be-En Kok; see Joseph Yahalom, Az
ascribe this phenomenon to current political and cultural trends, but we should not forget the hold that the Jerusalem Temple and its sacrificial system have always had upon the popular Jewish imagination. At the same time, one also notices the proliferation of icons of charismatic Rabbis—posters and even trading cards depicting Rabbi Yitzhak Kaduri, a popular practitioner of “practical Kabbalah,” the Lubavitcher Bebe and others. To put these two phenomena in terms of the current debate about the nature of Late Antiquity, sacred place and sacred person both possess power.3

In fact, the connections between sacrifice and magic extend to intellectual history as well. The two phenomena have suffered similar fates in the history of scholarship. From the Reformation on, magic and sacrifice became battlegrounds on which the lines of demarcation between “true” and “false” religion were drawn.4 As Jonathan Z. Smith has shown in his book Drudgery Divine, generations of historians of religion seeking to distinguish ancient Christianity from its neighbor religions have relied on Protestant polemics against Catholic conceptions of Eucharistic sacrifice—said to operate under the principal ex opere operato. In such polemics sacrifice and magic are identical—and both are bad.5

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