Book Reviews

Yuval Harari


For those interested in early Jewish magic, these are truly blessed days. In addition to Gideon Bohak’s *Ancient Jewish Magic: A History* (Cambridge 2008), we now have the volume under review—a revised and updated English translation of Yuval Harari’s Hebrew monograph *Early Jewish Magic: Research, Method, Sources* (*hakišuf hayehudi haqadum: meḥqar, šiṭah, meqorot*; Jerusalem 2010). The Hebrew title gives a better idea of the structure of this volume, which is divided into two parts—the first containing four chapters devoted to research and method, and the second containing three chapters devoted to sources.

To begin with the latter, the three sources chapters discuss, in order, Jewish magical texts and artifacts (insider sources), non-magical literature, and rabbinic literature (both outsider sources). Thus Chapter Five, ‘Jewish Magical Literature: Magical Texts and Artifacts’ (pp. 207–293, plus seventeen pages of images), introduces the reader to an impressive range of amulets, magic gems and pendants, magic bowls, magic skulls, magic recipes, and magic treatises. Then, in Chapter Six, ‘Angels, Demons, and Sorceries: Beliefs, Actions, and Attitudes in Nonmagic Literature’ (pp. 294–352), Harari discusses how these topics manifest in the literatures of the Second Temple period, the late-antique and early medieval *hekhalot* and *merkavah* texts, medieval Karaite sources, and the writings of the important rabbinic figures Hai Gaon and Maimonides. The contributions of these outsider sources to our understanding of early Jewish magic is well demonstrated, especially in relation to the link between ritual power and social-political power, and the polemical contexts in which such discussions often occur. The final chapter, ‘Knowledge, Power, and Hegemony: Sorcery, Demonology, and Divination in Rabbinic Literature’ (pp. 353–460), extends this into a detailed discussion of the rabbinic discourse concerning a range of related topics (sorcery, demonology, divination, dream
interpretation, and astrology), with reference to both the phenomenological and social perspectives—the latter being political, reflecting the rabbis’ struggle for power within their communities.

Moving to the first part of this book, one obvious difference between Bohak’s earlier monograph and the present volume is that Harari devotes significantly more space to discussing theoretical questions. The first chapter, ‘Magic and the Study of Religion’ (pp. 15–67), addresses the magic-religion question, discussing, in turn, the evolutionist, sociological and anthropological approaches of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Although this chapter focuses more on the study of non-Jewish magic in living societies, rather than historic Jewish magic, Harari’s discussion sets the scene well for what follows. As he observes, ‘echoes of the increasingly diversifying controversy on the essence of magic and its place with respect to religion resonate strongly in writings about magic in late antiquity in general and about Jewish magic in particular’ (p. 67).

Then, in Chapter Two, ‘Magic, Mysticism, Religion, and Society: The Study of Early Jewish Magic’ (pp. 68–158), Harari moves on to discuss early Jewish magic, from late antiquity to the early Islamic period—a sensible delineation in view of the wealth of evidence provided by the Cairo Genizah. Beginning with a brief discussion of the history of research into Greco-Roman magic, in which one can discern parallel trends to those discussed in Chapter One in relation to living cultures, Harari turns to rabbinic sources and again discerns parallel developments in their study, most notably the development of a social-political approach to the magic-religion question. Harari then discusses the controversial issue of the purpose of the mystical hekhalot and merkavah literature, before moving to a treatment of how scholars have attempted to understand the “essence” of Jewish magic. In doing so, Harari provides an excellent account of what has been accomplished to date in the study of Jewish magic.

If the study of early Jewish magic can be likened to an odyssey, Harari rightly identifies the work of Shaul Shaked, his mentor, as representing the latest port of call—albeit one he wants to navigate beyond. Shaked’s work, for Harari, represents a pragmatic approach to theoretical questions. For example, Shaked would view magic as a ‘ritual with a personal purpose’ (p. 146; cf. p. 137), and would approach the issue of definitions from a social-cultural perspective (see pp. 146–147). Shaked’s definition of magic ‘by negation, as including everything that was not part of the accepted worship’ (Shaked apud Harari, p. 147), is described by Harari as an ‘expansion of Marcel Mauss’s proposal to see magic as the forbidden cult, perceiving it as including all the nonofficial rituals’ (p. 147). For Harari, this creates a paradox, in which Shaked has effectively dismissed the “hopeless” concern with definitions by means of an ostensibly “simple”