Investigating the question of Moses as magician in modernity might seem hardly a meaningful venture. After all, the figure of Moses was established in the period between humanism and the Enlightenment much more obviously as the founder of a de-mythologized religion, in which things like magic had just been overcome. Under the conditions of modernity, Mosaic monotheism had to be nothing less than the prototype of religion interpreted in terms of secular politics and in terms of law. From such a perspective, Moses the Halakhist, the lawgiver, appears like a Hegel avant la lettre, who in his philosophy of law lays down the foundations of a modern secularisation of religion and metaphysics that proscribes myth and magic in any form. What Hegel wrote about Spinoza in the Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie—‘Spinoza’s System is absolute pantheism and monotheism lifted to the level of concept’—could then be applied to the philosophical and political achievements of modernity as a whole: its fundamentals can essentially be traced back to Mosaic monotheism.

One might indeed draw such a conclusion if one were to assume that the project of secularisation, by which modernity defines itself, follows a linear progression. However, there is reason to question not only a non-dialectical notion of historical progress in general, but also the related idea that the self-determination of the modern era was based on the exclusion rather than the transformation of myth and magic. If we take a closer look at modernity, we perceive not an end but, rather, an unresolved ‘Work on Myth’; and likewise we find not a definitive negation of magic as the antithesis of modernity but, rather, a transformation of it. The question of Moses as magician presents us with a basic problem in the philosophy and history of religion, namely the relationship between a knowledge of religious and natural law.

---

1 ‘Spinozas System ist der in den Gedanken erhobene absolute Pantheismus und Monotheismus’ (Hegel, Vorlesungen, 298).
2 Blumenberg, *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*.
3 Blumenberg, *Arbeit um Mythos*.
(according to the paradigm of the Moses of Mount Sinai), on the one hand, and a knowledge of magic (according to the paradigm of the Moses of Egypt), on the other. Thus, in the dialectical process of secularisation and of modernity, two different Moses-configurations appear: Moses the law-giver of Mount Sinai, and Moses the magician from Egypt.

Clearly, an investigation of the potentials and representations of a magical Moses cannot restrict itself to the narrow domain of Latin, European Christianity in early modernity. Rather, one needs to study the relevant processes of theological and scientific transformation and re-interpretation within the transitional domain between Judaism and Christianity. That is why the question that has been thrown up here demands, from a historical and systematic perspective, to be approached from a wider perspective. Firstly, even with a focus on early modernity, a historical contextualization of Moses-configurations requires discussion of sources ranging from late antiquity to the 19th century. Secondly, the subject of Moses as magician requires a comparative study of Jewish as well as Christian literature. In this manner, it is possible to distinguish and describe the potentials of the magical Moses in early modernity from a diachronic and intercultural perspective. First, we will analyze the profile of Moses as magician in Jewish, and especially in kabbalistic literature. The emphasis here lies on the Moses of Sinai as sharply separated from the Moses of Egypt. Second, we will investigate the reinterpretations and transformations of Moses the magician in the literature of Christian Kabbalah and modern esotericism. As will be seen, the Egyptian Moses-paradigm is here resurrected under new conditions.

1. Mosaic versus Egyptian Magic in Jewish Literature

All doubts considering the possibility of a magical Moses-figuration are confirmed by biblical and rabbinical literature. In fact, the establishment of mosaic monotheism in the second Book of Moses is presented here as an uncompromising victory over Egyptian magic. Moses’ victory over the magic of the Egyptians has become even a foundational element in biblical and accordingly, rabbinical literature: the rejection of Egyptian magic becomes basic to the establishment of tradition. The formula samti pedut bein ami

\[\text{Cf. Assmann, } Moses the Egyptian, 11: ‘the Hebrew Moses of the Bible has kept an image of Egypt alive in Western tradition that was thoroughly antithetic to Western ideals, the image of Egypt as the land of despotism, hubris, sorcery, brute-worship, and idolatry’}.\]