SOME RABBINIC THEMES IN MAGICAL PAPYRI*

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Introduction

The world of ancient magic has been given fresh illumination by the discovery of papyri, Greek and Coptic, which contain magical charms. One of the outstanding features of this material is the welter of Jewish and pagan names which are used almost interchangeably, indicating the degree to which Jews and pagans were profoundly influencing one another. So argues E. R. GOODENOUGH, in volume 2 of his monumental Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman World (New York, 1953), p. 155-56. Indeed more than just Jewish names permeate this body of lore: Biblical references and allusions, Jewish themes and motifs, intersperse the magical formularies of the papyri and amulets, as has been noted by a number of prominent scholars.1)

Conversely, elements of Hellenistic magical lore penetrated the Jewish world, leaving their traces in Rabbinic literature, most especially in the early Jewish mystical literature.2)

Hence, in the study of Hellenistic magical and Gnostic material, Rabbinic lore may at time illumine an obscure point, just as a puzzling passage in the Midrash may find it solution in a Greek or Coptic magical text. The following study seeks to demonstrate this point with some representative examples.

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1) The literature is very considerable, and begins already with L. BLAU'S Das altjüdische Zauberwesen (Budapest, 1878), and continues up to the present day. Of particular note is G. SCHOLEM'S Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism and the Talmudic Tradition (New York, 1965), and GOODENOUGH, ibid., chapters six and seven. See most recently my remarks in Bar-Ilan 14/15 (1977), pp. 40-44.

2) E.g. Hechalot and Merkabah literature, (cf. SCHOLEM cited above note 1), and the Jewish magical tracts such as Sefer ha-Razim, ed. MARGALIOTH (Jerusalem, 1966) and The Sword of Moses, ed. M. GASTER (London, 1896). Cf. my remarks in Bar-Ilan, ibid., p. 43.
1. One Hundred and Forty Tongues

In a "Jewish" portion of the great Paris magical papyrus3) (iv, lines 3056-58) we read4):

For I adjure thee by him that revealed the hundred and forty tongues and divided them by his command.

Adolf Deissmann, in a note on this passage5) writes:

Noah’s generations enumerated in Genesis X contain the names of 70 peoples; the Jews therefore assumed there were 70 different languages …6) Our passage has 2 x 70 languages—a number not mentioned elsewhere, so far as I know.

Likewise Ludwig Blau, who also dealt with this text7), wrote8):

Warum hier 140 (2 x 70) erwähnt werden, ist nicht klar.

Lieberman was the first to point out in this connection that there was an early Rabbinic tradition according to which there were 140 nations8). He refers one to a passage in the Sifre Deuteronomy, section 311, ed. Finkelstein, p. 352 (and parallels), a text from the second century C.E. This, however, only explains part of our text; the continuation, that the number 140 was "divided by his command," still requires elaboration. The whole motif, according to which the number 140 was further "divided" into two groups of seventy (?), is, I believe, to be explained as a result of a harmonistic exegesis on the verse in Canticles 6:8; "There are three-score queens, and four-score concubines and virgins without number." This verse was explained by the Rabbis in the Midrash as referring to the nations of the world and their tongues. Indeed, this is the verse upon which the text in the Sifre Deuteronomy referred to

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4) Deissmann, ibid., p. 262.
5) Ibid., note 4.
6) On this subject in general, see my article in Encyclopaedia Judaica (Jerusalem, 1971), 12, 885-86, s.v. Nations, the Seventy, with bibliography. And cf. C. D. Isbel, Corpus of the Aramaic Incantation Bowls (1975), p. 111.
7) See Das altjüdische Zauberwesen, pp. 113-14.
8) Ibid., p. 114, note 1.