Biblical traditions about magic and witchcraft, and later European Christianity: some preliminary considerations

It is still a wide-spread idea that late medieval and early modern witchcraft persecutions and witch imaginations are a product of Christian abhorrence of female sexuality, of male clerical dominance and theological teachings suspicious of folk tradition, and that these are rooted in Biblical, Jewish and ancient Christian concepts. This once popular view is clearly deeply erroneous, and not even just an oversimplification. Late antique and medieval images of magic and witchcraft are influenced more by Greek and even more by Latin pagan literature than by any Biblical examples and texts. Magic is also an important aspect of early Christianity (Biblical texts e.g. were widely used as amulets), though it has often been criticized by theological writers. But this “Christian magic” as such is not simply identical to medieval and early modern images of magic. Ideas about magic have changed to a large degree, and recent definitions of magic also differ widely and yield quite different histories of discourses on magic when applied to sources from antiquity. Many basic observations do not agree with older stereotypes both in theological literature and in literature critical of Christianity, and the emergence of magic in antiquity as a field of specialized cultural studies in the last decades has significantly changed commonly accepted ideas about its place both in the Christian mainstream (the “Church”) and in its minority forms (as gnostic groups). Female witchcraft, for instance, surprisingly is mentioned only rarely in early Christian narrative texts, though male sorcerers are quite common. Women in such stories usually are victims of witchcraft, not perpetrators. A popular and naïve believe in demons is still often seen as part of a common antique “weltbild”, shared and indeed intensified by Christians. Once again, things become much more complicated when the full range of sources is allowed to speak. Jewish views differ substantially from Christian ones, and there are even Christian as well as Jewish sources that use terms like “magician” (magos) in surprisingly positive contexts (Mt 2). Ideas of magic and witchcraft in Christian history have changed much, and not only for theological reasons. The New Testament as a collection of foundational Christian writings only rarely deals in magic as such, though Jesus himself was accused by his opponents as someone in league with Beelzebul.
All of these aspects are to be placed into a framework of late antique discourses. Ideas like a formal contract or pact with demons or the devil only much later become part of imaginations on magic. The idea of a witch-cult, a kind of demonic anti-religion with meetings and witches’ Sabbaths, also does not yet exist in Christian antiquity, though in Greek and Latin literature witches sometimes work together to effect mischief. A boundary distinction magic–religion (even when put into different terminology as prayer vs. spell), also though definitely pre-Christian, takes new forms and a new prevalence in the Church. On the other side, in some ancient cultures, such as in the Egyptian one, it is almost non-existent or meaningless. Observations from later Christian societies also must not be projected onto late antique social realities and belief systems.

In a preliminary step, facing the different phenomena of what we might call magic in ancient Judaism and Christianity, we can fundamentally distinguish: 1. magical practices that would have been clearly identified as such by ancient practitioners; 2. practices that would have been criticized in theological literature as connected with magic, divination or even idolatry, though they were part of folk religious practice, and we do not clearly see whether practitioners themselves might have accepted a description as magic or witchcraft; and 3. practices that in a modern view, informed e.g. by ethnology or comparative studies of religion, can be qualified as magic in a rather wider sense but which were not seen as problematical by Church authors or rabbis. A special case are slurs targeted against Christianity as connected to evil-doing magic in pagan writers (cf. already Celsus in Origen, Against Celsus 1, 6 a.o., and see still Augustine, On the Harmony of the Gospels 1:9, 14; 10, 15; 11, 17), connected to suspicions about Christianity as a kind of secret cult. In any case, we use magic and witchcraft here as wide interpretative terms hinting at a variety of motifs, not corresponding to a clear-cut segment of culture (or religion), and often (though not always) used as a delegitimizing label on non-standard, private or subversive forms of religion. Both are often related to concepts and rituals of gaining power over supernatural beings. Already in antiquity they are as much a matter of narrative imagination and stories as of actual rituals, and they clearly exist on all social levels.

Old Testament/Hebrew Bible magic

When we ask from the point of view of later reception history, we will have to start with a single verse from Pentateuchal religious law, which had a massive impact on later witch images. Exodus 22:18 says “You shall not permit a sorceress to live”, in a context separating Israelite religion from paganism. The verse perhaps originally has in view a divining trance medium serving non-Jewish gods, or some form of popular magic. Already the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament, substitutes the quite conspicuous singular feminine of the Hebrew for a masculine plural, without doubt to give the verse a more general meaning. The Babylonian Talmud (Sanhedrin 67a) generalizes the statement, but also explains the feminine form from an alleged factual majority of female witches. General prohibitions of magic are not rare in Jewish Biblical tradition (Dtn 18:10–12; Lev 19:26; cf. Mi 5: 11; Is 47:8–15; Jer 27:9s.; Nah 3:4 and also Ex 20:7 = Dtn 5:11 etc.), in Mal 3:5 as part of a list of evildoers, etc., though it is quite unclear what exactly might have been defined
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as illegitimate magic. In any case the reference frame of such prohibitions in ancient Israel always is the fight against idolatry and other gods in the name of Yahweh as the national God of Israel. Necromantic divination is strictly forbidden, though it has been believed to be quite efficient (“the witch of Endor” 1 Sam 28). Saul, who had lost his divine protection, desperately looks for supernatural guidance and visits a ba’alat ḥŏb, a wise woman who possesses a dug-out pit used for sacrifices to chthonic numina (what in Greek is called a bothros) and is able to invoke the spirits of the dead (similar to the necromantic scene in Odyssey 11). She brings up from Sheol the spirit of the prophet Samuel, who confirms to King Saul his impending doom.

Later Christian writers discuss whether Samuel himself had truly appeared to Saul, or whether this may have been just a demonic illusion (cf. Eustathius of Antioch, On the ventriloquist against Origen). Texts such as 2 Kgs 21:5s. allude to other illegitimate practices. Of particular interest is Hes 13:17–23, where the male prophet polemizes against female diviners, who successfully manipulate lives with magical knots and scarfs (German “Nestelknüpffen”). “And say, Thus saith the Lord GOD; Woe to the women that sew pillows to all armholes, and make kerchiefs upon the head of every stature to hunt souls! Will ye hunt the souls of my people, and will ye save the souls alive that come unto you?” (Ez 13:18 King James version, which sounds to us slightly archaic, as such a text may have sounded in NT times). The gender constellation of male charismatic prophet vs. female (technical) diviner able to manipulate lives is of vital interest for discourses on “magic”. The slowly emerging monotheism of ancient Judaism became a lead factor repelling and repressing many forms of popular religion and magic. But the image we receive from canonized scriptures is certainly biased, and archaeology can only to some degree complete our knowledge, as only certain aspects of magic have left material traces. The story about achieving cattle ringstraked, speckled and spotted by magically imbued water in Gen 30 can be seen as a classical case of Frazerian sympathetic magic, as can be the apotropaic snake on a pole (Num 21:4–7) later allegedly destroyed by Hezekiah (2 Kgs 18:4). Another story cycle related to both ancient and modern concepts of magic is Ex 7:1–8:15, which can be read as a magical contest narrative (a genre mainly known from late Egyptian and demotic literature). Moses waving his wand and parting the sea becomes an archotypical image of both “man of God” and magician: in pagan sources he is often interpreted as a sorcerer (Pliny mai., Natural history 30:11; Apuleius, Apology 90; also in some magical papyri). Already the Jewish novel writer Artapanos (2nd century BCE) has a story about Moses whispering the secret name of God to Pharaoh, making him tremble and fall unconscious, but later revivifying him by the same means (frg. 3 Holladay from Eusebius, Preparation of the Gospel 9:27, 24s.). Harmful spells may be in view Job 3:8, where sorcerers curse the day and wake up the Livjatan, a primeval dragon symbolizing chaotic forces.

Some rituals in modern research have been interpreted as magic, though they were not qualified so in ancient Judaism: the ordeal of the bitter water (Num 5:11–31), the purification ritual of the red heifer (Num 19), or the eliminatory rites (Lev 13s. 16). Amulets were part of everyday life as in all ancient societies (Jer 3:18–23). The miraculous powers of the “men of God” Elijah and Elisha are strictly seen as a gift of God and never as acquired by magical means. But a narrative as 1 Kgs 18:41–45 can easily be mistaken for some kind of rain-magic. Elijah’s strange posture (head between his knees) becomes stereotypical for Jewish mysticism. Ḥanina ben Dosa, a
famous 1st-century BCE healer and rainmaker, also imitates it (Talmud Bavli Berakhot 34b), as do medieval mystics. According to Talmud Bavli Sanhedrin 113a Hanina has at his disposal the “keys of rain”, as did Elijah. Prophetic symbolism and anticipations of divine action may have some affinity to magical rites (1 Kgs 22:11; Jer 51:59–64), and God, in an extremely audacious metaphor, can even be compared to a snake charmer (Ps 58:6). Military magic may be a background of both Jer 19:1–13 (a charm against enemies, using an Egyptian pattern; cf. Ps 2:9) and 2 Kgs 2:8.14. A more far-reaching theory has been expressed by the Norwegian OT scholar Sigmund Mowinckel (1884–1965). He interprets the pōšle awen “workers of iniquity” (some 16 times in Psalms) as evil sorcerers using the divine name for harmful charms. This theory about sorcery, aimed at in individual psalms of lament, has not generally become accepted, but it has demonstrated the impact of magic in ancient Israel and it has reminded scholarship of the vital importance of witchcraft fears in oriental societies, also well documented for instance in Assyrian and Babylonian sources. The “theocentric” theory that in Israel magical performance was always directly connected with God can hardly be upheld, however. The relation between magical practices and divine intervention was never systematized.

Demons and the rise of the devil

As all oriental (and indeed all ancient) religions, Israel had a complex and multifaceted demonology that is probably only partly reflected in the texts that became later canonical literature in Judaism and Christianity. Some of its figures can be interpreted as being derived from a common Mediterranean substratum, whereas other mythological entities as Lilith and Asmodaeus/Ashmedai have a background in particular Near Eastern religions (Babylonian and Persian in these two cases). A number of very different Hebrew terms denote what later becomes metamorphized into Christian demonology. Šēdim (Dtn 32:17 and Ps 106:37, where they are said to receive sacrifices) in post-Biblical times turns into a general term for demons as malevolent and dangerous spirits. As the related Akkadian šedu is a positive term for certain spirits, the Hebrew word may represent a deliberate reversal of terminology. “The hairy ones” (šeʿīrim Lev 17:7; Is. 13:21; 34:14; 2 Chron 11:15 a.o.) are satyr-like beings (reminiscent of later goat-demons). The name became unintelligible to later readers and was only rarely used in Rabbinic Judaism. According to Jes 34:14 they can be found in ruins and eerie places, together with animals and the spirit Lilith (transformed into a central mythological figure in late antique Jewish demonology). Other, more general demonological terms are ruʾaḥ raʾa “evil spirit” (1 Sam 19:8), also the “destroyer” (Ex 12:23), the “destroying angel” (1 Chron 21:15), the “evil angels” (Ps 78:49) and others. Interestingly, these spirits remain part of the divine cosmos and can be used by Yahweh for certain errands. The Hebrew Bible does not yet have any clear dichotomy “angels”–“demons” as later became central for Christian mythology (and to some degree also developed in late pagan contexts, as for Porphyry). Particularly telling is the story of Micha ben Jimla (1 Kgs 22), where God himself sends a lying spirit to cause the doom of King Ahab (cf. Zeus sending a deceiving dream to Agamemnon, Ilias 2, 1ss.), though of course the manoeuvre is revealed by the prophet Micha to the king, and thus becomes a kind of paradoxical intervention.
Pagan deities can be demonized, as the West Semitic deity Resheph (god of heat and the plague) (Dtn 32:24; Hab 3:5; Ps 78:48), or Baal Zebub “Lord of flies” in Ecron (2 Kgs 1, 2.3 etc.), who is a caricature of the Canaanite Baal Zebul “Lord of glory” (though there is also a Greek God “Zeus averter of flies”, Pausanias 5:14, 1), a name that in the New Testament becomes a major synonym of the devil as prince of evil spirits (Mk 3:22; Mt 12:24; Lk. 11:15 etc.).

Demonology only slowly becomes part of an organized system of otherworldly beings. Lilith, mentioned above (translated as lamia in the vulgate), is a central figure in Aramaic magical bowls from Mesopotamia (4th–7th century CE), and in early medieval Jewish folklore became Adam’s first wife, created before Eve, but unwilling to serve Adam (the story is first mentioned in the geonic “Alphabet of Ben Sira”, though it may be older). As a demon with a woman’s face, long hair and wings, she is feared as a child murderer (imperilling women in childbirth), and many amulets are used against her in apotropaic magic. A man sleeping alone in a house has to be careful not to be seized by her seductive power (Talmud Bavli Shabbat 15b). Another demonic figure is Azazel (Lev 16:8, 10, 26), to whom a goat (the “scapegoat”) is driven into the desert as an eliminatory ritual. In later writings, such as 1 Hen 10:8, he turns into a major demonic figure, having originally been one of the “watchers” sent to earth, then mingling with human women and siring giants which are destroyed in the deluge. In the 1st century CE Apocalypse of Abraham, Azazel is a devil, as for the Christian theologian Origen (Against Celsus 6:43).

Asmodaeus (Greek Asmodaíos, Hebrew Ashmedai) is a demon from the book of Tobit, much spoken of also in later Jewish literature. His name is connected to Iranian ašna-daēva, a demon of wrath. But in the Book of Tobit his function is different: he moves in the dangerous sphere of marriage and sexuality. The wedding bed, the bathroom, the cemetery, desert places are always prone to demonic influences and may necessitate protective magic. The worlds of the dead and of demons are also likely to intersect easily. Generally speaking, it is an act of taboo breaking that opens the human sphere to demonic influences and invasions, but “dangerous” times such as birth, marriage and death may also need ritual protection against particular demons. Both the plague (Hab 3:5) and death (Jes 28:15; Job 18:13 etc.), and also other calamities, can be mythologized into quasi-personal demonic figures.

Another such figure of late antique Judaism is Beliar (from Beliyaʾi “worthlessness”, with common interchange of 1 and r, a name often used of evil powers in Qumran literature and in the perhaps 1st-century BCE “Testament of 12 Patriarchs”). Paul uses this name (2 Cor 6:15), as do later Latin sources (mostly spelled Belial) for the devil as a figure clearly defined in Christian theology. A difference between Jewish and Christian demonology is indeed the increased concentration on such a devil figure as an adversary of God in Christianity (though dualism is strictly avoided: in Apc 12 it is Michael, not God, fighting the “old serpent”). The rabbinic tradition has much to say about both internal forces shaping human conduct and external demonic forces threatening health and welfare, but it does not concentrate its theories of evil on a devil figure (though such figures are far from unknown), and demonology only rarely exculpates human weakness.

Belief in evil spirits and demons is universal: belief in the devil is not. It is particularly important not to use the complete repertoire of ideas about the devil as if they had existed already in antiquity, but to give careful attention to the exact
constellation of demonological concepts at a given time and place. In Old Testament studies, the theory has gained some plausibility that, on a deeper level, the devil figure came into being by disincorporating or separating evil from the image of Yahweh, thus creating an autonomous figure of evil. Locus classicus (1 Chron 21:1) is where Satan as a tempter takes a role filled by God himself in the literary pretext (2 Sam 24:1). In sources like Iob 1s. and Sach 3:1s., Satan is part of the heavenly court and thus also part of a monarchical metaphorical world, accusing mankind in the face of God as judge of the world (cf. Apc 12:10). Hebrew Šāṭān means adversary or prosecutor and perhaps also slanderer (Num. 22: 22. 32). Not yet in Iob but in 1 Chron, the word is used anarthrous as a personal name. The emerging devil figure takes over traces from the destroying angel (Ex 12) or the desert demon Azazel, and also from personifications of chaos as Tiamat, Livjatan and others. He receives already in Judaism many names: Belial, Satan, Beelzebul, Mastema, Semjaza, Samael and in Greek Diabolos “slanderer, accuser” (> Old Saxon diuval, English devil). He tempts men both with evil thoughts and as an embodiment of destructive forces. Texts like the Greek “Testament of Solomon” (Jewish, but read and copied by Christians, 4th century CE?) describe in much detail demonic figures. No magical incantations are given, however, though a rich Jewish tradition of conjuring angelic entities arises not much later (Sefer haRazim and other writings, known from medieval manuscripts).

In Christian stories, the devil also causes heresy. Stories about human beings possessed by demons are known in ancient Judaism, but are not very common, though they become more prominent in late antique sources. Josephus gives an elaborate and rather technical exorcism story (Jewish Antiquities 8:46–49), differing markedly from the exorcisms performed by Jesus, which do not use magical plants or spells. The term commonly used for demons exorcised by Jesus is “unclean spirits” (which by enallage adiectivi means spirits causing uncleanness). Once exorcised, demons walk “arid places” and, finding no rest, may return to their previous home (Luke 11:24–26).

The perhaps most important element in Christian demonology, however, was the identification of the pagan gods with demons (already 1 Cor 10:21, but cf. also 8:4). All paganism now became some kind of devil-worship, and magic and divination became by-paths of paganism. This idea is much more prominent in the ancient church than might be said about an approach that sees other gods as simply non-existent.

Jesus interprets his exorcisms and healing miracles as overcoming the devil, anticipating the expected Kingdom of God (Lk 10:18; 11:14–26 par.). The devil is accompanied by a host of evil angels (Mt 25:41; 2 Cor 12:7 etc.). The central metaphor for the devil’s realm is not so much a monarchy as a military unit, an invading army causing disease and death (Mk 3:22–30; cf. the demon name “legion” Mk 5:9). This military aspect of demons “invading” God’s world stays important also for medieval demonology: good and evil are never just static possibilities of human behaviour, but humans are in league with either God or the devil, both fighting for men’s souls. For Paul, the devil is “God of the aeon” (2 Cor 4:4), for the Gospel of John “ruler of this world” (12:31; 14:30; 16:11). Imperial world power (Mt 4:1–11 par.) and the Roman state (Apc 13:1; a.o.) can be spheres of devilish influence, and heretic teachers (2 Cor 11:15) and Jews rejecting the gospel (Joh 8:44; Apc 2:9; 3:9) can be regarded as being possessed by the devil. Older texts such as Mark or the genuine epistles of Paul often used the Hebrew word Satan(as), whereas later texts prefer the
Greek diabolos. Many taboo names for the devil go back already to early Christian literature (the “old snake”, the “black one”, the “fiend”, the “evil one”, the “one who brings ruin” on men, etc.). Snake and dragon symbolism (much reinforced in Apc 12s. etc.) is derived from the pre-Christian identification of the snake in Gen 3 with the devil (Wisdom of Solomon 2:24; 1st century BCE). In NT times, the devil has not yet any similarity with Pan-like animal figures, though he can be imagined in animal shape (dragon). In early Christianity, he is more a source of temptation and terror, not so much a monarch of hell as in later medieval imagination. The name Lucifer (“bringer of light”) combines the symbolism of Venus with a mythology of a demonic entity thrown from heaven as a result of its pride and ambition (Is 14:12, where the vulgate has “Lucifer”).

This mythology of Satan thrown from heaven (also Lk 10:18) in later Christianity allows for an integration of Satan and demons into a concept of all creatures created good by God. Another such common trait is the conviction that Satan can mask himself as an angel of light (2 Cor 11:14). In Rabbinic Judaism, the devil tempts with evil inclinations; he accuses man before God and destroys life (Babylonian Talmud Baba Bathra 16a). Satan (often called also Samael, Samiel or Sammuel, from “sami” “blind”) and the “evil inclination” can sometimes also be identified as death (e.g. Targum Ps.-Jonathan on Gen 3:6). Stories are repeatedly told about tests of the pious by veiled demonic visitants. In Christian imagination, the devil is a more clear-cut figure, fallen through pride, expelled from Heaven and bent on destroying men by temptation (cf. e.g. Augustine, The City of God, Book 11). He cannot be redeemed (Synod of Constantinople 543 CE against Origen, On First Principles 3:6). Gregory of Nyssa, in the 4th century, believed in the existence of male and female demons and supported the idea that demons procreated with other demons and with human women. Other scholars supported the idea that they could not procreate and that the number of demons was constant. The idea, well-known from medieval and Renaissance sources, that both angels and devils form special hierarchies opposed to each other is only slowly emerging in late antiquity.

**Magic in ancient Judaism**

Some ambivalence about magic permeates ancient Judaism as well as early Christianity. Delegitimizing discourses and an unbroken practice of magic go almost hand in hand. Magical dealings with drugs and poisons (pharmakeía) as well as “unholy mysteries” are expressions of pagan religion (Wisdom of Solomon 12:4), whereas Egyptian “juggleries of the magical art” do not help against God-send plagues (17:7). Magic and faith can be seen as direct opponents (18:13). Second Maccabees 12:40 polemizes against amulets, well known from excavations in Palestine. Many other passages in Jewish literature attack magic, though it is often quite unclear which practices exactly are in view (e.g. Testament of Judah 23; Ps.-Philo, Biblical Antiquities 34. 64; Ascension of Isaiah 2:5; Sibyllic Oracles 3:218–34 a.o.). A basic observation is a linking of magic, divination and idolatry that we meet in Christian literature as well. On the other side, Graeco-Jewish texts like the 1st-century BCE Prayer for vengeance, found at Rheneia, or the Prayer of Jacob (PGM XXIIb:1–26) cannot be distinguished from spells, and Rabbinic literature is full of evidence for magical practices. Even taboo-breaking rituals using urine and menstrual blood are not unknown (Josephus, Jewish War 7:180–185, cf.
Apollonius Rhodius, Argonautics 3:845–866). Revulsion and disgust are important elements in many magical rituals, expressing a break from “normality” by sheer will power; at least, this interpretation is given by modern practitioners of similar rituals.

Magic destined to harm is known e.g. from 3rd-century BCE Hellenistic Maresha (Tell Sandaḥanna), where 16 small statuettes in human form bound in chains of lead, iron or bronze have been found that certainly have a magic intention (but also demons can be “bound” or “sealed”). In Caesarea Maritima, leaden curse tablets (defixions) are known from the Roman period, some meant to harm competing charioteers in sport events. For court magicians, Greek magos is used in Greek versions of Dan 2:2. 10 LXX; 1:20; 2:2. 10. 27; 4:4 Ps.-Theodotion, translating Hebrew ‘ašāf. Novelistic tales about magic, demons, angels abound, as in the early Hellenistic-Jewish (or late Persian) tale of Tobit, where folk medicine also has an important part, or in the later Graeco-Jewish novel about the sorcerors Jannes and Jambres, all of which were also read by Christians.

In Second Temple Jewish literature, magic can be explained as an evil art revealed by demons. In the Enoch tradition (1 Enoch 6–36, 3rd–2nd century BCE), the Sons of God, appointed as “watchers” over mankind, start consorting with human women (begetting “giants”) and teach them weaponry, idolatry, divination, astrology, hate-inducing charms, cosmetics and other questionable arts, and also magic (as the art of using roots). They are deprived of their power and imprisoned in hidden places in the earth, and their offspring with human women are killed in the deluge (or are somehow connected to demons), but the evil arts they have revealed stay with humanity. Evil spirits are children of angels and women (1 Enoch 15:8); later Rabbinic stories can e.g. speak about demons coming from male sperm ejaculated outside a female body (and thus “useless”); Demons in such cases are uncontrolled, unrestrained powers that eventually will do damage to men. In a more general sense, their mission is to induce humans to sin, and particularly to be idolatrous. Such stories were known to the Church also (the Epistle of Jude in the NT cites 1 Enoch, and Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria and Lactance share the “watchers mythology”), though their impact on later Christians was rather limited, and theologians preferred other explanations for evil. The story line of Gen 6:1–4 was transferred to purely human actants, as by Augustine. Still, the idea magic is some kind of knowledge gleaned from demons (and thus of dubious value) also became a Christian stereotype.

In the later but still pre-Christian Testament of Ruben (5:5s.), the women themselves initiate the contact with the “watchers”: this emphasizes female guilt and makes magic more of a “female art”. The witch as a figure is well known in ancient Judaism. Talmudic tradition even tells about an execution of 80 witches instigated by Shimon be Shetach, a 1st-century BCE religious leader, in Ashkelon, a pagan city at the Mediterranean coast (Talmud Yerushalmi Hagiga 2, 2, 77d, and some parallel passages), in the time of Alexandra Salome (who ruled 76–67 BCE). These witches, living in a cave, had harmed their neighbours with maleficent magic. But as this tradition is rather late, and such an event is not known from any non-Jewish source, it is highly probable that the story is somehow symbolic and connected to polytheistic ritual at the Aphrodite Urania temple of Ashkelon (witches as priestesses of Ashtoreth). The Mishna (ca. 200 CE) even says: “The more possessions the more care; the more women the more witchcraft; the more bondwomen the more lewdness” (Avot 2:7 transl. Danby). The Talmud asserts a connection of women–witchcraft (Bavli Erubin
Of course, being a minority religion with only limited political power, no witch persecutions on a grand scale have been possible within ancient (and medieval) Judaism. But the mentality of persecution could have developed in Judaism as well as in Christianity. Rabbi Shimon ben Yochay (later pseudepigraphic author of the cabbalistic Zohar) is reported to have said that even the best of women is full of witchcraft (Talmud Yerushalmi Qiddushin 4 66c), and when two women sit at a crossroads facing each other surely they are involved in witchcraft (Talmud Bavli Pesachim 111a). The obvious misogyny and fear of witchcraft of such passages, however, is not shared by other Jewish writings, such as Josephus, wisdom literature, the Qumran texts or other Rabbinic sources. Obviously such texts do not describe social reality as such, but illustrate aspects of patriarchal imaginations of the female as the dangerous other, taking up motifs from folk magic.

Jews in pagan texts are often imagined as sorcerers (Pliny, Natural history 30:11; Juvenal satires 3:13; 6:542–547; Pompeius Trogus 36:2, 8–11; Strabon 16:2; Lucian, Tragodopodagra 173s.; cf. also the Qumran text 4QOrNab), as are other ethnic groups from an outsider perspective. Christian physicians still use Jewish magic (as the charm against the gout in Alexander Trallianus, Therapeutics 12 Puschmann 2:583). Moses also for pagan writers is the magician par excellence. The Council of Elvira (Spain, early 3rd century) even forbids Christian landowners to ask Jewish magicians for magical blessings of their crops and fields, so this may have been a common practice (can. Eliberat. 49). Talmud Babli Taanith 24b tells a story about King Shapur II testing (by advice of his mother) whether Jews can be used as rain charms. Stories about Jewish sorcerers are a common element in Christian narratives and historiography as well.

Josephus, our most important source for 1st-century CE Judaism, quite rationalistic in his attitude, never uses “magic” to explain disasters and gives scant attention to prohibitions of magic (Jewish Antiquities 4:279). He uses words like goes (“sorcerer, charlatan”) in his defamation of prophetic and pseudo-messianic figures, however (Jewish War 2:261. 264; 4:85; 5:317; Jewish Antiquities 20:97. 161. 167. 188; vita 40). During the Jewish war, in which he initially took part as a Jewish general, he saved two Jewish nobles from an accusation of using magic in favour of the Roman side (vita 113. 149–153). We find a more ambivalent attitude towards magic in the Jewish religious philosopher Philo of Alexandria, a contemporary of Jesus. Magic is an art connected to the forces of nature, illuminating its hidden aspects. It is rooted in researching nature, meditation and initiation. As such, magic is a royal art, practiced e.g. by the Persian kings initiated into its mysteries. On the other side, there is a vile evil-doing art practiced by slaves, women and itinerant quacks, dealing in purifications, spells and charms, changing love to hate and hate to love, and often resulting in disaster. Sorcerers are to be executed immediately. Obviously for Philo, both sides of magic have little in common and have to be strictly distinguished.

The main symbolic figure of Jewish magic is King Solomon. Already Josephus (Jewish Antiquities 8: 45–40) tells about a Jewish exorcist Eleazar using a magical ring and spells allegedly written by Solomon. The exemplary sage (cf. 1 Kgs 5:9–15 or the Book of Wisdom, particularly 7:17–21) in the magical tradition is turned into a magical king. His questionable character (tolerating idolatry and possessing a large harem) may even have helped in this development, but most of all his famous wisdom allowed for ascribing to him all kind of occult and demonological knowledge.
Already Origen, in Commentary on Matthew 26:63, knows books attributed to Solomon containing spells and invocations of demons. The “Testament of Solomon” (4th century, but with older traditions) is no grimoire, but a kind of demonological handbook framed by a narrative on Solomon. Its main interest is medical: certain demons cause certain diseases, and it is useful to know these connections.

The Dead Sea scrolls, usually ascribed to an Essene community, additionally contain many Biblical and Para-Biblical texts as well as examples of exorcisms, brontologia, physiognomic texts, oaths and others (4Q186; 4Q561; 4Q318 u.a.). In 4Q510–511 are apotropaic songs of a “wise man” against evil spirits, 5Q14 ritual curses; 4Q560 may be a magical protection of a pregnant woman, etc. These were obviously not seen as illegitimate magic. They also have a strong interest in angelology and demonology.

The prohibition of magic in Hebrew Bible texts of course was well known (11Q19 col. LX, 16–21). The most important sources for Jewish magic in late antiquity are apotropaic magical bowls, inscribed on the inside (more rarely also on the outside) and put into the corners of the house and below thresholds as places symbolic of inside–outside borderlines. Many hundreds such bowls from the area of Northern Iraq, Eastern Syria and Western Iran have been published (though only a few from controlled archaeological diggings) and can be dated mostly to the 4th–8th century; even more are unpublished. Written in different Aramaic dialects (later also in Arabic) by Jews, Mandaeans and perhaps Manichaens, i.e. religious minorities, they seem to have been bought also by Christians and Zoroastrians. Highly syncretist, they combine Hebrew Bible, later Jewish and clearly pagan invocations and apotropaic prayers. Jewish curse texts are also not rare. Such specimens of practical magic will have served personal coping with strokes of fate, disease, bad luck, theft and other invasions of the private sphere, and with what was perceived as maleficent witchcraft.

Only a few remarks are possible here on Rabbinical Judaism with its immense corpora of collected haggadic and halachic tradition. It has become increasingly clear in recent years that this corpus still cannot be identified with the totality of late antique Judaism, however, but with only some of its major elements. In a manner comparable to the Church fathers, the Rabbis struggle to some degree against both popular and professional magic, whereas some of their own practices in a wider sense clearly can be interpreted as magic as well. A special mythology is derived from the arcane nature of the divine name, the knowledge of which is seen as the most desirable magical mystery (cf. already 1 Enoch 69: 14; Jubilees 36: 7; Mishna Taanith 3: 8). The miracle-working rabbi is not just a healer: his curse can be fatal. A particular stratum of stories is woven around some 1st-century BCE–1st century CE figures, often called “Galilean charismatics”. They work by miraculous powers of prayer, both for healing and rain making, and may be of some importance as comparative data to understand the historical Jesus. Ḥanina ben Dosa, Ḥoni the Circle-drawer, Abba Hilkijah and others must have been well-known names in 1st-century Palestine (Honi is also mentioned by Josephus), living in a popular sphere where magic and religion, prayer and inherent healing power cannot be clearly separated. These are not “sorcerers”, but have been described as “men of deed” (miracle men). Comparable to Jesus, they lived in personal poverty and were popular primarily as healers, but also known for a special relation to God describable in a son–father imagery. A strange trait also important in early Christianity is their immunity against snake and scorpion bites (cf. Mk 16:17s.; Lk 10:19; Acts 28:1–6).
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Rabbinic Judaism tries hard to minimize the place of magical practices, e.g. by forbidding to use Thora verses in healing rituals (Mishna Sanhedrin 10:1; cf. 6:6; 7:7.10). The gemara to these passages argues with much detail against diviners, necromancers, ventriloquists and similar popular professions. The most elaborate discussion of questions of limitation and definition of magic in Rabbinic literature is to be found in Talmud Babli Sanhedrin 65a–66a. 67a–68a, where it is also distinguished from show illusionism posing as magic. A judge has to have a solid knowledge of magic to be able to judge respective cases. We can even reconstruct from different sources a full Jewish Book of magic, the late antique Sefer haRazim “Book of mysteries”; it is difficult to date the text more clearly, as it existed in quite different versions. Magic here has obviously ill intent: spells and practices are given to send bad dreams, overthrow a wall or make a ship capsize, though apotropaic magic is much more common, protecting e.g. a woman in childbirth. In a few cases, evocation formulas even use pagan names of deities such as Helios, Hermes or Aphrodite. The magician may have seen these as minor supernatural beings not competing with monotheism. The compiler of the spell book may even not have regarded his compilations as transgressing the boundaries of traditional religions, as his spells may have been used against “witchcraft”.

Magic in earliest Christianity

As many other religious foundational figures (Mani, Muhammad and others), Jesus as a healer and exorcist was accused of magic by his contemporaries. He was said to be possessed (Mk 3:20–30 par.; Joh 8:48; cf. Lk 7:33 par. about John the Baptist) or even in league with the devil (Lk 11:14–23 par. from the Sayings Source Q). Jesus interestingly takes this suspicion up with arguments against it: if the devil himself were active in his exorcisms, the realm of evil could not endure, as it would be divided against itself. The devil’s realm in Jesus’ exorcisms is envisaged as a structured unity, more of a military army than a kingdom, like locusts invading a country. Healing miracles using saliva (Mk 7:31–37; 8:22–26; Joh 9:1–12) or transferring health by laying on of hands (Mk 1:31; 5:24–34 a.o.; cf. Philostratus v. Apoll. 3:39; 4:45; Sueton, Vespasian 7; Tacitus, Histories 4:81 a.o.) will have reminded ancient spectators of magic. Even more, Jesus’ short Aramaic command words in a Greek-speaking world might have been misunderstood as magical spells. Such similarities to magic already in the gospels are pushed back, as when Matthew leaves out the saliva in the healing stories. And already Mark, the oldest gospel, emphasizes that Jesus’ command words (Mk 5:41 Talitha kum; 7:34 Ephatha) can be translated and so are no Voces magicae.

The Greek gospel obviously wants to put some distance between Jesus and the image of the magus. Onomata barbarica, strange-sounding formulas in exorcisms and healing miracles are otherwise quite common (cf. Lucian, Philopseudes 9:31; 34, 15; Alexander Abon. 13; and as Christian texts see e.g. Jerome, Life of Hilarion 18; Acta Philippi 132). The pericope about Pharisees and scribes asking Jesus for a sign from heaven (Mk 8:11–13 par.; Lk 11:16. 29–32 par. from Q) also has to be understood in the context of distinguishing Jesus from magic. Signs on earth (miracles) are ambivalent: they may be demon work. A sign in heaven, where demons cannot reach, would be unambiguous. The tradition knows different answers of Jesus (which may go back to different occasions): the flat denial of the request, or the “sign
of Jonah” (preaching; later understood as hinting at the resurrection). Such passages try to put some distance between Jesus and popular magicians that we know well from Greek, Jewish and Egyptian sources. He was far from alone in this: even successful physicians now and then had to struggle against suspicions of being magicians, as we hear even about the quite rationalist Galen. The exorcisms and healing miracles of Jesus have to be understood in the reference frame of his preaching about the coming Kingdom of God (Lk 11:20). He does not use spells, stones, plants or other magical means, and gives no attention to special times or circumstances (contrast Josephus, Jewish War 7:180–185). Jesus was indeed no magician, but from an outsider perspective could be mistaken for a wizard. The precise meaning of faith in this context is not easy to see (“your faith has saved you”, in the sense of “has healed you”, Mk 5:34, and parallel passages; cf. Mk 5:36 “just believe” and the words on having faith like a grain of mustard seed). Faith in these tales and sayings is not just belief in the miracle-working power of the healer, but it also does not have the soteriological precision it has in Paul’s letters. Jesus clearly wants to state miracles depend not just on a magical dynamis (“power”, Mk 5:30) of the healer but also on something else. The gospels on the other side can use terminology known from loosening spells for therapeutic events (Mk 7:35; Lk 13:16; cf. Busch 41–44). But there is no wider reception of any technical terminology of magic in the gospels. Jesus successfully cursing a fig-tree (Mk 11:12–14. 20–25) certainly is meant to prove somehow the power of faith. The well-known word of faith “moving mountains” (Mk 11:22–24; Mt 21:21–22; cf. 1 Cor 13:2) has some affinity to imaginations of power as stated in magical texts.

The healing story Mk 5:23–34 (healing from touching Jesus’ clothes) at least comes close to a kind of magical automatism. The trust of the bleeding woman in the magical power of the miracle-worker (dynamis v. 30) is changed into something more personal by Jesus forcing her to a direct encounter. Peter Busch has made the basic ambivalences of many religious phenomena visible by confronting “magical” and “non-magical” interpretations of may passages. In some cases, the affinities are obvious: the temptation of Jesus (Lk 4:1–13; Mt 4:1–11 from Q) has reminded readers of the “flying magician” as known from the later Simon Magus legend (Acta Petri Vercell. 7–29; Pseudo-clementine recognitions 2–3; homilies 3:16–19 and many other texts).

Interpreting Jesus as a sorcerer was particularly attractive for both pagans and Jews (e.g. Talmud Babli Sanhedrin 43a), as it allowed miraculous happenings around Jesus to be accepted without conceding any soteriological interpretation. Christian authors like Justin (First Apology 30:1; Dialogue with Trypho 69:7; 108:2), Origen (Against Celsus 1:6. 38), Tertullian (Apology 21:17) Athenagoras (On the incarnation) and many others had to defend Jesus against this accusation. In pagan circles, such an image of Jesus might otherwise be the outcome of a fascination with the miracle worker, and could easily go together with stereotypes such as having learned magic in Egypt. Scholars like Morton Smith (1915–1991) have tried to understand the Jesus tradition as deeply involved in magical ideas and practices. This has not convinced the majority of experts, though there certainly are similarities e.g. between the gospels and the Life of Apollonius of Tyana (Philostрат, early 3rd century). The names of Jesus and even of the apostles could be used as “power words” by non-Christian exorcists (Mk 9:38s.; Acts 19:13s.), as we know also from magical papyri (PGM IV, 1230s. 3020s.; XII, 190. 390; XXIIb, 18; CXXIII, 50), perhaps from Jewish tradition.
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This reminds us of late antique Jewish magical bowls using names of miracle workers like Chanina ben Dosa and Joshua ben Perachja.

Paul never shows any deeper concern about magic; explicit allusions such as perhaps Gal 5:29 are rare. He is convinced, however, of Christ’s eschatological victory over all astral and demonic forces and powers of destiny (1 Cor 15:25; Phil 2:11; cf. also post-Pauline passages as Col 2:15; Eph 1:20s. etc.). The excommunication and “deliverance unto Satan” (1 Cor 5:3–5) has some affinities to curse rituals (cf. 1 Tim 1:20 and as Jewish models cf. Dtn 27:11–26; 1QS II 4–18 a.o.). Cursing as causing miraculous events is well known in the New Testament, and even Jesus is known to have used curses, though not against human beings (Mk 11:12–14. 20–25; cf. Acts 13: 9–11 and contrast Lk 9:52–56 with important textual variants). Many other practices may have some affinity to syncretist magic, e.g. the veneration of angels and the elements (stoicheia) in Colossae (Col 2:18–20). Lists of supernatural charisms (1 Cor 12:4–11; Rom 12:4–8; Ps.-Mk 16:17s.) can be read as an antithesis to lists of the supernatural effects of magical rituals. (Even lists of famous sorcerers, well known in pagan literature, can be reproduced by Christian writers: cf. Tertullian, On the soul 57:1; Arnobius, Against the nations 1:52 with Pliny, Natural History 30:2–11; Apuleius, Apology 90).

We get a much more vivid, detailed and even humorous depiction of the gospel in confrontation with popular magic, divination and other pagan practices from the Acts of the Apostles. Besides the Simon Magus episode (8:4–25) we may think of stories about Paul cursing the professional magician Barjesus Elymas (13:4–12; perhaps a Nabataean, cf. Arab ‘alim “having (secret) knowledge”), or Paul being exposed and almost stalked by a woman possessed by a snake spirit (pneuma python) and speaking as a kind of ventriloquist (Acts 16:16–18), or we may think of legends telling about the healing effect of the shadow of Peter and the handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched Paul’s skin and were carried away to the sick, so that their diseases left them (Acts 5:15; 19:12). A Jewish guild of exorcists seems to have used the fancy name of “seven sons of Skeuas” (19:13–17), who is said to have been a high priest, but must be a fictitious figure (lat. Scaeva); the name may have been an advertising gimmick, or the group used the stereotype about Jews as magicians (cf. the “Hebrew exorcism” PGM IV:3007–3027). Glossolalia, described in Acts 2 and 1Cor 14, has sometimes been compared to magical spells, but this is not convincing. It has no “magical effect”, though it can be interpreted as an Angelic tongue (1 Cor 13:2, similar to magical words interpreted as the gods’ language). The miraculous opening of a door (Acts 12:7) is also a common motif in tales of magic (Philostratus, Life of Apollonius 8:5; Jamblichus, Life of Pythagoras 217; Arnobius, Against the nations 1:43; PGM XIII:327. 1065; IV:447; XII:161 etc.), though of course in Acts it is an angel who does the miracle. A small episode of wide influence is the famous burning of magical books by Christians in Ephesus (19:19), who in their former pagan days had spent 50,000 silver denarii on these books. This financial value seems high, but we hear often about the large amounts of money magicians and exorcists charged their customers (cf. e.g. Tacitus, Annals 16:31; Lucian, Philepseudes 16). This episode became a main legitimation of later censures against magical literature (e.g. Zacharias Scholasticus, Life of Severinus of Antioch 63. 65. 69s.). The author of Acts playfully alludes to the famous Ephesia Grammata, though these are not books, but actually a special magical formula well known in antiquity, connecting Ephesus with magic.
“Make no potions, keep away from magical books”, says the late-Hellenistic Jewish-Greek didactic poet Ps.-Phokylides 149 (tr. P. W. van der Horst). The combination of poison-making and sorcery is common in both Jewish and Christian literature (cf. Testamentum Ruben 4:9; Sibylline Oracles 1:96; Ascension of Isaiah 2:5; Philon, de spec. leg. 3:92–103; Didache 2:2; Barn. 20:1; Acts of Paul 4:35 and many other passages). For Christians, the burning of magical books will have been a liberating experience, a getting free from the supremacy of fate and demonic powers. The possession of magical books in Roman jurisprudence is first clearly prohibited in the late 3rd century CE, in a context with severe threats against magic (Ps.-Paulus, Sentences 5:29 (23), 17s.), though this can only to a very small degree have been actual legal practice. The magical papyri show no fear of persecution by the state. Fear of witchcraft in a more general sense is well documented for Roman imperial society, however. An inscriptive oracle of Apollon e.g. dated 165 CE speaks about the apotropaic powers of the Ephesine Artemis, which is declared as overcoming the workings of evil sorcerous art using magical dolls with malefic intent.15 The NT on the other side does not speak about wide-spread sorcery fears (though we may cf. Apc 18:23 where pharmakeia is “witchcraft”). But the scenario mission vs. magic proves “magic” to have been a competitive factor in the mutual rivalry between religions, an aspect of primary importance for early Christian missionary history.

This scenario, only hinted at in canonical Acts, is much elaborated on in the apocryphal Acts of the Apostles and pseudo-Clementine literature (“Recognitions”, “Homilies”), Christian religious novels (2nd–5th century CE) telling the life and death of the apostles. Apostles preaching the gospel and magicians looking for customers in these narratives relate to the same clientele, and legitimizing miracles compete on a quite basic level. The problem of how to distinguish between divine miracles and magic is present, but not discussed in much depth. The Christian miracle very simply is more effective than any work of magic. Popular subjects such as love magic or invocations against serpents are mentioned a number of times, and the Acts of Andrew and Matthew 1 even know a “zombification potion” used by blood-drinking cannibals turning men into will-less slaves. It is unclear whether such fairy tale-like motifs were actually believed in: the entertainment aspect of these religious novels must not be underrated. Divination using the corpse of a child killed by Simon Magus is put into effect not by the soul of the boy but by a demon; pagan interpretation of magical practice is changed into a Christian reference frame (ps.-clementine Recognitions 2:13–15; 3:44s.; homilies 2:25–30). The attempt by Simon Magus to fly through magic, thwarted by Peter praying and causing Simon’s downfall, is perhaps the most famous legend on magic in Christian history. It became the basic iconographic representation of the competition between magic and the Christian mission. The interpretation of Simon Magus as a magician trying to fly has also been read as a caricature on Paul’s claim to have visited Paradise in the Third Heaven during an ecstatic experience, perhaps even corporeally (2 Cor 12:1–5), though this seems unlikely. He later becomes a central figure in ideas about the history of magic (as in Ireland as the teacher of the Druid magician Mog Ruith).

Ideas about malefic magic and love magic may be echoed in passages such as Gal 5:20; Apc 9:21; 18:23; 21:8, but rituals of “forcing the Gods”, defixions (curse tablets, a wide-spread practice) and similar arts are never in view, as divinatory practices like physiognomics (known in Qumran) and astrology do not occur (but astral
symbolism is frequent). We never get a detailed description of magical rituals, as in many ancient epics and novels. Apc in its catalogues of vices assigns sorcery to demonic evil (9:21; 18:23; 21:8; 22:15). Some aspects of Apc have nevertheless a (perhaps antithetical) affinity to revelatory magic, stressing e.g. the quickness of Jesus’ parousia (Apc 2:16; 3:11; 22:7.12.20), which has been interpreted as a counter phenomenon to the very typical impatience in magical spells (“now, now; quick, quick” PGM III:123s.; IV:1245. 1593. 1924. 2037 cf. I:89s.; IV:236s.; VI:14; VII:248s. 329/31).

The Pastor Hermae (mand. 11), a 2nd-century writing from Rome, strongly criticizes “prophets”, the behaviour of which has similarity to a professional diviner, speaking in private for payment, not freely in the congregation. The worlds of magic, divination and Christian charismatics can clearly converge. An attitude of derision and strong opposition against magic is also not rare in pagan writings: Lucian, a contemporary of Hermas, makes fun of a sorcerer promising to make other men give to his customers everything they might desire (Demonax 23). Augustine wants to try experimentally the supernatural powers of a mandrake, and complains about the high price he has to pay for the root (Against Faustus 22:56). Amulets and talismans have been in common Christian use, though often criticized by theological writers. Arnobius, writing in the early 4th century, takes it as a matter of course that Christians bought apotropaic small tablets (laminae) produced by Marsians and Psyllians (Against the nations 2:32), and John Chrysostom complains about the wide-spread use of little crosses born as amulets (Homilies in Matthew 54:4). Texts such as the Our Father, Psalm 90 and John 1:1–18 are well-documented as amulets, as are the beginnings of the gospels. The extremely small papyrus P 78 (P. Oxyrhynchus XXXIV 2684) has the text of Jude probably as an amulet, etc. Early sacramental piety calls the Eucharist a “medicine bringing immortality” (Ignatius, Letter to the Ephesians 20:2), or simply “medicine” (Acts of Thomas 135), perhaps using a fairy tale motif. Other ritual acts can attract magical symbolism as well, such as the laying on of hands in curing diseases which can be accompanied by anointing with oil (cf. Mk. 6:13, not taken over by Matthew and Luke who may have found the ritual problematic, and perhaps saw oil only as medicine as in Luke 10:34; see also James 5:14).

Minority groups such as Christian gnostics could easily be suspected of practising magic, and this became a central reproach in haeresiological literature. But non-Christian authors also saw an affinity between gnostic esotericism, ascent mysticism and magical rituals destined to convey revelation experiences. Plotin, in his tract against the gnostics (Enneads II, 9), enumerates practices as invocations of heavenly entities, spells imitating animal shouts (well known from Graeco-Egyptian magic) and exorcisms, and he is aware of the inner relation between experiences of powerlessness in real life and fantasies of omnipotence, supernatural knowledge and transcending the human condition. A feeling of superiority connects magic (cf. PGM XXXIV) and gnosticism. A fine observer such as Origen takes it for granted that parts of gnostic symbolism and ritual language are directly derived from magic (Against Celsus 6:31s. 38; 7:40, where he speaks about Ophites). The accusation of magic is also used against gnostics by Basilides, Karpocrates and particularly Marcus Magus, a Valentinian. Marcus (according to Irenaus, Against the heresies 1:13, 1–16, 2; Hippolytus, Refutation 6:39, 1–54, 2 and others) used illusionist techniques in the Eucharist sacrament to counterfeit a change of water to wine. He also was said to use love magic and a familiar spirit (a parhedros).16
As Jesus was accused of magic, so his followers quite regularly during persecutions both in the Roman and in the Sasanian (Persian) empire were suspected of using sorcery, e.g. to avoid a lawsuit (Acts of Perpetua and Felicitas 16; Lactance, Divine Institutes 5:3, 19; Ps.-clementine recognitions 1:58, 1; Origen, Against Celsus 7:69 and very often). The apocryphal Acts of Thecla 15 (part of the larger Acts of Paul, a late 2nd-century Christian novel) know about allegations against Paul having “bewitched” Thekla with his words. It is essentially the same kind of suspicion which up to recent times has been used by majority religions against competing new religious movements (with labels such as “Satanism”, “brain washing”, “mesmerism”). Tertullian defends Christianity against a general suspicion of witchcraft (ad. uxor. 2, 4, 5), an accusation still used by Iulian Apostata (Socrates, Church history 3:13, 11, 12).

Mt 2 is the only NT text that speaks about magicians from the East (magoi apanatolon) in a surprisingly positive sense. The number and names of these wise men drawn to the new-born messiah varies in the old church; Justin (Dialogue with Trypho 44:3) interprets them as coming from Arabia. They represent the messianic hope as something also known to non-Jewish humanity. The term magoi here may simply mean astrologers: Babylonia was famed for its astrological expertise, and “Chaldeans” had come to mean simply astrologers (e.g. Diodor. Sicul. 2:30, 4s.). According to Pseudo-Aristotle, a Syrian magos travelling in Athens predicted to Socrates his violent death (Diogen. Laert. 2:45), and a connection between Iranian magicians star lore and divination for certain nations is already known to Herodotus (7:37, 2s.). It may be no coincidence, however, that magoi – originally Median priests, and later adherents of Zoroastrianism – are visiting the messianic child, people who have strongly developed messianic hopes. In this case, the pre-Matthean Jewish-Christian legend in Mt 2 may choose “magoi” as representatives of non-Jewish messianic hopes with some deliberation, and indeed quite appropriately. The ancient church with Mt 2 in view found it difficult to completely disclaim astrology, though it generally discredited divination. Writers like Tertullian (Against idolatry 9:5) or John Chrysostom (Sermons in Matthew 6:1) argue against people using Mt 2 to legitimize astrology, and Augustine (in his younger days an adherent of astrology) also speaks out against those who, quoting Mt 2, would try to defend astrology’s essential fatalism (Sermon 20:3s.). More common is the idea that magic and divination have been bereft of their power by the birth of Christ. Ignatius, Letter to the Ephesians 19:3 (ca. 110 CE), even can say that all magic was vanquished and all bondage of evil comes to naught by the messianic birth and its accompanying star of Bethlehem (cf. Ignatius, Letter to Polycarp 5:1). Origen (Against Celsus 1:60) says a century later, the magicians from the East had started their voyage because they realized their magic had lost all power. This assurance of having overcome magic was lost in later theology, and aspects of witchcraft fears became common ground to Christians and non-Christians. “There is indeed nobody who does not fear to be spell-bound by imprecations”, Pliny the Elder had written (Natural history 28:19; cf. Apuleius, Metamorphoses 2:20).

The ancient church in successive steps took over images of magic and witchcraft that had developed in Greek and Roman literature, and it participated also in the increasing criminalization of magic in late antique legal discourses and 4th-century court proceedings. This heritage came to be of vital importance for medieval and
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early modern images and theories of witchcraft, much more than e.g. Germanic, Celtic or Slavic polytheist pagan ideas.

Notes
10 *Sefer ha-Razim I und II – Das Buch der Geheimnisse I und II*, edited by Bill Rebiger/Peter Schäfer (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012).

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