

magic in the biblical world

From the Rod of Aaron to the Ring of Solomon

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COMPETING MAGICIANS IN EXODUS 7–9:
INTERPRETING MAGIC IN THE PRIESTLY THEOLOGY

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1. *Foreword: Problems of Definition*

To define 'magic' is as difficult as giving a precise definition of 'religion'. Yet it is always in relation to 'religion' that historians of religion attempt to locate 'magic'. S. Mowinckel, for instance, following B. Malinowski, contrasts magic to religion and sees the former as having much in common with the natural sciences, for in his view both magic and science are powerfully shaped by pragmatic aims and empirical functions.¹ N. Söderblom also strongly distinguishes between religion and magic: 'in religion, man reveres divinity; in magic, man makes use of divinity to his own advantage'.² According to F. Graf, this distinction goes back to Plato, who in the *Laws* contrasts magic's goal of persuading the gods to true religious behaviour's respect for the gods' freedom of will and superior knowledge of what is good for us.³ On the other hand, scholars such as A.E. Jensen have strongly criticized the view according to which magical practices would belong to a 'proto-religious' state of humanity and form the basis on which religion would later develop. Jensen insists that one cannot have either magic deriving from religion or religion from magic, even if there are many correlations between the two.⁴ This view is clearly opposed to that of the

school of J.G. Frazer, which adopts an evolutionist outlook and distinguishes between three stages in humankind's mental development: magic, religion and science;⁵ from this perspective, magic is characteristic of archaic and primitive man. And thus one will try, as Graf points out, to distinguish magical rites from those one wants to view as religious.⁶ This effort often betrays a pejorative view, stemming from certain theological or philosophical conceptions of what is called 'magic'.

Today, it turns out that the word 'magic' is not very functional as a global concept. True, one may specify which different rites are considered as magic—witchcraft, necromancy, divination, miracles and so on—but no alternative has been suggested to that generic term. Thus we adopt J. Kümmerlin-McLean's pragmatic definition when she speaks of 'methods associated with the gaining of suprahuman knowledge and power or with influencing suprahuman power'.⁷ It is obvious, especially as far as ancient Near Eastern religions are concerned, that a strict distinction between magic and religion is impossible. This fact may even be confirmed from the etymology of the Greek word μάγος which comes from Persian and, according to Xenophon, refers to 'experts in matters related to the gods' (οἱ περὶ τοὺς θεοὺς τεχνίται).⁸ What, then, about magic in the Old Testament?

2. *Magic in the Old Testament*

Let us first remember that the Hebrew Bible does not immediately reflect religious and ritual practices of the average Israelite of the first millennium BCE. The Hebrew Bible is to a large extent a literary product composed by intellectual elites from the Persian period in order to reorganize or even create Judaism out of the crisis of exile. All the same, these texts assimilate information about popular ritual customs for a variety of polemical, subversive and even antiquarian reasons.

The Hebrew Bible is rich in terms for specialists in magic or witchcraft: מַכְשֵׁף ('magician', 'sorcerer', e.g. Mal. 3.5); חוֹבֵר ('charmer', e.g. Ps. 58.6);

wesentlichen nichts miteinander zu tun. Die zahlreichen Verbindungen zwischen magischen Praktiken und religiösen Vorstellungen sind sekundär'.

5. For more details, see Graf, *La magie*, pp. 19–27.

6. Graf, *La magie*, p. 26.

7. J.K. Kümmerlin-McLean, 'Magic: Old Testament', in *ABD*, IV, pp. 468–71 (468).

8. Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* 8.3.11, quoted in Graf, *La magie*, p. 31.

1. S. Mowinckel, *Religion und Kultus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1953), pp. 15–28.

2. N. Söderblom, *Der lebendige Gott im Zeugnis der Religionsgeschichte: nachgelassene Gifford-Lektüren* (Munich: E. Reinhardt, 1942), p. 33.

3. F. Graf, *La magie dans l'Antiquité gréco-romaine: idéologie et pratique* (Histoire, 28; Paris: Belles Lettres, 1994), p. 38.

4. A.E. Jensen, 'Gibt es Zauberhandlungen?', *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 75 (1950), pp. 3–12 (repr. in L. Petzoldt [ed.], *Magie und Religion: Beiträge zu einer Theorie der Magie* [Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1978], pp. 279–95). See, for instance, p. 294: 'Magie und Religion sind wahrscheinlich gleich alt und haben im

מלחש ('enchanter', e.g. Jer. 8.17); חכם חרשים ('expert in magic', Isa. 3.3); מַקְסָם ('divination', Ezek. 12.24) and so on.⁹

In 1 Kgs 18.17 Ahab addresses Elijah as a sorcerer who would have put a spell on Israel.¹⁰ This shows that the border between prophetism and magic is very fluid. Elijah and Elisha are not only prophets but also magicians. They know how to decontaminate polluted waters and make an iron axe come back up to the water's surface (2 Kgs 2.19-22; 6.1-6). Through magical rites, they restore dead children to life by making their vital energy pass over the child (1 Kgs 17.19-23; 2 Kgs 4.33-37). A number of prophetic 'symbolic acts' are also quite near to magic rites (e.g. the model of a besieged and destroyed city in Ezek. 4.1-3, and in Jer. 51.59-64). These instances, to which others could be added, confirm F. Cryer's hypothesis: 'ancient Israel was a "magic society" like those around her'.¹¹ Yet most exegetes think the Old Testament has, in general, a hostile view of magic.¹² This perspective may be explained in two ways: first, by the exegetes' theological options; and next, by the undue valorization of a single theological trajectory in the Old Testament—namely, that of the Deuteronomists.

3. 'Popular Religion' and the Constitution of an Official Judaism under Persian Rule: The Deuteronomistic versus the Priestly Antagonism

The Pentateuch or Torah appears today to be a compromise document duly negotiated between the two major ideological trends¹³ that will give Judaism its profile from the Persian period onward: the Priestly trend (P) and the lay-scribal, Deuteronomistic (D) trend. Within the framework of this essay, we can leave aside the question of whether the publication of the Torah was favoured by the Persians themselves (theory of the 'imperial

9. For more details, see R. Albertz, 'Magie II: Altes Testament', in *TRE*, XXI, pp. 691-95; and D.N. Fabian, 'The Socio-Religious Role of Witchcraft in the Old Testament Culture: An African Insight', *Old Testament Essays* 11 (1998), pp. 215-39 (225-30).

10. For this translation of עכר, see G. Fohrer, *Elia* (ATANT, 31; Zürich: Zwingli-Verlag, 1957), p. 11.

11. F.H. Cryer, *Divination in Ancient Israel and Its Near Eastern Environment: A Socio-Historical Investigation* (JSOTSup, 142; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), p. 324.

12. K. Gallig, 'Magie: 7. Im AT', in *RGG*³, IV, p. 601.

13. The word 'trend' should not be understood as meaning a vast, popular movement. The Pentateuch was edited by a small group of elites who knew each other and met in Jerusalem (and Babylon?).

authorization') or if it was due rather to a process within the Jewish communities in Palestine and in the Diaspora.¹⁴ Nevertheless, it is also too simplistic to conceive the Pentateuch as resulting from the combination of two trends only; this model would certainly not account for the whole material knitted together in the Torah. All the same, it allows us to account for the divergence between the two main trends, D and P, in their treatment of magic. On the one hand, Priestly and Deuteronomistic writers agree as to the fundamental theological options of the Pentateuch: the monotheistic creed and the essential role of Moses as a mediator between the divine word and the people. On the other hand, they deeply disagree as to their strategy for the promotion of this 'new religion' among adepts of the former Yahwistic and polytheistic pre-exilic religion. While the Deuteronomistic group favours breaking off and banning certain religious traditional practices, the Priestly writers would rather have a strategy of integration and transformation.

Let us take as an example the practice of worshiping dead ancestors, a phenomenon quite widespread in the ancient Near East, as well as in Judah and in Israel.¹⁵ This worship implies veneration of the ancestor's tomb and strategies of getting in touch with the dead (see especially 1 Sam. 28).

The D tradition wants to eradicate these practices, identifying them with Canaanite customs and forbidding them.¹⁶ The Priestly school, also hostile to the worship of the dead (cf. Lev. 19.31-32), is more aware of cultural realities. Thus, P has an entire chapter about the tomb Abraham bought in Makpela, near Hebron (Gen. 23). In this long secular narrative of oriental bargaining, where God does not interfere, the Priestly writers succeed both in 'desecrating' the patriarchal tomb and at the same time paying tribute to it.¹⁷ Yes, in Hebron is Abraham's tomb, but the place of the tomb has no sacred power, since the Patriarch had to buy it just as he would have any other good property. In this way, the Priestly writers recognize the func-

14. For a presentation of present research on the Pentateuch, see T. Römer, 'La formation du Pentateuque selon l'exégèse historico-critique', in C. Amphoux and J. Margain (eds.), *Les premières traditions de la Bible* (Histoire du texte biblique, 2; Lausanne: Éditions du Zèbre, 1996), pp. 17-55.

15. See, for instance, N.J. Tromp, *Primitive Conceptions of Death and the Netherworld in the Old Testament* (BibOr, 21; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1969).

16. E.g. Deut. 18.9-12: 'you shall not learn to do after the abominations of those nations'; and Deut. 26.14, with its ban on 'feeding' the dead.

17. Cf. J. Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), pp. 293-95.

tion of the tomb for the genealogical identity of a group, but they transform worship of the dead into a memorial to the Patriarchs.¹⁸

This divergence between P and D is still more evident regarding their attitude towards magical rites. On the whole, for the D tradition, anything involving magic is rigorously forbidden, as is clear from some examples.

- a. 'You will not suffer a sorcerer (מכשף) to live' (Exod. 22.17). In the law of the Book of Covenant,¹⁹ this is the only occurrence of the feminine form of the word.²⁰ This has led some exegetes to consider the word here as a collective. It might suggest that there were women excelling in witchcraft. The ban is religious and, as in Deut. 18.9-14, means rejection of practices envisioned as non-Yahwistic.²¹
- b. 'There shall not be found with you any one that makes his son or daughter to pass through the fire, one that uses divination (קסם), one that practises augury, or an enchanter (מנחש), or a sorcerer (מכשף), or a charmer (חבר), or a consulter of a deceased spirit (שאל אור), that is one who consults dead people. For whoever does these things is an abomination unto Yhwh' (Deut. 18.10-12).²² It is difficult to tell precisely which magical practices this list has in mind; it looks like an attempt to cover the widest range of magical practices possible. These interdictions figure in the context of the law regarding prophets and obviously aim at a distinction between 'true' prophecy and magical practices.

18. According to O. Loretz, 'Vom kanaanäischen Totenkult zur jüdischen Patriarchen- und Eltermehrung', *Jahrbuch für Anthropologie und Religionsgeschichte* 3 (1978), pp. 149-201, the command to honour (living) parents in the Decalogue should also be understood as a transformation of worship of deceased ancestors.

19. We shall not discuss the question of a Deuteronomistic redaction of this collection. According to L. Schwienhorst-Schönberger, *Das Bundesbuch* (Ex 20, 22-23, 33): *Studien zu seiner Entstehung und Theologie* (BZAW, 188; Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1990), pp. 329-30, this prescription would date from the seventh century BCE.

20. See the discussion by C. Houtman, *Das Bundesbuch. Ein Kommentar* (Documenta et monumenta Orientis antiqui, 24; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1997), pp. 218-21. His proposition, according to which the matter is not a sorcerer but an adulteress, is not very convincing.

21. Cf. J.M. Sprinkle, *'The Book of Covenant': A Literary Approach* (JSOTSup, 174; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), p. 164.

22. For these various expressions in Deut. 18, see Kuemmerlin-McLean, 'Magic: Old Testament', pp. 468-69.

Many other texts from the Deuteronomistic trajectory adopt a rejecting attitude towards magic, as for instance the Decalogue command: 'You shall not take the name of Yhwh in vain' (Deut. 5.11), which forbids the use of the divine name in magical incantations (see also Jer. 27.9; Mal. 3.5).²³

For the Deuteronomistic trend, prophecy must be separated from magic, and all magical ritual should be declared an insult to Yahwistic religion. After the ban in Deut. 18.9-12, Moses becomes the founder of a prophetic succession which is in radical opposition to practices considered to be 'non-Yahwistic'. This is in no way the option of the Priestly school, which chose instead to transform Moses and Aaron into 'super-magicians'.

4. *The Narrative of the Plagues of Egypt as a Paradigm of an Ideological Conflict within the Pentateuch*

In its canonical form, the narrative of the 'ten'²⁴ plagues of Egypt (Exod. 7.14-12.36²⁵) prepares for the night of the massacre of the firstborn and the exodus out of Egypt (Exod. 12-14). The episodes of the various 'plagues' are composed with the following six elements:

- a. Discourse of Yhwh to Moses: an order to ask Pharaoh to release (שלח) the people, and an announcement of the plague to come;
- b. Discourse of Yhwh to Moses (and Aaron): an order to carry out the plague;
- c. Realization of the plague;
- d. Intervention of the magicians;
- e. Pharaoh summoning Moses (and Aaron): discourse of Pharaoh with an imperative ('pray/serve Yhwh');
- f. Result: obstinacy/Pharaoh hardens his heart.

The distribution of these elements allows for a regrouping of the plagues into three series of three (I: 1, 2, 3; II: 4, 5, 6; III: 7, 8, 9),²⁶ the tenth

23. Cf. W.H. Schmidt, *Die zehn Gebote im Rahmen alttestamentlicher Ethik* (Erträge der Forschung, 281; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1993), pp. 82-85.

24. Let us recall that the number ten comes from a certain synchronic reading, but nowhere does that number appear in the text.

25. The end of the last plague is not easy to determine—a difficulty which favours the thesis that the narrative has been elaborated on the basis of the story of the massacre of the Egyptian firstborn in Exod. 12.

26. This idea is already present in Rashbam (eleventh and twelfth centuries); see on

catastrophe standing apart. The 'a' element (i.e. divine discourse about the announced plague) is present in the first two plagues of each triad but missing from the third; in plagues 1, 4 and 7, there is insistence on the urgency of the announcement (בְּבִקְרָה); and plagues 2, 5 and 8 all have the imperative 'go to Pharaoh'. This composition shows that the final redactor of the book of Exodus understood the pericope 6.28–7.13 as a prelude to the plagues. But in fact, when one looks at the structure of this unit, one realizes that it is built in a fashion very comparable to other episodes in Exod. 7–12 (only the 'a' element differs). Its place outside the cycle comes from a preconception of Exod. 7–12 as a cycle of plagues and divine punishments. But this reading does justice to only some of the units assembled in this corpus—namely, the pericopes of Deuteronomistic origin: as a matter of fact there exists a certain consensus among scholars on Exodus 7–12 about distinguishing between priestly texts and non-priestly ones that have similarities with the Deuteronomistic school.²⁷

The Deuteronomists seem to have written an account in which there were seven plagues,²⁸ an observation supported by Pss. 78.44–51 and 105.28–38 since both allude to a cycle of seven plagues. As J. Van Seters has notably demonstrated, this is a literary creation and not 'ancient tradition'. The author got his inspiration from the expression 'signs and prodigies', which he uses to sum up the exile out of Egypt and the catastrophes he has adapted from Assyrian vassal treaties (cf. Deut. 28.21–68).²⁹ According to the D composition, the manifestations of Yhwh in Exod. 7–12 are to be understood as divine punishments caused by the obstinacy of Pharaoh (cf. the use of the roots נָגַע or נָגַף in 7.27 [D]; 11.1 [D³⁰]; 12.13–23 [D]). The D composition draws a parallel between the destruction of Judah and the destruction of Egypt: catastrophe came to Judah because Israel did not

this J. Kegler, 'Zur Komposition und Theologie der Plagenzählungen', in E. Blum (ed.), *Die hebräische Bibel und ihre zweifache Nachgeschichte* (Festschrift R. Rendtorff; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1990), pp. 55–74.

27. For the book of Exodus, I follow the approach of E. Blum, *Studien zur Komposition des Pentateuch* (BZAW, 189; Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1990); cf. also W. Johnstone, *Exodus* (OTG; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990).

28. See, for instance, the study by F. Kohata, *Jahwist und Priesterschrift in Exodus 3–14* (BZAW, 166; Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1986); however, she still attributes this version to a Yahwist of the tenth century.

29. J. Van Seters, 'The Plagues of Egypt: Ancient Tradition or Literary Invention?', *ZAW* 98 (1986), pp. 31–39.

30. Following Blum, *Studien zur Komposition des Pentateuch*, pp. 35–36. According to Kohata, *Jahwist*, this verse belongs to the final redaction.

listen, and cataclysm came upon Egypt because Pharaoh did not listen (Exod. 7.16). To this prophetic-deuteronomistic ideology of judgment and punishment, P opposes a more irenic, indeed humorous, version of the manifestations of Yhwh to the nations. Priestly texts in Exod. 7–12 never mention plagues, but talk instead of signs and prodigies (7.3; 11.9). These are *Demonstrationswunder*—that is, miracles which seek to demonstrate Yhwh's power.³¹ In contrast to Deuteronomistic ideology, the Priestly school is not concerned with the judgment of Israel and the nations (a concern expressed, e.g., in the theology of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart), but rather with the place and specificity of Israel among the nations. This is why the Priestly school transforms the Deuteronomistic narrative of the plagues into a contest of magicians.³²

5. Competing Magicians

The Priestly version of the miracles in Egypt has five episodes, of which 7.1–13, often understood as a prologue on the level of a synchronic reading, is the first.³³ In each of these five scenes, Moses and Aaron come to compete with the magicians of Egypt.

After Aaron's stick has been transformed into a 'dragon', Pharaoh sends for the wisemen (חֲכָמִים) and the sorcerers (מְכַשְפִּים, cf. Deut. 18.10). These two categories of specialists are called חֲרָטְמִים later on (Exod. 7.11). This word,³⁴ which occurs repeatedly in the five episodes (7.22; 8.3, 14–15; 9.11), is usually translated as 'magician' and is probably a term borrowed from Egyptian, designating a priest of high rank and in charge of reading ritual instructions (Redford: 'chief lector priest'³⁵). Aaron and the

31. H.-C. Schmitt, 'Tradition der Prophetenbücher in den Schichten der Plagenzählung Ex 7,1–11,10', in V. Fritz et al. (eds.), *Prophet und Prophetenbuch* (Festschrift O. Kaiser; BZAW, 185; Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1989), pp. 196–216 (203).

32. As argued by O.H. Steck, *Der Abschluss der Prophetie im Alten Testament: Ein Versuch zur Frage der Vorgeschichte des Kanons* (Biblich-theologische Studien, 17; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1991), p. 17, the P document was conceived as an anti-Deuteronomist work.

33. Belonging then to P, *grosso modo*, 7.19–22*; 8.1–3, 11*; 12–15; 9.8–12. There is an astonishing unanimity on this matter among exegetes.

34. Translated by LXX as ἐπασιδός, which may be a neologism; cf. J. Lust et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint, Part I* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1992), p. 165.

35. D.B. Redford, *A Study of the Biblical Story of Joseph (Genesis 37–50)*, (VTSup, 20; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1970), p. 203.

חֲרָטָמִים thus have a double identity: they are both priests and 'magicians'. What makes them differ is the origin of their knowledge: Egyptian magicians base their performance on occult sciences (חֲרָטָמִים), cf. 7.11, 22; 8.3, 14³⁶), whereas Aaron can rely on Yhwh's word as transmitted by Moses (7.9, 15; 8.1, 12). The author clearly wants to show that Aaron holds the best cards from the first round on, since his stick will eat up that of the magicians (7.13). All the same, Pharaoh's sorcerers are taken seriously, since the second and third confrontations end in a draw. Just like Moses and Aaron, they succeed in transforming water into blood (7.22) and have the frogs come up (8.2). This means that the author takes the magical capacities of the Egyptians seriously and that, for him, magic as such is no problem.³⁷ Indeed, what he wants to prove is that the magic of God's word is more effective than the magic of the Egyptians.

So, in the fourth plague, the magicians of Egypt are unable to imitate Aaron's magical gesture—namely, the transformation of dust into mosquitoes (Exod. 8.13-14). They acknowledge Moses and Aaron's (and their God's) superiority when they declare to Pharaoh, 'This is the finger of God [*elohim*]' (8.15). This expression, attested in Egyptian magical formulas, undoubtedly points to Aaron's stick,³⁸ whose superiority the sorcerers acknowledge. They do not use the tetragrammaton but rather the more universal name *elohim* used by P in reference to pre-Mosaic settings and the gods of other peoples. As in the Joseph novel (Gen. 37-50), *elohim* is the word that allows the Hebrews and Egyptians an area of theological agreement. In contrast to Pharaoh (whom Yhwh has hardened), the magicians begin to understand their adversaries' superiority.

The defeat of the Egyptian magicians is finally confirmed in the fifth episode, where they are themselves affected by the ashes of the furnace that Moses and Aaron transform into a vehicle of skin disease (9.10-11). This last episode differs from the preceding ones: it offers no trace of the customary reference (7.11, 22; 8.3, 14) to the occult sciences of the Egyptian

36. These are the only occurrences of the word in the plural in the whole Hebrew Bible.

37. Cf. W.H. Schmidt, 'Magie und Gotteswort: Einsichten und Ausdrucksweisen des Deuteronomiums in der Priesterschrift', in I. Kottsieper *et al.* (eds.), 'Wer ist wie du, HERR, unter den Göttern?' *Studien zur Theologie und Religionsgeschichte Israels* (Festschrift O. Kaiser; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1994), pp. 169-79 (178); the opposition he constructs between magic and word of God stems from his dogmatic presuppositions.

38. So, convincingly, B. Couroyer, 'Le "doigt de Dieu" (Exode, VIII, 15)', *RB* 63 (1956), pp. 481-95.

tian magicians, a conspicuous absence that underlines their incapacity. But there is also a change on the Hebrew side. Contrary to the four previous episodes, this narrative does not open with 'Yhwh told Moses: tell Aaron' (cf. 7.8, 19; 8.1, 12), but with 'Yhwh told Moses and Aaron' (9.8). Here Moses does not transmit the divine order to his brother who will execute it later; both take a direct part in the magical operation, with Moses even playing the most important part, just as if the author wanted to show that it is through the direct involvement of Moses that the Egyptian magicians are finally defeated. Moses, who had more or less stayed out of the first four episodes, is characterized in the end as the one who puts a definitive end to Egyptian magic.

6. Origin and Intention of the Competition Narrative

One of the important debates in discussion of the Pentateuch concerns the status of P. Would it originally be an independent document, or a redaction integrating and editing the composition D? In regard to the cycle of the plagues, J. Van Seters has recently reiterated his arguments in favour of the redactional character of P. He thinks Exod. 7.1-7 is not to be understood solely as an introduction to the episodes of the magicians' competition, but also has been written in view of non-Priestly texts.³⁹ Nevertheless, the competition narrative has a certain unity and consistency, as Blum noted,⁴⁰ and it is thus very possible that P would have included an oral or written tradition in his work.⁴¹ J. Reindl stood up for the thesis that P would have taken up a narrative originating in the Egyptian Diaspora,⁴² which seems to me a very attractive idea. It is certainly not pure coincidence if all the occurrences of the word חֲרָטָמִים outside Exod. 7-9 are found in the Joseph story (Gen. 41.8, 24) and in the narrative part of Daniel (Dan. 1.20; 2.2), that is to say in two diaspora novels. Genesis 41 and Daniel 1-2 have aims comparable to the story of the magicians'

39. J. Van Seters, 'A Contest of Magicians? The Plague Stories in P', in D.P. Wright, D.N. Freedman and A. Hurvitz (eds.), *Pomegranates and Golden Bells: Studies in Biblical, Jewish, and Near Eastern Ritual, Law, and Literature in Honor of Jacob Milgrom* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1995), pp. 569-80.

40. Blum, *Studien zur Komposition des Pentateuch*, pp. 250-52.

41. I do not understand why Blum wants to cut out 7.8-13.

42. J. Reindl, 'Der Finger Gottes und die Macht der Götter: Ein Problem des ägyptischen Diasporajudentums und sein literarischer Niederschlag', in W. Ernst *et al.* (eds.), *Dienst der Vermittlung: Festschrift Priesterseminar Erfurt* (Erfurter Theologische Studien, 37; Leipzig: St Benno, 1977), pp. 49-60.

competition in Exod. 7–9; the reader discovers there that the magical skill of the Jews is superior to that of the specialists in the great cultures (for Joseph and Daniel, it is mainly a matter of oneiromancy). Besides, the author of Exod. 7–9 seems to know quite well a certain popular Egyptian culture.⁴³ Thus, the first episode in Exod. 7.8–13 shows some parallels with a story in Papyrus Westcar, where an Egyptian changes a wax crocodile into a real one by throwing it into the water; when he takes it out of the water, the crocodile turns back to wax.⁴⁴

In this way Exodus 7–12 can be understood as a dialogue with Egyptian culture. The author accepts, and maybe admires, the magical knowledge of the Egyptian priests; but he wants to convince his readers that belief in Yhwh, the only God, can integrate and exceed such knowledge in might.

7. Summary: Moses, a Magician?

Whilst the Deuteronomistic ideology sets 'magical' practices against Yahwistic prophetism (Deut. 18.9–19), the Priestly school merges them by integrating a tradition from the diaspora. The fact that Aaron, priest and magician, is called *nabi* in Exod. 7.1 reveals a strategy in conflict with that of Deut. 18.

Presented with these ideological options, moreover, Rabbinism can be seen to have adopted the stance of the Deuteronomistic school vis-à-vis magic. According to the Mishna (*Sanh.* 7.7) magic is equivalent to idolatry. The *Šabbat* treatise denounces magical remedies as 'the custom of the Amorites' (*Šab.* 6.10). In spite of this condemnation, however, and as Graf reminds us, traditions about Moses as a magician exist in Jewish circles of both Alexandria and Syro-Palestine, as well as in the Graeco-Roman world.⁴⁵ These traditions must be based on a positive appreciation of the magical powers of God's messengers; besides, the Talmud takes this fact into account when it declares that magical practices performed for the benefit of teaching are not included in the prohibitions (*b. Sanh.* 68a). Thanks then to the Priestly strategy of integration, magic (in due service of the Torah!) found a niche within the Pentateuch.

43. M. Görg, *Die Beziehungen zwischen dem Alten Israel und Ägypten: Von den Anfängen bis zum Exil* (Erträge der Forschung, 290; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1997), p. 149.

44. The link with this narrative might explain the use of *נביא* instead of *קוסם*; cf. A. Jirku, *Altorientalischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament* (Hildesheim: Gerstenberg, 1972), p. 83.

45. Graf, *La magie*, pp. 14–16.