

Yuval Harari, *Jewish Magic before the Rise of Kabbalah*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2017. Pp. 552. \$64.99. ISBN: 9780814336304.

Most scholars of Jewish magic—the present reviewer included—are apprehensive of definitions and theory. We know (or think we know) what it is that we wish to research, and how. Delving on questions such as “what is magic” seems superfluous and difficult at the same time. I suspect it is primarily the latter that leads scholars to avoid these questions. Books on the topic usually contain a few remarks on definitions (often in order to avoid criticism about the absence of such), but after these most writers tend to “get down to business,” and discuss the various aspects of the magical materials they are interested in. Theory is mentioned even more sparingly, and rarely consciously employed. Yuval Harari is an exception. His scholarship, from a very early stage, showed a remarkable drive to tackle the challenge that other scholars of Jewish magic do their best to avoid: the theoretical challenge. Harari’s new book is the fruit of years’ work on definitions, theories and methodologies pertaining to Jewish magic, ancient and modern. Broad in scope and size, *Jewish Magic before the Rise of Kabbalah* is a pivotal work for anyone interested in ritual practices, Jewish and non-Jewish, that fall outside the realm of religion (or do they? this is one of the questions that Harari attempts to answer).

The book is aptly divided in two parts, the first of which discusses “Research and Method,” and the second engaging with the actual “Sources.” Without detracting from the value of the latter part, the volume’s greatest innovation lies in the former. Systematically and coherently, the author engages in a survey of different theoretical aspects of Jewish magic, placing it in context: historical, religious, phenomenological. Chapter 1, “Magic and the Study of Religion,” provides a summary of major theories of magic, touching on a great variety of thinkers, from the perennially quoted Edward Taylor and James Frazer to less discussed ones, like Wilhelm Wendt or William Robert Smith.

In Chapter 2, subtitled “The Study of Early Jewish Magic,” Harari zooms in on his main topic, placing it in the theoretical context discussed earlier. He begins with a brief description of magic in the Graeco-Roman world, which, as he correctly points out, “is a constant horizon of reference and comparison for scholars of Jewish magic” (69), moving to review three main aspects of the latter: the rabbinic literature, mysticism (*Hekhalot* and *Merkavah* literature), and the actual Jewish magical texts. Once again, the author does great service to readers interested in a comprehensive historical overview of scholarly trends, from 19th-century pathbreakers such as Gideon Brecher and David Joël to modern trailblazers like Peter Schäfer. The last section in this chapter covers both practical magic texts (Babylonian incantation bowls, amulets) and

magic manuals such as *Sefer ha-Razim* or *Harba de-Moshe*. The survey covers the scholarly approaches to these sources, not their contents, which will be the focus of the second part of the volume.

Chapters 3 and 4 present revised versions of Harari's own pioneering work on the definition of Jewish magic. The former starts from Wittgenstein's "family resemblance" principle and attempts to employ it in order to arrive (closer) to a definition of magic in Judaism. The approach is commendably original but yields no straightforward results. "This course of definition (...) is not a simple one, because it does not provide a clear-cut answer to such questions as, Is *this* magic? (...) But such an answer is also hard to provide to such questions as, Is *this* love? (...) Ultimately, the meaning of these words derives from their use," admits Harari on p. 175. Chapter 4 draws on John Austin's speech act theory, attempting to determine whether Jewish incantations can be viewed as performative utterances. While this theory has been previously employed by scholars to analyze other systems of magic (e.g., the Zande, Dinka, and Navajo), the author reaches an unexpected conclusion, namely that the speech act theory cannot be usefully employed in the context of ancient Jewish magic. The latter, "contrary to illocutionary utterances, was not a means for attaining social change by virtue of social agreements. Rather, it was a technique whose effectiveness was perceived as anchored in objective conditions (...)" (201).

The volume's second part surveys the broad array of sources for the study of Jewish magic. Chapter 5 begins with a review of artifacts—most of which are textual items, whether in the form of metal *lamellae*, Babylonian incantation bowls and skulls, Genizah amulets, or magic gems—and ends with recipes and manuals of magic, many of which also derive from the Cairo Genizah extraordinary trove. The following chapter moves to outsider sources, that is, non-magic literature, and discusses the views found therein about angelology, demonology, and magic. The sources range from Qumranic and pseudepigraphic literature to Maimonidean writings. Lastly, in Chapter 7, particularly useful to a non-expert and student readership, the author skillfully tackles many of the references to magic and related notions, e.g., divination and astrology, found within the rabbinic corpus.

The volume as a whole is well presented; however, having read the Hebrew original version (2010) first,¹ I must admit having found the English volume somewhat lacking. The translator, Batya Stein, clearly made great efforts to convey Harari's flowing but complex style into another language, but the

1 Youval Harari, מוסד, חקר, שיטה, מקורות. ירושלים: מכון בן צבי ומוסד, תש"ע (Jerusalem: Bialek, 2010).

results are not always flawless. Furthermore, the present version is slightly uneven, as if chapters were translated separately and had not undergone a unifying editorial process. One point that should be addressed in future editions, since it comes up repeatedly, is the inconsistent terminology related to magic. The volume moves between “witchcraft,” “sorcery,” and “magic,” often adding between parenthesis the Hebrew term “*kishuf*,” and one is left wondering what, if any, is the difference between them. For instance, on pp. 354-55 we are told that “The rabbis are, in principle, opposed to magic (*kishuf*, *keshafim*),” immediately followed by the assertion “Yet sorcery (*kishuf*) is not precisely defined in the Mishnah.” More attention to such details is desirable in a study that devotes so much thought to exact definitions.

Another difference between the original Hebrew and the English version is the title. The latter, *Jewish Magic before the Rise of Kabbalah*, seems designed with a view to attracting audiences potentially interested in Kabbalah and not being aware of the differences between it and magic. Not only does the term Kabbalah barely appear in the book, but the chronological focus is Late Antiquity and the early Islamic period, while Kabbalah only begins to flourish in the thirteenth century. The original Hebrew title—which could be translated as *Early Jewish Magic: Research, Method, Sources*—would have done the content more justice, even if it had been less appealing both to a scholarly and a non-academic public.

And yet, pursuing a broad appeal may be necessary. Despite the relative rise in research and publications about Jewish magic the topic still suffers from a disadvantage when compared to its polytheistic and even Christian counterparts. Quite a few modern scholars are reticent to admit that there was (and is) such a thing as Jewish magic other than as a negligible occupation of some marginal individuals. Students of Jewish magic are still often faced with a disparaging view of their choice of research and urged to take up a more “serious” line of study. The constantly growing body of primary evidence, including the names of respectable rabbis and community leaders surfacing in amulets and magic booklets (e.g., Masliah ha-Kohen Gaon ben Solomon Gaon), succeeds only in part to ascertain the need for a methodological study of this topic. While it is true that magic has been “rescued from the backyard of Jewish studies and pushed [...] toward the main street” (80), the academic road it needs to travel is still long. And indeed, the volume ends with a desideratum for “a detailed description of early Jewish magic as a cultural system,” one to which most scholars of the topic will surely subscribe. Harari’s work to date has laid some admirable ground for achieving this aim. Meticulous studies like the present volume, particularly its theoretical and methodological considerations, are

essential in ensuring the advancement of this research subject, including mining into its potential contribution to the social and cultural history of Judaism and its relations with other religions.

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