

Mining Angels in Jewish and Coptic Magic Texts

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Introduction

In the Hebrew Bible, New Testament and the Apocrypha the term “angel” appears numerous times, referring to a divine messenger or being. Nonetheless, these corpora only name four such entities: Michael, Gabriel, Raphael and Uriel. From Late Antiquity onwards, however, a massive increment in angelic nomenclature appears in both Judaism and Christianity, primarily in magical and mystical texts (e.g., Olyan 1993; Reed 2020; Tefera and Stuckenbruck 2021). The use, popularity and connections between these angel names remain to be studied in depth. This paper is part of a larger research project that employs digital methods to analyze angelic nomenclature in Jewish magic and the magic of related cultures.

Jewish and Christian magical literature (Aune 1980; Flint 1991; Bohak 2019) abound in references to angels, who are beseeched or adjured to assist in achieving the aim of the magical act. Our paper focuses on angels that appear in magical texts from late-antique and medieval Egypt. Its proposed method, however, can be applied further to other historical contexts.

The corpora

A large amount of texts that may be described as “magical” has survived from late-antique and medieval Egypt, pertaining to Graeco-Roman polytheists, Jews, Christians and Muslims. These texts have been preserved in several corpora: the Greek and Demotic magical papyri (*PGM*) (mostly polytheistic materials), Coptic magical texts (Christian), the Cairo Genizah (Jewish) and early medieval manuscripts (Islamic). While following different religions, the people who produced these texts exchanged and communicated magical knowledge. Our paper explores two of the above corpora: the Cairo Genizah (both published and unpublished manuscripts) and the Coptic manuscripts assembled by Dosoo 2021 (covering Meyer and Smith 1994 and other published manuscripts). A systematic exploration of the webs of magic communication in Egypt across the centuries remains a desideratum (Fodor 1992; Ritner 1995; Bohak 1999; Dieleman 2005; LiDonnici 2007), and the topic of angelology is one step in this direction.

The Cairo Genizah preserved over 2,500 magical and mystical manuscript fragments, ranging in date from Late Antiquity to the modern period (Saar 2019). Cairo Genizah texts comprise Hebrew, Aramaic and Judaeo-Arabic (Arabic written with Hebrew script), and often a combination of the three. Only a few hundred of these manuscripts have been published to date. The second corpus to be discussed here, of Coptic magic, dates from the fourth to the eleventh century (Van der Vliet 2019). Its texts are written in two languages,

Greek and Coptic. Coptic magic displays interesting similarities with Jewish magic preserved in the Cairo Genizah, due to the geographical proximity in which these texts were created.

Aim and method

The project presented here is a first step towards systematically comparing Jewish and Coptic angel names. In Judaism, most angel names consist of a stem followed by the theophoric suffix EL (ל) or YAH (יה), meaning God. Likewise, most angel names found in Coptic magic texts end in EL (-ΗΛ). In both types of texts, however, we occasionally find names that do not fit this pattern, such as Iqas (איקאס), Kananukh (כנאנוך), Atrakh (ατραχ) or Amerbenouth (αμερβενουθ). Our research aim for this short paper is to establish a comparative database of angel names found in Jewish and Coptic magic texts. Employing computational methods, we have mined two corpora: a corpus of Jewish magic texts from the Cairo Genizah assembled by Gideon Bohak and the [Kyprianos-Coptic magic database](#) assembled by Korshi Dosoo. We have extracted from them contextualised information on angel names, as described below.

Establishing a database using an automated workflow involves a number of challenges, which we have met by employing proven, off-the-shelf digital methods and libraries (e.g. Eijnatten/Huijnen 2021). Written in Python script, our code generates word lists in Hebrew, Aramaic and Coptic to identify angel names based on suffixes. To this end we have tokenized the texts and constructed n-grams. In a field that is only just beginning to experiment with digital approaches, the interaction between traditional and digital methods is essential, and for this purpose we have built a tool to automatically generate concordances. These allow us to speed up the process of manually identifying angel names that do not contain the typical suffixes -EL and YAH, but are nonetheless designated as angels based on the context, for instance being part of a larger list of angels. At the same time, we have experimented with transformer and other models for named entity recognition.

One challenge encountered when comparing the angel names in the Cairo Genizah and Coptic corpus is that of transliteration. The Hebrew and the Coptic alphabet do not fully match, and hence the Coptic angel Souriel (σοϣρηλ) could correspond to the Hebrew Tzuriel (צוריאל), Suriel (סוריאל), or Śuriel (שוריאל), which have different roots and meanings.

Results

Our results indicate a significant similarity in the frequency of the archangel names (Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, etc.) in both corpora. Other angels appear just once or twice, but are attested in both corpora, e.g. 'Azael (αζαηλ / עזאל). However, some angel names are only attested in one of the two traditions, for example Raḥmiel (רהמיאל) or Metatron (מתטרון) never appear in the Coptic magic corpus, despite being relatively popular in the Genizah. Similarly, the angel Orphamiel, who is fairly popular in Coptic magic, never appears in the

Genizah (which does mention, however, a similar angel, Orphaniel).

A systematic comparison of angelic nomenclature can shed new light on cultural contacts and transmission between Jews and Christians in late-antique and early medieval Egypt. It appears that crossing the borders that separate the Jewish and Coptic religious traditions, practitioners of magic shared some angel names and attributes, while maintaining their own distinctive cultural features.

| Coptic corpus | freq (Coptic) | Genizah corpus | freq (Genizah) |
|---------------|---------------|----------------|----------------|
| Gabriel | 35 | Gabriel | 32 |
| Michael | 21 | Michael | 30 |
| Raphael | 17 | Ḥasdiel | 14 |
| Suriel | 10 | Şuriel | 13 |
| Anael | 8 | Raphael | 13 |
| Uriel | 7 | Meṭaṭron | 13 |
| Emmanuel | 3 | Raḥmiel | 12 |
| Mishael | 3 | Samael | 9 |
| Anazanael | 2 | Nuriel | 9 |
| Setekiel | 2 | Şadqiel | 7 |
| Azael | 2 | Kavšiel | 6 |
| Eremiel | 2 | Ḥeniel | 6 |
| Neremiel | 2 | Barqiel | 5 |
| Rakuel | 2 | ʿAnaniel | 5 |
| Asalthiel | 2 | Paspua | 4 |

The table shows the 15 most popular angel names in relation to Coptic and Genizah corpora. While there are clear differences, it is also evident that angels like Gabriel, Michael, Raphael and Suriel are the more popular.

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