

*Was God a Magician? Sefer Yeşira and Jewish Magic **

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This paper is an attempt to take a little further some of the ideas which I expressed in my article entitled 'The Temple at the Centre of the Universe', published in *JJS* in 1986.¹ In that article I argued that *Sefer Yeşira* (The Book of Creation)² deliberately substitutes a new set of symbols in order to replace what had hitherto been the central symbol of Judaism—the Temple in Jerusalem. Where earlier forms of Judaism had made the Temple the linchpin in a symbolic structure which connected together the Jewish people, the Land of Israel and the God of Israel, *Sefer Yeşira* substituted the Hebrew language. Earlier and, of course also, other forms of Judaism contemporary with *SY*, stressed God's role in history and revelation, but the author of this text is interested solely in how God created the world by using the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. He never mentions Moses or his Torah, has no interest in ethics or apparently in the national dimension of Judaism, and hardly ever quotes Scripture.³ His is a Judaism with no historical dimension.

At first sight, such a text, which was produced in the same period when the major works of rabbinic Judaism were being created, seems to be rather out of place. The mystery deepens when we consider that this short work of about 2,000 words became such a fundamental text of the Kabbala. Over sixty commentaries on it are known, starting from that produced in the tenth century by the most prominent Jewish scholar of the time, Saadya Gaon.⁴ The central role of *SY* in Judaism is epitomised for me by one small 14th century manuscript which I came across in the British Library.⁵ In about forty folios it contains the text of the two main recensions of *SY* plus a commentary on it. It is small enough to fit in a pocket and the owners' notes on the flyleaf indicate that it had travelled all over Europe in the late Middle Ages. The problem is to try and understand how such a text, which

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¹ *JJS* 37 (1986), pp. 176–182.

² I. Gruenwald, 'A Preliminary Critical Edition of Sefer Yezira', *Israeli Oriental Studies I* (1971), pp. 132–177.

³ See my article, 'Some Observations on Sefer Yesira: (1) Its Use of Scripture', *JJS* 35 (1984), pp. 164–84.

⁴ Saadya b. Yusuf al-Faiyumi, *Commentaire sur le Sefer Yesira ou livre de la création*, ed. Mayer Lambert (Paris, 1891); Y. Kafach, *Sefer Yeşira im Perush ha-Gaon Rabbenu Saadya* (Jerusalem, 1972).

⁵ British Library, Or. 6577.

omits most of the supposedly basic tenets of rabbinic Judaism, could have played such a role in sustaining Jewish faith in the endless depressing centuries which followed the loss of the Temple in 70 C.E.

In the above mentioned article I argued that one reason for the success of *SY* is that it adopted as its central symbol an exclusively Jewish possession: the Hebrew language, something which was entirely outwith the vicissitudes of history. Hebrew, the language with which the world was created, was one thing, at least, that the Gentiles could never take away from the Jews. On the basis of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet the author created a symbolic system which bound together in the closest unity the spheres of the Universe, Time and Mankind. The latter has a central role because in its very essence, humanity is a microcosm of the universe. But, of course, the only people who know this are Jews, because all the clues to humanity's real status are hidden in the Hebrew language.

The potential function of this symbolic system as a psychological compensation for Jewish powerlessness in diaspora conditions is, I think, reasonably clear. On any rational understanding of the phenomenon of magic, it likewise functions as a psychological compensation for human weakness in the face of a hostile physical and often social environment. The Jews, as we all know, were renowned in antiquity for their prowess at magic. Recent scholarship, aided by some significant discoveries among the DSS and in the Cairo Geniza, has been showing how early and how widespread were magical practices and beliefs amongst all types of Jews. Philip Alexander has recently supplied us with a comprehensive survey of the Jewish magical texts and materials known from the Talmudic period.⁶ In the paper which he read last July to the British Association for Jewish Studies he argued that there is now sufficient of this material available to challenge prevailing views about the nature of Judaism at this time. It turns out to be a good deal less monolithic, and less rabbinic, than scholars have thought. One of these magical texts, *Sefer Ha-Razim* (The Book of Secrets),⁷ which probably dates from the 4th century C.E., even contains invocations to Aphrodite, Helios and Hermes. The mid-fourth century is probably close to the date of origin of *Sefer Yesira*. Hence I would like to explore now the possibility that another reason for the success of *SY* could be that its principal image of God is as a magician.

There are two principal images of God in *Sefer Yesira*: the Great Artist and the Great Magician. The image of God as an artist is vividly presented by the author's choice of vocabulary when describing creation. He deliberately eschews the characteristic vocabulary of Genesis 1 and 2, the verbs *bara'* (create) and *asah* (make), and chooses instead *haqaaq* (carve out),

⁶ In Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ [= HJP]*, rev. ed. by G. Vermes et al., vol. III.1 (Edinburgh, 1986), pp. 342-379.

⁷ Ed. M. Margaliot (1966), translation by Michael A. Morgan (Scholars Press, Chico, California, 1983).

haşav (engrave), *yaşar* (form), and *şar* (create); you will need no reminding that the verb *şar* is the root of the noun *şayyar* (artist). This vocabulary goes hand in hand with a view of creation which *Genesis Rabba* regards as heretical:

Whoever comes to say that this world was created out of *tohu* and *bohu* does he not impair (God's glory)? (Gen.R. 1:5)

That is precisely the view of creation in *Sefer Yeşira*:

He formed (*yaşar*) from *tohu* something and made it with fire and it exists (SY 20)

The image of God as the Great Artist has, of course, a long history in Jewish and Israelite thought and ultimately goes back to ancient Mesopotamia. It lies behind Genesis 2:7:

Then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life.

Here God functions like the Sumerian goddess Mami who created mankind from pieces of clay.⁸ Theologians do not much like this image of God because it conflicts with the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. The artist works with pre-existing materials! Theologians prefer Genesis 1. But that brings me to the second image of God in *Sefer Yeşira*.

The image of God as the Great Magician appears throughout SY. God creates the world by manipulating the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, using a method that is not very clear!

Twenty-two letters: he carved them out, he hewed them, he weighed them and exchanged them, he combined them and formed with them the life of all creation and the life of all that would be formed (SY 19)

The clearest image of God as a magician comes in paragraph 15:

Five—he sealed above. He chose three simple letters and fixed them in his great name—YHW. And he sealed with them the six edges (of the universe), and turned upwards and sealed it with YHW.

Six—he sealed below. He turned downwards and sealed it with YWH.

Seven—he sealed the east. He turned in front and sealed it with HYW.

Eight—he sealed the west. He turned behind and sealed it with HWY.

Nine—he sealed the south. He turned to his right and sealed it with WYH.

Ten—he sealed the north. He turned to his left and sealed it with WHY.

Here we have God standing in the middle of what was to become the universe and sealing its boundaries with the six possible combinations of the three constituent letters of the divine name YHWH. The magical background to this paragraph is not difficult to trace. It lies in the very popular custom of writing powerful magical names on incantation bowls and

⁸ Cf. S. G. F. Brandon, *Creation Legends of the Ancient Near East* (London, 1963), p. 88.

amulets and burying them in the ground around one's house. As Alexander says:

A common practice appears to have been to bury a bowl at each corner of the house in order to establish a protective cordon around it.⁹

That is precisely what God is doing according to *SY* 15—establishing a protective cordon around the universe. In the rather tart words of S. G. F. Brandon, 'what was practised by men was practised even more effectively by the gods'.¹⁰ What God is protecting it from becomes clear when we compare verses 2–3 of the Prayer of Manasseh, a text which dates from some time before the 3rd century C.E.¹¹

Thou who hast made heaven and earth with all their order;
Who hast shackled the sea by thy word of command,
Who hast confined the deep and sealed it with thy terrible and glorious name.

There is no more powerful a magic force than that contained in the 'terrible and glorious name', and there is no more powerful a threat than the great 'deep', the symbol of cosmic and social chaos in the OT from Genesis 1:2 onwards. The *Prayer of Manasseh* shows us that behind *SY* 15 is the constant theme that accompanies creation language throughout the OT: God's conquest of the chaos waters at the time of creation and his continuing ability to keep at bay that threatening chaos which is somehow never properly destroyed:

He laid the earth on its foundation,
so that it should never be shaken.
Thou didst cover it with the deep as with a garment;
the waters stood above the mountains.
At thy rebuke they fled;
at the sound of thy thunder they took to flight.
The mountains rose, the valleys sank down
to the place which thou didst appoint for them.
Thou didst set a bound which they should not pass,
so that they might not again cover the earth.

(Psalm 104:5–9)

⁹ *HJP* III.1, p. 353.

¹⁰ *op. cit.*, p. 37.

¹¹ *HJP* III.2, p. 371. For a (perhaps earlier) parallel see I Enoch 69:18 f. For the original context in which this name/oath operated (no longer recognisable in *SY*) see Margaret Barker, *The Older Testament* (London, 1987), p. 42: 'This great oath can only be understood in the light of the magical tradition which it most closely resembles, where the oath is the means of binding the fallen spirits who operate through natural phenomena, in order to make them serve a higher purpose.' Despite the toning down of the mythological background in *SY* it is nonetheless closer to this earlier tradition than the one which appears in III Enoch. See my 'Sefer Yesira and the Hekhalot Literature', *Proceedings of the First International Conference on the History of Jewish Mysticism* (Jerusalem, 1987), p. 75.

In Old Testament times it seemed to be easier for God to control this threatening chaos. After 70 and the loss of the Temple and a proper national life, more desperate measures were called for. God had to resort to magic, as David discovered when he came to build the Temple:

When David came to dig the foundations of the temple he dug fifteen hundred cubits and did not reach the Deep (*Tehom*). At length he came upon a potsherd and wished to raise it. (The potsherd) said to him, 'You cannot (lift me up).' 'Why?' he asked. 'Because I am here to suppress the Deep (*Tehom*).' (replied the potsherd). 'And since when have you been here?' asked (David). 'Since that hour when the Merciful One made his voice to be heard on Sinai (saying): "I am the Lord your God"'. Then the earth shuddered and began to subside, and I am here placed to suppress the Deep (*Tehom*).'

(ySan. 29a)¹²

What was written on the potsherd we only discover when we turn to the parallel version in the Babylonian Talmud:

When David dug the Pits, the Deep (*Tehom*) arose and threatened to submerge the world. 'Is there anyone', David enquired, 'who knows whether it is permitted to inscribe the Ineffable Name upon a sherd, and cast it into the Deep that its waves should subside?' [Ahitophel produces a convincing argument] ... '[David] thereupon inscribed the Name upon a sherd and cast it into the Deep and it subsided sixteen thousand cubits.'

(bSukka 53a-b)

The Babylonian Talmud ascribed this magical act to David; the Jerusalem Talmud somewhat coyly does not tell us who did it. Certainly not David, because he found the potent potsherd when he was digging the foundations of the Temple. Since the potsherd performs the function which the OT and the *Prayer of Manasseh* ascribed to God, the implication of who put it there is pretty clear. In line with a standard tendency in rabbinic Judaism,¹³ the time when the chaos was suppressed is displaced in the Jerusalem Talmud from creation to Sinai. The *Prayer of Manasseh* and *SY* no doubt preserve the original time of the action. As we shall see, in rabbinic Judaism the Torah suppresses the chaos of the world outside Judaism, whereas in *SY* God the Magician did it at the time of creation.

The background of the potsherd story in Jewish magic of the talmudic period has been ably traced by Daniel Sperber in his article 'On Sealing the Abysses', so I will not pursue it further here. For my purposes the story is useful, not only for explaining the background of *SY* 15 but also because it shows the human/divine analogy at work. What people do to protect their homes from evil forces, God must have done to protect his universe from the threat of chaos.

¹² Translation from D. Sperber, 'On Sealing the Abysses', *JSS* 11 (1966), p. 168 f.

¹³ For the rabbinic transference of the Fall to Sinai see my article, 'The Fall, Freewill and Human Responsibility in Rabbinic Judaism', *SJT* 37 (1984), pp. 13-22.

The potsherd story is also significant because it gives us the location where the threat of the emergence of chaos is greatest: below the site of the Temple, the pre-eminent symbol of cosmic order. Now I have argued in my article 'The Temple at the Centre of the Universe' that it is precisely on the Temple site (the centre of the universe) that God is standing in SY 15. This fact throws light on an obscure, and hitherto unexplained passage, in the fourth century Gnostic work, the *Pistis Sophia*:

Now it happened when they crucified our Lord Jesus, he rose from the dead on the third day. His disciples gathered to him, saying: 'Our Lord, have compassion on us, for we have left father and mother and the whole world behind us, and we have followed thee.'

Then Jesus stood with his disciples beside the water of the ocean and pronounced this prayer, saying: 'Hear me, my Father, thou father of all fatherhoods, thou infinite Light: *αειουω. ιαω. αωι. ωια. ...*' [various magical formulae follow, some of them familiar from the Greek magical papyri and the Jewish Hekhalot texts. The passage continues:]

As Jesus was saying these things however, Thomas, Andrew, James and Simon the Canaanite were in the west, with their faces turned to the east. But Philip and Bartholomew were in the south, (with their faces) turned to the north. The rest of the disciples and women disciples however were standing behind Jesus. *But Jesus was standing before the altar.*

And Jesus called out as he turned to the four corners of the world with his disciples, and they were all clothed in linen garments, and he said to them: *ιαω. ιαω. ιαω.* This is its interpretation: iota, because the All came forth; alpha, because it will return again; omega, because the completion of all completions will happen.¹⁴

So far we seem to have here a kind of magical seance involving Jesus and his disciples, with some of the disciples symbolically placed at the four points of the compass while Jesus stands beside the altar and proclaims a prayer which, though in Greek, contains three of the permutations of the divine name which appear in SY 15: *ιαω* = YHW, *αωι* = HWY, *ωια* = WYH. YHWH, in its Greek form *ιαω*, is frequently found in the Greek magical papyri; in fact, only in this literature have I found all six of the permutations of YHWH as in SY 15.¹⁵ Undoubtedly, that is where the author of the *Pistis Sophia* got it from. But what is Jesus doing standing before the altar?

Where they all are becomes clear a little later on in the passage. For what follows is a vision of chaos:

In that moment however all the heavens came to the west, with all the aeons and the sphere and their archons and all their powers. They all ran to the west to the left of the disk of the sun and the disc of the moon. But the disk of the sun was a great dragon whose tail was in its mouth, and it carried seven powers of the left ... And the whole world and the mountains and the seas all

¹⁴ *Pistis Sophia* IV.136, text ed. C. Schmidt, trans. Violet Macdermot (Nag Hammadi Studies, IX) (Leiden, 1978).

¹⁵ See *PGM* III.570-5, IV.1040, 1045, VII.309 f.

fled to the west. And Jesus with his disciples remained *in the Midst* in an airy place on the paths of the way of the Midst which is below the sphere ...

So when the illusionary framework of cosmic order is removed, Jesus and his disciples find themselves in the middle of the cosmos observing the battle between the forces of order and chaos, the outcome of which Jesus explains to them. The parallels with *SY* 15 are too close to be coincidental:

- (i) The setting in the middle of the cosmos, surrounded by the four points of the compass, and before the altar (of the Temple?)
- (ii) The recitation of the permutations of the divine name YHWH at the point where the battle between order and chaos takes place.

I could diverge at this point and review the lengthy discussions of the Jewish elements within Gnosticism,¹⁶ but I will not. Suffice it to say that here, in the Christian Gnostic work *Pistis Sophia*, Jesus the Magician replaces God the Magician as we see him at work in *SY*. *SY* throws light on some of the elements which have gone into making the *Pistis Sophia*. *Pistis Sophia* confirms the magical background of *SY*. I should add that there are some other interesting parallels between *SY* and *Pistis Sophia*, particularly in the area of numerology.

In making this case for the magical background of *SY* I have concentrated so far on one paragraph. I could easily strengthen the case by referring to the precise parallels between the symbolical use of the alphabet in *SY* and in the system of the second century Valentinian Gnostic, Marcos. The one point that the Church father, Irenaeus, (our major source of information about Marcos), wants to prove is the spurious nature of Marcos' claims to be a great magician.¹⁷ One might be tempted to discount a lot of what Irenaeus says about Marcos' magical ability as the normal currency of exchanges between 'orthodox' and 'heretical' Christians, were it not for all the information we have on the tie up between speculation on the letters of the alphabet and magical practices.

Irenaeus accuses Marcos of the standard repertoire of magical practices from preparing love philtres to having a familiar spirit. None of this kind of 'common or garden' magic appears in *SY*, in contrast to what is present in *Sefer Ha-Razim* and not infrequently also in the Hekhalot books.¹⁸ What then was the attraction to our author and his readers of the image of God as the Great Magician?

One obvious attraction is apparent in the links which I have traced between *SY* 15 and the creation traditions of the OT. Both offer the reassurance that there is a God who has carved out of chaos an ordered space in which human life is possible. His constant presence is necessary in

¹⁶ For a methodological survey see P. Alexander, 'Comparing Merkavah Mysticism and Gnosticism: An Essay in Method', *JJS* 35 (1984), pp. 1-18.

¹⁷ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, I.13-22.

¹⁸ See Alexander in *HJP* III.1, pp. 361-4.

order to keep those ever threatening forces of disorder at bay. After 70 they seemed overwhelmingly dangerous. How close chaos lay to the surface is revealed by the potsherd story: the primitive deep lay just below the site of the Temple, the centre of the ordered universe and but for the potent potsherd it would have overwhelmed it. The loss of the Temple tore apart the union of heaven and earth, God and the Temple, Yahweh and Israel, and shattered the paradigm on which all Jewish groups had structured their belief systems. How to restore or replace the paradigm? *SY* does it, as we have seen, by building on the one Jewish possession that the Romans could not take away: their language. The Hebrew language replaces the Temple as the key to the unity of man, God, and the universe. The Temple itself recedes into pure symbolism; it represents the image of God's presence at the centre of the universe. The Hebrew language, however, functions on both levels—as a real medium of communication, a concrete earthly reality, and also as an infinitely elastic symbol of that harmony which it is the author's intention to reassert.

But most of this could also be said of the central thrust of rabbinic Judaism which, as has often been observed, enabled Judaism to survive by substituting words/language for the concrete symbols of nationhood. As in *SY*, so in the Mishnah there is no historical dimension at all. Both texts are situated in an ideal realm outside history. They tell us how things really are if we shut our eyes to observable historical reality. For the latter is either illusory or unimportant. But there is one crucial difference between the sages of the Mishnah and the authors of *SY* and the other Jewish mystical and magical texts. The authors of the rabbinic texts used real Hebrew words in order to create the mental world inside which for countless centuries Jews would seal themselves off from the harsh reality of a hostile gentile environment.¹⁹ *SY*, by contrast, uses meaningless combinations of Hebrew words to seal out its vision of chaos and create the ordered universe. Not even the power of language is sufficient to create order out of chaos; the chaos has to be controlled by chaotic language. The meaningless permutations of the divine name are more powerful for our author than the simple name YHWH which suffices for the *Prayer of Manasseh* and for the rabbis who concocted the story of the potent potsherd. That for me is the greatest paradox of these Jewish texts like *SY* and the Hekhalot texts: the greatest

¹⁹ For the power of this creation symbolism in rabbinic Judaism as late as 1865 see the appeal by Rabbi David Moses Joseph of Krynki for funds to rebuild the Volozhin Yeshivah:

I was familiar with the ways of the world and I noted that before our rabbi [Haim ben Isaac] founded the 'house of God' [the Volozhin Yeshivah in 1803] the world was *empty*, literally *without form*; it was *void*, for even the term *yeshivah* was unknown, let alone what activities took place in one.

(From *The Jew in the Modern World*, ed. P. Mendes-Flohr and J. Reinharz, Oxford, 1980, p. 316)

Outside the world of the Yeshivah and its study of the Torah, the world is as it was in Genesis 1:2 'without form and void' (*tohu wa-bohu*). Only within the realm of words (the Torah) is there any ordered universe.

power, magical power, lies not in the normal language with which we create our social reality and make sense of our chaotic universe, but in meaningless combinations of letters, strange formulae constructed by jumbling up several languages together. The existential crisis seems to be too great to be controlled by ordinary language. The Jews to whom these texts appealed survived by recreating their God in the image of the only potent power left to them by the Romans: magic.

But there is an even greater attraction for some Jews in the image of God as the Great Magician than simply updating the OT theme of his control of chaos. Genesis 1 tells us that God created the world by simply uttering Hebrew words—‘and God said, *yehi ’or* (let there be light), *vayehi ’or* (and there was light) [Gen. 1:3]’. A favourite rabbinic title for God is *mishe-’amar vehayah ha’olam* (He who spoke and the world came into being). The essentially magical background to this conception of creation has been traced out by S. G. F. Brandon in his *Creation Legends of the Ancient Near East*,²⁰ and I do not propose to develop this here. What I would like to do is to relate this to an aspect of Judaism which has puzzled students of mysticism, and which becomes an acute problem when we consider that *SY* was a central text of the Kabbala. For what is missing in *SY* and in nearly all Jewish mystical literature is any mention of an experience of mystical unity with God. In *SY*, and not infrequently in other texts which we assign to the mystical trend in Judaism, there is no reference to any kind of spiritual experience. But scholars of Judaism persist in calling this literature mystical. One explanation that is often offered for this strange omission is that the stern monotheism of Judaism created such an absolute barrier between divinity and humanity that any thought of union between the two was inconceivable. A well known example is Scholem’s statement that ‘the Creator and His creature remain apart, and nowhere is an attempt made to bridge the gulf between them or to blur the distinction’.²¹ My own view is that this concept of ‘the stern monotheism’ of Judaism owes more to theological apologetics than to historical reality. I see the explanation for this apparent absence of the spiritual dimension in Jewish mysticism as lying elsewhere than in the exalted realms of theological dogma.

Let us look again at *SY*. For a Jewish text of the rabbinic period, it is really rather curious. Where does the author get his information from? For a start, he does not get it from biblical interpretation.²² Nor, like so many

²⁰ pp. 37 ff., 98, 150.

²¹ *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (1955), p. 56. For a similar, though perhaps too cautious, statement see Philip Alexander, *Textual Sources for the Study of Judaism* (1984), p. 27 f.: ‘Judaism is profoundly conscious of the “otherness of God”, of the ontological gap which divides man from his creator. As a result the Jewish mystics shrink from explicitly describing the climax of their mystical experiences as absorption into God, even when, in effect, such absorption and union appear to take place.’

²² See my ‘Some Observations on Sefer Yesira: (1) Its use of Scripture’, *JJS* 35 (1984), pp. 164–84.

of the apocalypstists and hekhalot mystics, does he rely upon information provided by an angelic interpreter. What is more, the work is not pseudepigraphic. The author does not claim to be simply passing on the work of some ancient sage like Enoch. What he does is simply to tell us how things were and are, how God created the world and how the structure of the Hebrew alphabet enables us to make sense of it. Observe the syntax of the final paragraph of the text.

When Abraham our father came, and looked, and saw, and investigated, and understood, and carved, and combined, and hewed, and pondered, and succeeded, the Lord of all was revealed to him. (SY 61)

It is not that the Lord of all reveals to Abraham the secrets of creation, but that when Abraham has worked these out for himself, *then* God is revealed to him. What is more, the very verbs which describe Abraham's activity here are those used earlier in the text for God's creative work ('carved', 'combined', 'hewed'). Abraham functions like a magician who by his knowledge of the correct formulas can compel the gods to appear and do his bidding. Implicit behind the very literary form of *SY* is the claim that the author knows what God knows. He knows the techniques used by God to create the world. The exalted status given to humankind, the microcosmic image of the universe (the macrocosm), is the real secret of the success of *SY*. What *SY*, and later on the Kabbala, offers Jews is the opportunity to 'think God's thoughts after him', and hence in a real sense to experience imaginatively what it is like to be God. Herein lies the appeal of this literature to the mystic temperament. It offers the ultimate psychological compensation, a thrilling experience which enables people to deny historical reality, to shut out the numerous forces which humans cannot control and which constantly batter our view of our importance in the scheme of things.

This indirect method of claiming to know what God knows is not dissimilar to the techniques by which biblical prose works. As Robert Alter points out:

The narrators of the biblical stories are of course 'omniscient', and that theological term transferred to narrative technique has special justification in their case, for the biblical narrator is presumed to know, quite literally, what God knows ... It is a dazzling epistemological trick done with narrative mirrors: despite anthropomorphism, the whole spectrum of biblical thought presupposes an absolute cleavage between man and God; man cannot become God and God (in contrast to later Christian developments) cannot become man; and yet the self-effacing figures who narrate the biblical tales, by a tacit convention in which no attention is paid to their limited human status, can adopt the all-knowing, unflinching perspective of God.²³

Alter suffers here, to some extent, from the 'theological disease' discernible in the extract quoted earlier from Scholem's *Major Trends*, but his main

²³ *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (1981), p. 157.

point is clearly valid and has been followed up by subsequent students of biblical narrative style.²⁴

Magicians contemporary with the author of *SY* but living outside the boundaries of the Jewish community could afford to be less cautious or indirect about the extent of their claims to divine power. The Greek Magical Papyri, discovered in Egypt, are a mine of information on the kind of environment in which Jewish magicians operated. The claim of the compilers of this material to divine power and status is open and above board. Take this excerpt from the *Eighth Book of Moses*²⁵ (note the title!):

You, lord of life, King of the heavens and the earth and all things living in them ... Your name and your spirit rest upon the good. Come into my mind and my understanding for all the time of my life and accomplish for me all the desires of my soul.

For you are I, and I, you. Whatever I say must happen, for I have your name as a unique phylactery in my heart, and no flesh, although moved, will overpower me; no spirit will stand against me—neither daimon nor visitation nor any other of the evil beings of Hades because of your name, which I have in my soul and invoke.

Even more striking is the following 'spell for Helios' supposed to be recited by the magician:

I am he on the two cherubim, at the middle of the cosmos, between heaven and earth, light and darkness, night and day, rivers and sea. Appear to me, archangel of god, set in authority by the One and Only Himself.²⁶

There cannot be much doubt about who 'he on the two cherubim' is!

The Jewish version of these extravagant claims is to be found in a theme which was integral to the mystical tradition right from its inception, namely, the apotheosis of the wise man. At the heart of the Enoch tradition lies the myth of Enoch's translation to heaven to become something much more than a man. Already in Jubilees 4:23 he has become the heavenly scribe, the equivalent of the Babylonian god Nabu. In I Enoch 71 he becomes the Son of Man, who is clearly number two in the heavenly hierarchy (see I Enoch 39:6 f.). II Enoch gives us a striking description of his apotheosis into a divine being (II Enoch 22:8–10). In III Enoch he becomes Metatron, the 'little YHWH' (III Enoch 12:5, 48C:7, 48D:1), a figure whom Elisha ben Abuyah could mistake for God himself (b.Hag. 15a, III Enoch 16). For a recent and, I think, convincing attempt to trace this tradition back to certain conceptions of the semi-divine status of the pre-exilic Israelite kings, I would refer you to a most important book by Margaret Barker, *The Older Testament* (London, 1987).

²⁴ See Richard Nelson, 'The Anatomy of the Book of Kings', *JSOT* 40 (1988), p. 45.

²⁵ *PGM* XIII.785–800, trans. Hans Dieter Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation* (Chicago and London, 1986), pp. 190 f.

²⁶ *PGM* XIII.355–8.

³² The Munich Ms of the Babylonian Talmud reads *hilkot yeṣira* (the laws of creation). This is probably the original reading.

³³ See Gershom Scholem, 'The Idea of the Golem', in his *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism* (London, 1965), pp. 158–204.