

## INTRODUCTION

This book deals with a specific kind of magic,<sup>1</sup> widespread among Jewish intellectuals from the early twelfth century onwards and known as astral magic. The focus of the discussion is on the period up to the expulsion from Spain. Astral magic is predicated on the assumption that individuals can utilize celestial elements for their benefit and advantage. Stars and signs release a constant and steady emanation known as *rūhaniyyāt* [spirituality], which is also endowed with extraordinary forces. The quality of the emanation and the character of the supreme forces are determined by the influencing signs and planets and their location in heaven. The celestial emanation and the supreme forces can be absorbed and directed in the terrestrial world on condition suitable preparations are made, and their absorption is known as “drawing down” [*horadah* or *hanahah*]. The magician brings down this spirituality for practical purposes, such as changing the course of natural forces, predicting the future, or healing the sick. Exploiting this emanation or these celestial powers requires detailed and exact knowledge about the circumstances surrounding the sources of the emanation (the celestial bodies such as planets and constellations), as well as of the preparations required.

What ensures success in drawing down the stellar emanation? Preparations involve the creation or procuring, at a specific time, of an image, an effigy or an amulet that symbolize the emanating source, the planet or the constellation. This preparation presumes sympathetic interaction between heaven and earth, and between the symbol and what is symbolized. Often, the symbol of the emanating star or constellation is engraved on the image.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The term magic in the present context is problematic. Many students of medieval astral magic would strongly contest this definition, emphasizing that this is a scientific field. But Aristotelian science, which was dominant during this period, did not recognize astral magic as a science and we have accordingly opted for the term *magic* that has no room in Aristotle’s scientific world. This distinction between the Aristotelian scientific paradigm and the one stressing the phenomenon of magic is discussed at length in the book.

<sup>2</sup> For a concise summary, see, for instance, Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 131-133. Cosmic sympathy, on which astrology and astral magic are predicated, is a notion developed in Greek and

How does the magic action take place? The magician's act involves several stages:

1. A meticulous examination of the specific configuration of stars and constellations that could yield the desired result. For instance, if the aim is to heal sickness, magicians will consult astrological and magical sources to find out what stellar configuration will summon the emanation that will cure the illness. The configuration might be a specific constellation rising on the horizon ("ascendant"), a particular planet (*mesharet*) found within the sign's area ("house"), or the encounter of two planets within the sign's house ("conjunction"). Often, the configuration intended by the magician is quite elementary and includes only a single constellation or star.
2. Preparing an effigy or image that symbolizes the emanating celestial configuration.
3. Procuring the image at a time the stars and constellations are arranged in an influential configuration. In the present example, the magician places the effigy on the body part affected by the illness, when the star or constellation is influential.
4. Using various auxiliary techniques, such as incense burning, praying to the stars, invocations, using magic names, and so forth.

Systematic formulations of astral magic appear in the Hermetic literature of the first three centuries CE referring to the revelation of Hermes' secrets, the god identified with Thoth, the Egyptian god of wisdom. Both Greeks and Romans related to ancient Egyptian religion as a kind of "ancient truth" and hence singularly significant. Systematic formulations of astral magic, then, develop as the pagan mythological religions in the ancient East and in the Hellenistic world are waning. Hermetic literature includes a philosophical world view that comprises Neoplatonic, Stoic, and Eastern elements, together with astrological conceptions and detailed techniques of magic and astral magic.<sup>3</sup> These techniques were meant to assist in attaining the

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Roman culture, particularly in the Stoa. Stoic philosophers systematically formulate the notion of sympathy as part of their outlook on immanence. See, for instance, Samuel Sambursky, *Physics of the Stoics* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987), 41-43; Robert B. Todd, "Monism and Immanence: The Foundations of Stoic Physics" in *The Stoics*, ed. John M. Rist (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 151; Liba Chaia Taub, *Ptolemy's Universe: The Natural Philosophical and Ethical Foundations of Ptolemy's Astronomy* (Chicago, Ill.: Open Court, 1993), 129.

<sup>3</sup> In many astrological and magical traditions, Hermes' name is linked to hermetic

speculative and ecstatic goal to which Hermetic literature directs its readers. *Aesculapius*, a philosophical work in the Hermetic corpus, formulates the magic principle of drawing down spirituality on images in Hermes' answer to a question by Aesculapius, who gives the book its name:

[The qualities of the gods and their influences<sup>4</sup>] come from a mixture of plants, stones and spices, Asclepius, that have in them a natural power of divinity.<sup>5</sup> And this is why those gods are entertained with constant sacrifices, with hymns, praises and sweet sounds in tune with heaven's harmony:<sup>6</sup> so that the heavenly ingredient enticed into idol by constant communication with heaven<sup>7</sup> may gladly endure its long stay among humankind.<sup>8</sup>

Magic and theurgic views also feature in the Neoplatonic writings of Proclus and Iamblichus, and Hermetism also played a significant role in the growth of alternative approaches to the Aristotelian *Weltanschauung*. The scientific Aristotelian legacy states that the physical order of the material world is explainable mainly from within and without recourse to supernal levels, so that the origin of the laws of movement, for instance, should not be sought in the celestial world. The doctrine of natural locations, whereby each of the four elements (earth, water, air, and fire) strives to return to its natural setting, explains the movement of the elements. Aristotle makes the laws of the universe dependent on the celestial, supernal world only in specific

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literature and its surroundings. See, for instance, Hans Dieter Betz, ed., *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation: Including the Demotic Spells* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 54-55; Andre-Jean Festugière, *La révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste*, vol. 1, *L'astrologie et les sciences occultes* (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1949); Idem, *Hermetisme et mystique païenne* (Paris: Aubier-montaigne, 1967); Frances Amelia Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 44-61.

<sup>4</sup> In the available Latin translation, *qualitas*, through which the writer refers to magical forces.

<sup>5</sup> In Latin, *divinitatis naturalem vim*. In Festugière's reading, cited in p. 256 of Copenhaver's translation (see note 8 below), "hidden spiritual power." Could also be read as "hidden celestial power."

<sup>6</sup> Reflecting the Pythagorean tradition, whereby the moving spheres make sounds.

<sup>7</sup> In Latin, *caelestius*. According to Nock's reading, cited in p. 257. It could also be translated as "celestial world."

<sup>8</sup> The passage as cited is from Brian P. Copenhaver, ed. and trans., *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a New English Translation, with Notes and Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 90.

cases and, even then, confines it to the movement of the sun.<sup>9</sup> By contrast, other traditions, including the Hermetic one, seek to explain physical processes by relying to some extent on the stellar effect on the material world. According to these views, stellar emanations exert essential influence upon processes in the material world, a conception that paves the way for astral magic.

In the twelfth century, astral magic assumes a role in the philosophical discourse of Jewish-Spanish culture and becomes a convenient platform for various theological doctrines. Judah Halevi relies on astral magic rather than on theoretical considerations to explain the view that the commandments are the vehicle to religious perfection. Astral magic is based on experience, and is thus no different from astrology. Just as in astral magic the preparation is what draws the emanation down, in Judaism observing the commandments leads to the realization of prophecy. Judah Halevi attacks contemporary theoretical science by presenting Judaism as an alternative science, with astral magic as one of its most essential elements. Abraham Ibn Ezra also holds that astrology and astral magic are essential to the building of a Jewish theology. Since Ibn Ezra ascribes great value to astrology and even focuses his scientific concern on it, astrology becomes a mainstay of his biblical exegesis. The approach of these two thinkers will concern us in Chapter One of this book.

Maimonides' authority deals a fatal blow to this young theology. Maimonides targets his attack on astral magic, denies it any value, and forbids it on religious grounds, presenting it as idolatry. Maimonides' harsh critique is the subject of Chapter Two.

The rationalists' neglect of astral magic as a serious theological factor appears to have paved its way to the hearts of many Spanish kabbalists. Whereas the rationalists abandon any intensive concern with astral-magic theology during the thirteenth century, the kabbalists preserve these traditions and an entire school of Nahmanides' disciples turns astral magic into a legitimate theology, as discussed in Chapter Three.

Eventually, astral magic reaches the core of the philosophical-rationalist consensus prevalent in Provence and Spain. Toward the end of the thirteenth century, it is appropriated by many rationalists for its medical uses. University courses at Montpellier and Bologna, for

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<sup>9</sup> Aristotle, *De generatione et corruptione*, trans. C. J. F. Williams (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), II:10.

instance, begin teaching the uses of astral magic in healing. Bernard Gordon and Arnold of Villanova taught healing through amulets, as Joseph Shatzmiller shows.<sup>10</sup> Doctors were required to prove their astrological expertise to be allowed to practice. Times for the administration of medication were often set according to astrological methods.<sup>11</sup> Despite the conflict that erupted among Provence Jews, astral magic was not banned. The controversies in Provence and Spain are the subject of Chapters Four and Five.

The medical-practical uses of astral magic were probably instrumental in returning the theological concern with it. Paragons of fourteenth century rationalism consistently present exegeses of biblical texts directly based on principles of astral magic. At the same time, and rather naturally, Ibn Ezra is presented as a forerunner of Jewish rationalism, beside Maimonides. Supercommentaries on Ibn Ezra's biblical exegeses begin to appear, written by contemporary Spanish rationalists and emphasizing astral magic as an essential element of their interpretation. Chapter Six describes this phenomenon, marking the return of astral magic to the theological map.

The influence of Spanish culture is also evident in other geographical areas, some of them far-flung, which also came to endorse these modes of explanation. Among them is the group of Byzantine rationalist thinkers in the late Middle Ages that have hardly been studied. Chapter Seven, then, briefly outlines the structure and horizons of Byzantine rationalist thought during this period. Chapter Eight delves into the unique character of this culture's astral magical explanations. Some of the works influenced by Byzantine culture reflect Spanish approaches, while others are distinctly unique. The comparison between astral magical theology in Spanish and Byzantine cultures points to some unique Byzantine viewpoints. The epilogue outlines the implications of the studies in this book for the philosophy of science.

Preliminary or partial versions of various chapters in this book have been published before. Several chapters have appeared in Hebrew in

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<sup>10</sup> Joseph Shatzmiller, "In Search of the Book of Figures: Medicine and Astrology in Montpellier at the Turn of the Fourteenth Century," *AJS Review* 7/8 (1982/1983), 383-407; Joseph Shatzmiller, "The Forms of the *Twelve Constellations*: A Fourteenth Century Controversy," in *Shlomo Pines Jubilee Volume: On the Occasion of His Eightieth Birthday*, ed. Moshe Idel, Warren Zeev Harvey and Eliezer Schweid (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought, 1988), 397-408.

<sup>11</sup> Per-Gunnar Ottoson, *Scholastic Medicine and Philosophy: A Study of Commentaries on Galen's Tegni ca. 1300-1450* (Napoli: Bibliopolis, 1984), 258-259.

my two books on the subject: *Astral Magic in Medieval Jewish Thought* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1999) and *Amulets, Properties, and Rationalism in Medieval Jewish Thought* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2004). Others have been published as articles and are reprinted in this book by kind permission of the publishers. Chapter Two is to appear in *Maimonidean Studies* 5, by Yeshiva University. The Hebrew version of Chapter Three was published in *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts* 4 (1999): 387-411, Cherub Publishers. Abridged English versions of Chapters Three, Seven, and Eight appeared in *Aleph* 3 (2002): 165-211, and are reprinted by kind permission of *Aleph: Historical Studies in Judaism and Science*, published by The Sydney M. Edelstein Center for the History and Philosophy of Science, Technology and Medicine and the Institute of Jewish Studies, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

To my friend, Prof. Gad Freudenthal, my gratitude for his crucial assistance in the writing of the epilogue. Thanks to my translators, Batya Stein and David Louvish. The breadth of their interests, their patience, and their generosity proved essential to the writing of this book. Working with Prof. Neusner was, as usual, a highly rewarding and gratifying experience.