

Magic, Demons, and Judaism
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Course Description:

Judaism is often thought of as a rational religion devoid of, and opposed to, superstition and the occult. However, throughout Jewish history we find numerous examples of amulets, exorcism, augury, and other magical phenomena typically considered taboo. In this course we examine a wide range of texts and artifacts from the bible through the middle ages which reveal how Jews positively perceived and interacted with magical practices and the presence of demons. Drawing upon some of the greatest hits of sociological and anthropological thinkers, the first half of this course also introduces students to a variety of scholarly approaches to understanding magic and its relationship to religion and society. All sources will be in English.

Course Goals:

- Engage with a wide range of primary sources in translation to discover the many ways in which magic and demonology were major topics in pre-modern Jewish life.
- Discover how understandings of magic and demons in Jewish communities have shifted over time as well as how scholarly approaches to these topics have developed
- Undertake independent research on a related topic of interest

Course Requirements:

Please complete the readings listed for each session *before* that class meeting. Readings are available on the course website. Grades will be based upon class attendance, participation and preparation of readings (40%), the midterm (25%) and the final paper (35%). Participation and preparation of readings includes weekly questions and responses on the course website. Each week one or two students will be responsible for posting a provocative question based on the reading to the course website by Sunday night. All other students must respond to the post with their thoughts and answer (300-500 words) by Tuesday night.

Note on Academic Integrity

Students are expected to maintain the highest levels of academic integrity and academic dishonesty will not be tolerated. All assignments should reflect students' own original work and all references to, and use of, outside sources must be cited or adequately noted.

Note on Disabilities

I will do my best to reasonably accommodate student disabilities that impact their work and participation in the course. If you wish to request accommodations for a disability please identify yourself within the first two weeks of the course with proper documentation of the disability and a description of the requested accommodations.

Useful Resource: <http://www.michaelsheiser.com/TheNakedBible/JewishMagicBibliography.pdf>

Class Schedule:

Magic

1. **What is Magic in a Jewish Context?**

How does a modern magic performance differ from magic in antiquity? How do our contemporary assumptions about magic differ from how pre-modern thinkers understood magic?

2. **Magic in the Bible**

How does the Bible describe magical practices? What is the Bible's attitude toward magic? What exactly does the Bible forbid and what does it permit?

- Reading: Exodus 22:15-18, Leviticus 19:26-32, Deuteronomy 18:9-15, 2 Kings 4:1-7, 31-35; Harari, "What is a Magical Text?"; Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (Selections)

3. **Magic and Community**

What is the relationship between magic and society? How can the same action be labelled as both "magic" and "ritual"? Is there a difference? How do sacrifices "erase" sins?

- Reading: Leviticus 1-4; Smith, *The Religion of the Semites* (Selections); Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Selections); Lee, "Religious Perspectives in Anthropology"

4. **Jewish Witchcraft**

What role does gender play in forbidding magic? Are certain types of magic associated with particular genders? Does this change from the Bible to the rabbinic period?

- Reading: Exodus 22:15-19; Jerusalem Talmud *Hagigah* 77d; Sefati & Klein, *The Law of the Sorceress*; Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic* (Selections); Bar-Ilan, "Witches in the Bible and the Talmud."

5. **The Function of Magic**

How is "good magic" different from "bad magic," and why? How does magic fit into a peoples' larger religious and cultural world?

- Reading: Babylonian Talmud *Sanhedrin* 68a, *Taanit* 23a; Malinowski, "Magic, Science, and Religion"; Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande* (Selections).

6. **Hebrew and Other Amulets**

How do the languages and terms found in amulets help us to understand the relationship between different religious and cultural groups in antiquity? What are the challenges in differentiating between an actual incantation and instructions for preparing an incantation? What does this tell us about how we interpret our available evidence?

- Reading: Babylonian Talmud *Shabbat* 61b, *Arakhin* 61a, *Gittin* 68a; Hezser, "The Magical Use of Writing"; Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic*, 114-123, 145-153; Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious."

7. **Use of Magic and Divine Names**

Why are names considered so powerful? Why would God have so many different names? How have academic approaches to magic and religion shifted over time?

- Reading: Genesis 2:18-25; Babylonian Talmud *Yoma* 8a; Trachtenberg, "In the Name of..."; Urbach, "Power of the Divine Name"; Idel, "The Kabbalah of the Divine Names"; Stark, "Reconceptualizing Religion, Magic, and Science."

8. Jewish Magic Bowls & *Midterm*

Demons

9. A Brief History of Demons

What role do demons play in society? How do everyday activities like eating and urinating affect the demons which the rabbis envisioned as being all around them?

- Reading: Babylonian Talmud *Niddah* 17a, *Pesachim* 111a; Hunter, "Who are the Demons? The Iconography of the Incantation Bowls"; Dan, "Demons of the Cup and Demons of the Thumb"; Goodblatt "Women, Demons, and the Rabbi's Son: Narratology and 'A Story from Worms'"

10. Lilith and Ashmodeus King of the Demons

How do the roles of Lilith and Ashmodeus compare? In what ways are they similar and how do they differ? How has the idea of Lilith or the "Liliths" changed over time?

- Reading: The Book of Tobit [<http://ebible.org/kjv/Tobit.htm>]; "Asmodeus," in the Encyclopedia Judaica (2007), 592-3; Owens, "Asmodeus: A Less Than Minor Character in the Book of Tobit"; Dame, "Sister in the Shadows: Lilith's role in the Jewish Family Myth"

11. Other Jewish Demon Stories

Why do we find demons in such a wide variety of places and engaged in such a wide variety of activities? What role do demons play in the greater Jewish religious world view?

- Reading: Babylonian Talmud *Gittin* 70a, *Shabbat* 81b-82a, *Berakhot* 51a; The Testament of Solomon [<http://www.esotericarchives.com/solomon/testamen.htm>]; Kottek, "Demons and Diseases in Bible and Talmud"

12. Satan and Demonizing the Other

Who is "the Adversary" in the Book of Job? Why has the image of the devil so popular in the medieval imagination? How do ideas of the demonic manifest themselves in society today?

- Reading: Book of Job 1-2; Kee, "Satan, Magic, and Salvation in the Testament of Job; Steven, "The End of Satan"; Russell, "The Devil and the Scholars"; Strickland, "Making Men Known by Sight: Classical Theories, Monstrous Races and Sin"

13. Exorcism

What role does exorcism play in Jesus' ministry? How is Solomon's act of exorcism different from what we find in the New Testament?

- Reading: Mark 16:16-18; Luke 4:33-36; Acts 19:13-16; Sorensen, "Possession and Exorcism in Ancient Israel and Early Judaism"; Duling, "Solomon, Exorcism, and the Son of David"; Pattison, "Psychosocial Interpretations of Exorcism"

14. Magic and Demons in Judaism Reconsidered

How have Jewish perceptions of magic and demons changed over time? In what ways do magic and demons continue to live on in the Jewish imagination? How do scholars approach the study of demons?

- Reading: Nash, "Devils, Witches, and Sudden Death,"; Gmelch, "Baseball Magic,"

Final Paper Due

Final Paper Guidelines:

The final paper should be 10-15 pages (double spaced) with standard formatting (e.g. 11-12 point font, Times New Roman or other standard font, 1 in. margins, etc.) and is due at the beginning of finals period (May 2nd). In this paper you will examine a topic related to magic or demons in Judaism which we did not cover in class. You should analyze translations of primary sources in addition to engaging with secondary scholarship that discusses your topic.

Potential topics include: the evil eye, divination, literary works such as the Sword of Moses or Sefer Razim, magic at Qumran, *Merkava / Hekhalot* literature, dream interpretation, etc.

Questions to consider: What are the major features of the topic/work that you are examining? Does it include a variety of different views that stand in conflict or change over time? How have scholarly approaches to the topic changed over time? What role does it play within the Jewish world?