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THE CHARAKTÈRES IN ANCIENT AND MEDIEVAL JEWISH MAGIC

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Abstract: This paper examines the different magical signs found in Jewish magical texts and artifacts in Antiquity and the Middle Ages. These include especially the Graeco-Egyptian “charaktères” (ring-letters, *Brillenbuchstaben*), the Arabic “string letters” (or *Siegel*), and the Latin *sigilla* or *figurae*, to which one may add a few other types of magical signs. This paper surveys their appearance in Jewish magical texts of different times and places, and analyzes their function within the magical texts where they are found.

Keywords: Charaktères, magical signs, Jews, Late Antiquity, Middle Ages.

The use of special signs is one of the hallmarks of magical texts and objects of many different cultures, and the Jewish magical tradition is no exception.¹ Unfortunately, this aspect of Jewish magic has not yet received the attention it deserves, and no attempt has ever been made to survey the magical signs found in Jewish magical texts of different periods, or reconstruct their transmission history.² Moreover, in many discussions of Jewish magic these signs often are referred to as “Kabbalistic signs,” even though they are mostly non-Jewish in origins, and predate the rise of Kabbalah by a full millennium. In the present study, I wish to present both a basic typology of the special signs found in Jewish magical texts in Antiquity and the Middle Ages, and a brief historical survey of their different forms and functions. I begin with a few words on magical signs in general, and with a basic typology of the magical signs used by Jews, and move on to a chronological and geographical survey of the Jewish magical texts and the special signs they display. My aim is both to see what *kinds* of magical signs appear in different Jewish magical texts and to see what *function* they fill within these texts.

¹ The research for this paper was supported by the Israel Science Foundation (Grant No. 635/08).

² For earlier studies, all of them very brief, see Gaster 1913; Trachtenberg 1939, 140-142; Weinstock 1981; Schiffman and Swartz 1992, 44-45; Swartz 2005, 195, 198.

A) Magical Signs in the Jewish Magical Tradition – A Typological Survey:

One important aspect of the Jewish magical tradition is that at least from Late Antiquity onwards it displayed a predominantly scribal nature, including the production of written magical texts – amulets, curses, love spells, dream requests, and so on – and the transmission of the magical know-how in written manuals or books of magic.³ This feature of Jewish magic enabled the proliferation of magical signs and – given the magicians’ attempts to enact and to copy their recipes as accurately as possible – assured the relative stability of their transmission. Thus, when we look at a Jewish magical text of the fifth century CE, and at a Jewish magical text a millennium and a half younger, we often find similar magical signs in both texts, in spite of the great chronological, and often also geographical, gap separating between them.

As a rule, I would define a magical sign as any sign which looks more or less like an alphabetic sign or a simple ideogram, but which does not belong to any of the alphabets used in that specific magical text, or to any known system of meaningful symbols. This means that in my search for magical signs in the Jewish magical tradition I exclude all images (of humans, animals, demons, etc.) which might appear in Jewish magical texts, because I do not consider them to be magical *signs*.⁴ Similarly, I exclude the word-triangles, alphabetic magic squares, and other uses of names, words and letters to create unusual shapes (what is known in other contexts as “technopaignia”), as these involve no special magical signs, only the regular letters of one’s alphabet.⁵ I also exclude all the non-alphabetic signs which form a part of any non-magical text, such as signs of vocalization in Hebrew and Aramaic texts (from the Early Middle Ages onwards), or punctuation marks that may be found in texts of all languages and periods, or lines, frames, and other methods of highlighting parts of the text, as these do not usually belong specifically in the realm of “magic”. I also exclude all known astrological, alchemical, and geomantic signs, as they belong within their specific spheres of knowledge, are usually transmitted in genre-specific texts, and tend to have a fixed, and well-known, meaning. Finally, I exclude any cipher signs whose meanings clearly were known to the producer of the magical text in which they appear, as these have to do more with cryptography than with magic, and I also exclude those “texts” that consist of repetitive meaningless squiggles, which may have been intended to fool ig-

³ See Swartz 1990; Bohak 2008, esp. 281-285.

⁴ For an excellent study of the iconography of ancient Jewish magic see Viložny 2010.

⁵ For such phenomena, see Bohak 2008, 255-256, 265-270; Luz 2010, 213-222.

norant clients into thinking that they contained a written text, or perhaps even to fill the empty spaces on one's magical artifacts.⁶

From the perspective of cultural history, the magical signs found in the Jewish magical texts may be divided into two main categories – those that were borrowed by the Jewish practitioners from their non-Jewish colleagues, and those developed by the Jews themselves. Let us briefly look at each of these categories, with the help of specific examples, produced in Table 1, and numbered from 1.1 to 1.8, and in Table 2:

a) Magical signs borrowed from other magical traditions:

The great majority of the magical signs displayed by the Jewish magical tradition are of a demonstrably non-Jewish origin. By far the most ubiquitous magical signs in the Jewish magical tradition are the *charaktêres*, those “ring-letters,” or *Brillenbuchstaben* of the Graeco-Egyptian magical tradition, whose most characteristic feature is the recurrence of ringlets at the tips of many of the individual signs (see Table 1.1).⁷ As we shall see below, these were adopted by the Jewish magicians in Late Antiquity, and are still in use to this very day. Their ultimate origins are quite obscure, but this is of little importance for the present survey, as they clearly entered the Jewish magical tradition through Greek magical texts, and even entered with their technical Greek name, which is why they often are identified in late antique and medieval Jewish magical texts as the “Karaqtiraya” or “Kalaqtiraya,” a word that often was split in two and understood as “kol qtiraya,” i.e., “all the knots,” or simply “qtiraya,” “knots.” And in the Middle Ages, elaborate “alphabets” were produced, consisting mostly of such *charaktêres* and often identified as the secret alphabets of various angels, including Metatron, Gabriel, Raphael, and many others. In some cases, each “letter” of the “alphabet” is accompanied by its supposed Hebrew equivalent, while in others the entire “alphabet” is produced as a sequence of magical signs, with no attempt to explain which sign stands for which letter (see Table 1.2). In many cases, these “alphabets” clearly were badly garbled in the process of transmission, as may be seen both from the fact that the number of “letters” they provide is neither 22 (the number of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet) nor 27 (the number of Hebrew letters when one counts the “final” *kaph*, *mem*, *nun*, *peh* and *tzadi* as separate letters), and from the fact that certain signs recur in different places in the “alphabet,” meaning that the

⁶ For a cipher used in some Genizah magical texts, see Bohak 2010a, and for a possible cipher used in an incantation bowl, see Harviainen 1981, 24-28. For a repetitive series of identical squiggles (a not uncommon occurrence in the incantation bowls), see Bohak 2008, 186, Fig. 3.6.

⁷ For a brief survey of the *charaktêres*, and much further bibliography, see Brashear 1995, 3440-3442.

same sign would have two alphabetic equivalents, which is rather unlikely if the cryptic alphabet was supposed to be effective (and both problems may be seen in Table 1.2).

In addition to the *charaktêres*, we may note that in the Middle Ages the Jews of the Arabic-speaking world borrowed from their Muslim neighbors a new set of magical signs, which we may call “string letters” (given their peculiar shape), or “Siegel” (the German word for “seals”), as they were best described in Winkler’s ground-breaking survey, *Siegel und Charaktere in der Muhammedanischen Zauberei*.⁸ These magical signs often look like long horizontal strokes, or strings, on or above which are pegged series of Arabic letters and numerals, as well as quasi-alphabetical signs, all of which clearly do not add up to any semantically-meaningful sequence (see Table 1.3). Both in the Muslim and in the Jewish magical texts, these signs, or more elaborate patterns that use these signs as their building blocks (see Table 1.4), often are called “seals” (Arabic *khatim*, pl. *khawatim*; Hebrew *hotam*, pl. *hotamot*), and they are found in many different types of magical texts. In addition to these “seals,” the Jewish magicians of the Middle Ages also borrowed from their Arab neighbors a sequence of seven magical signs, each of which looks a bit like the *charaktêres* (but without the ringlets at their tips), a series which was known in the Arabic magical tradition as the “Seal of Solomon,” and which is reproduced in Table 1.5.⁹ Finally, in medieval Europe, some Jews borrowed from their Christian neighbors the elaborate magical signs that are often found in Latin magical texts, signs that look like complex seals (or, in Latin, *sigilla*, sometimes also known as *figure* or *ymagines*), made up of combining together many smaller signs and placing them in elaborate frames (see Table 1.6).¹⁰ And, perhaps at a slightly later period, European Jews also borrowed from their Christian neighbors the elaborate circular designs, full of magical signs, some of which look like the age-old *charaktêres*, designs that usually were associated with each of the seven planets (see Table 2).¹¹

To our list of foreign magical signs that entered the Jewish magical tradition, one more sub-category may be added, of “false magical signs,” produced,

⁸ Winkler 1930.

⁹ See Winkler 1930, 55-149. For their appearance in Jewish magical texts, see Scholem 1998, 153-155, 166-167.

¹⁰ For similar seals in Christian magical texts see, for example, Kieckhefer 1997, 367-368, and cf. Pingree 1986, 187-188 and Pl. 2. For an exhaustive survey of the magical signs and designs used in medieval Christian magic (but, unfortunately, no illustrations to accompany the descriptions), see Véronèse and Grévin 2004.

¹¹ For such seals in Christian magical texts see, for example, Skemer 2006, 200-201, 215. See also the seals recommended by the *Ars notoria*, in Véronèse 2007, Figures 2, 11, 12, and Planche 4.

for example, when magical texts moved from one language to another, and some of the letters of the source-language(s) were mistook by their copyists for magical signs. Thus, in one Genizah magical text we even find, among a string of magical signs, some of which look suspiciously close to Coptic letters, a group of signs that clearly add up to the common Coptic abbreviation of the name “Jesus Christ,” a sequence that the Jewish magician copied merely as a set of meaningless magical signs, without ever realizing what he really was copying; in another Genizah magical text, we might even find a copy of older Demotic signs (a cursive form of writing the Egyptian Hieroglyphs), a writing system that had been extinct for many centuries by the time when this Genizah fragment was being copied.¹² In a few other cases, one finds Crosses or Christograms in Jewish magical texts, but it is not always clear whether they point to the Christian proclivities of the text’s producer or users, to innocent copying from Christian sources, or to the accidental resemblance of magical signs to well-known Christian symbols.¹³

b) Jewish magical signs:

Surprisingly, perhaps, there are very few cases of magical signs that can be seen as specifically Jewish, both in Late Antiquity and in the Middle Ages. One clear example is the occasional attempt, in the Jewish magical texts of Late Antiquity, to produce signs that seem like Paleo-Hebrew script, and that probably were intended to add to the texts’ magical powers by using an old, venerable, and perhaps even sacred Jewish script, at a time when it was no longer in use in other, non-magical, Jewish texts (see Plate 1.7).¹⁴ But apart from this example, I am aware of no other magical signs that can be seen as specifically Jewish, not only in late antique Jewish magic, but even in the Middle Ages, the only partial exception being the frequent production, in the Middle Ages, of magical signs that looked just like Hebrew letters, but with extra ringlets at their tips, i.e., of “Hebrew *charaktêres*.” This novelty evidently was the result of a conscious attempt to develop new sacred alphabets by “Judaizing” the foreign magical signs and offering a “kosher” alternative to the popular, but alien, magical signs (see Table 1.8, where the biblical verse Ex 15:3 is written with such “Hebrew *charaktêres*”). These signs were quite popular with some Kabbalists, and they still appear in some Kabbalistic *siddurim* (Jewish prayer-books), like that of R. Isaac Luria (*Siddur ha-ARI*) and that of R. Shalom

¹² For both examples, see Bohak 1999.

¹³ For a possible Christogram, see AMB, A4, l. 8. For innocent copying from Christian sources, see the wonderful nineteenth-century Yemenite-Jewish example discussed by Sperber 1994, 89-90.

¹⁴ See Weiss 2008, 255.

Shar‘abi (*Siddur ha-RASHASH*), where they are frequently used to write the Tetragrammaton, YHWH. They were equally popular with the Christian Kabbalists, like Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim, and thus became quite well-known in the Christian world as well. But when we look at Jewish magical texts of the Middle Ages, and even of the Modern world, we see that these “Hebrew *charaktêres*” were not very commonly used by the magicians themselves, and even where they did appear they in no way replaced the standard *charaktêres*, some of which kept on looking like Greek letters with ringlets at their tips – and still do so today. Jews, it would seem, were happy enough with the magical signs developed by their neighbors, and saw no reason to develop new ones, or even to consistently try to replace them with more “kosher” alternatives. In fact, in many cases they were utterly convinced that the magical signs that we, with our modern historical tools of research, know to have been of non-Jewish origins, actually were secret angelic scripts, used by Jews since time immemorial, and perhaps even borrowed from them by their non-Jewish colleagues and competitors.

In addition to these two types of magical signs, a few cases may be mentioned of magical signs whose origins are still obscure. For example, in a few Jewish Aramaic incantation bowls from Sasanian Babylonia we find some magical signs that clearly imitate the *charaktêres*, but we also find some magical signs that look quite different.¹⁵ These may have been developed by the Jewish scribes who produced the Aramaic bowls, but are more likely to have been shared in common by all the producers of incantation bowls in Sasanian Mesopotamia, including the Mandaean and the Syriac bowls.¹⁶ This, however, is a subject that still calls for further enquiry.

In light of the above notes, it should be clear that the vast majority of magical signs found in the Jewish magical tradition would look very familiar to any student of the Graeco-Egyptian, Muslim, and Christian, magical traditions. The same is true when we examine the *function* of the magical signs within the magical texts, for just as in the non-Jewish magical texts, so in the Jewish magical tradition, these signs may be used in several different manners. In some cases, they are directly invoked, as if they were powerful forces in their own right, and so we find a series of magical signs followed by “You holy kalaqtiraya, perform the task X,” or some similar expression.¹⁷ In other cases, they are identified as the powerful “Seal of Solomon,” as the secret seals asso-

¹⁵ For *charaktêres* in the Jewish Aramaic incantation bowls, see, below, n. 25.

¹⁶ And see, for example, the magical signs in McCullough 1967, 29, 42-43, 46 (a Mandaic bowl); Harviainen 1978, 7 and 8 (two Syriac bowls).

¹⁷ See, for example, AMB, G1 (for whose *charaktêres* see Table 3); MSF, G9, 3/12; MSF, G15, 2/6. Many more examples could easily be adduced.

ciated with various demons (so that, for example, you must show each demon his specific seal in order to force him to fulfill your wishes), or as secret alphabets supposedly used by the angels themselves. Finally, in many other cases, the magical signs appear at the beginnings or ends of the magical texts, or between sentences, or between words, and are not specifically tied into the texts where they appear. In such cases, they seem to have no specific semantic or symbolic function, and are used in order to fill some of the empty spaces in the text and to strengthen the object's occult powers, or its appeal to the clients who commissioned it, and probably were awe-struck by the mysterious signs. In such cases, we may also consider the general mystique associated with such incomprehensible signs, and their obvious value in the marketing of magical texts and objects to potential users, who probably saw such magical signs as evidence of the text's great powers and of its producer's demonstrated expertise in the realm of magic.¹⁸

B) Magical Signs in the Jewish Magical Tradition – An Historical Survey:

While the brief typology provided in the first section of this paper could serve as a useful phenomenological tool for the classification of the different magical signs found in Jewish magical texts, I believe that the best way to study these signs is chronologically and geographically, in order to see which magical signs were used by Jews at which times and in which places. Thus, the following survey will begin with the First and Second Temple periods, will move to late antique Palestine and Babylonia, will turn to the Jews of the Muslim and the Christian worlds in the Middle Ages, and will end with a few brief words on contemporary Jewish magic.

a) The First and Second Temple Periods:

While there is no doubt that the Jews of Antiquity, like those of later periods, practiced magic, their activities seem to have left few traces both in the literary and in the archaeological records. Thus, the absence of magical signs from the few ancient Jewish magical texts that have come down to us – i.e., the two amulets from Ketef Hinnom in Jerusalem and a few exorcistic and magical fragments found among the Dead Sea Scrolls – might be due to the paucity of

¹⁸ I note, for example, an amulet from the Cairo Genizah, Cambridge University Library Or. 1080.14.13 (reproduced in Bohak 2008, 273), which consists solely of eight such seals (one of which is reproduced in Table 1.3 below), with no text at all.

the evidence at our disposal.¹⁹ And yet, since the *charaktêres* which are so conspicuous in the magical texts and objects of Late Antiquity are of a demonstrably foreign origin, and since their spread within the Graeco-Egyptian magical tradition does not predate the first century BCE or CE, we may safely assume that the Jews of the First and Second Temple periods made no use of these signs in whatever magical texts and artifacts they may have produced. In fact, even the earliest Jewish amulets of Late Antiquity (both written in Greek letters, but containing some transliterated Hebrew words) – the one found in Wales (second century CE?) and the one found in Austria (second or third century CE) still display no magical signs of any sort.²⁰ It is only from the fourth or fifth century CE that we find Jewish amulets written in Aramaic and Hebrew, produced by Jewish amulet-makers for Jewish and non-Jewish clients, and these often display magical signs.²¹ Clearly, the new “pagan” magical technology did not immediately make it into the Jewish magical tradition, and the process of adoption and adaptation probably was slow and gradual.

b) Late Antiquity:

The *charaktêres* may have been slow to enter into the Jewish magical tradition, but once they did enter, they became part and parcel of that tradition, and remain so to this very day. Their foreign origin probably was not lost on many of their earlier Jewish users, as the shape of many of these “ring letters” looked suspiciously close to that of standard Greek letters, but for the circlets at their tips, and as they were known even in the Aramaic and Hebrew magical texts under their Greek name, *charaktêres*, which was borrowed together with the signs themselves.²² And yet, as these signs did not have any specifically “pagan” connotation, their Jewish users apparently saw nothing wrong in their use, and felt no need to “Judaize” them in any specific manner. Just as they avidly borrowed many other Graeco-Egyptian magical practices, so they borrowed the *charaktêres*, thus enriching their own magical technology and bringing it “up to

¹⁹ For the Ketef Hinnom amulets, and for the Dead Sea Scrolls magical texts, see Bohak 2008, 30 and 107-112 respectively, with much further bibliography.

²⁰ For the amulet from Caernarvon (Wales), see Kotansky 1994, 3-12 (No. 2) and Bohak 2003, 74-77. For the amulet from Halbtorn (Austria), see Eshel, Eshel, and Lange 2010; Doneus 2010, and all the other articles in the same fascicle of the *Journal of Ancient Judaism*.

²¹ For the relative chronology of the published Aramaic amulets, see Eshel and Leiman 2010, and for a fuller survey, see Leiman 2010.

²² For *charaktêres* which look like Greek letters with ringlets, see, for example AMB, A2, l. 7 (incl. XY and an inverted lunate *sigma*); AMB, A5, l. 2 (XOXOX); MSF, A17, l. 10 (MI); MSF, A19, l.23 (X); MSF, A30 (IKAMN, which even forms an alphabetic sequence!). For the Aramaic and Hebrew words for *charaktêres*, see AMB, A5 and *Sefer ha-Razim* II/54-55, 100, as noted by Margalioth 1966, 4.

date,” as it were, and in line with the magical technology of late antique society as a whole.²³ In a handful of cases, they apparently tried to use Paleo-Hebrew letters as magical signs (see Table 1.7), in line with the great sanctity sometimes accorded to that script from the Second Temple period onwards, but in most other cases, the magical signs they used resembled Greek letters, and – even more clearly – resembled the magical signs found on the Greek magical papyri, on curse-tablets, and on amulets produced by the “pagan” magicians of Late Antiquity.²⁴

While the “Western” branch of ancient Jewish magic fully absorbed this magical technology, its “Eastern” branch, as represented by the Aramaic incantation bowls from Sasanian Babylonia, was much less exposed to this Graeco-Egyptian technology, and the presence of *charaktêres* on these magical artifacts indeed is very rare. Unfortunately, no attempt has ever been made to catalogue and analyze the magical signs found on all the bowls written in Jewish Aramaic (most of which are still unpublished), but a recent catalogue of 122 images found on the bowls reveals only 3 bowls with magical signs, and my own impression is that this is an accurate reflection of the rarity of such signs on the published incantation bowls, and on those unpublished bowls to which I have had any access.²⁵ Thus, a magical technology that became popular among the Jews of Palestine and the western Diaspora in Late Antiquity reached even their Mesopotamian-based brethren, but apparently gained far less popularity among them. However, as it is mostly the “Western” branch of ancient Jewish magic that survived into the Middle Ages, the *charaktêres* became even more conspicuous in the later periods, as we shall note below.²⁶

c) The Middle Ages – The Lands of Islam:

While in the study of Jewish magic in Late Antiquity a useful distinction can be made between a “Western” and an “Eastern” branch, or that which flourished in the Graeco-Roman world and that which flourished in the Sasanian empire, in

²³ For this process, see the detailed discussion in Bohak 2008, 227-290.

²⁴ Unfortunately, no attempt has ever been made to collect all the *sequences* of magical signs displayed by ancient Jewish magical texts and to compare them in a comprehensive manner with similar sequences found in the “pagan” magical texts of Late Antiquity.

²⁵ See Viložny 2010, where *charaktêres* may be found only on bowl Nos. 75, 80, 120. A few other magical signs, which look quite different from the standard *charaktêres*, are found in a bowl published in Geller 1980 (his Bowl A) (the same set of magical signs is found on a bowl published by Levene 2003, M107, as he notes *ibid.*, 28 and 62), and in a bowl published in Bohak and Levene forthcoming. For possible comparanda, see above, n. 16. For more examples, see Hunter 2000, 172.

²⁶ For the continuity from late antique Palestinian Jewish magic to the Middle Ages, see Bohak 2009.

the Middle Ages the new political and religious realities engendered a new bifurcation of the Jewish magical tradition. In the Middle Ages, one can easily distinguish between the Jewish magical tradition as it developed in the lands where Islam was the reigning religion, and that which developed in the lands of Christendom. And just as in the earlier period the two branches of the Jewish magical tradition display some mutual influence, but also much independence, so in the Middle Ages one can easily point to the move of magical practices and magical spells from the Jews of the Muslim world to those of the Christian world and vice versa, and yet the two branches also remain quite distinct. It is for this reason that I begin with the magical signs found on the magical texts and artifacts of the Jews of the Muslim world, and only then turn to those of the Jews of medieval Christian Europe.

The best starting point for the study of Jewish magic in the Arabic-speaking lands of Islam is provided by the Cairo Genizah, the used-paper store room of a medieval synagogue, with its 200,000 parchment and paper fragments, of which more than a thousand contain magical recipes, amulets, curses, and other magic-related texts.²⁷ Looking at these magical texts, one is struck by the ubiquity of magical signs, which clearly fall in two distinct groups. On the one hand, we find the age-old *charaktêres*, which seem to have been transmitted smoothly from Late Antiquity to medieval Cairo, and often look in the Genizah magical texts just as they did half a millennium or more earlier. That at least some of the copyists of the magical signs were quite conscientious in their copying may even be seen from one specific example, namely, a group of inscribed clay shards from late antique Palestine that were produced for erotic magical aims according to a recipe which kept on circulating in the Jewish magical tradition for another millennium and a half. While the latest copies of this recipe display no *charaktêres*, in at least one Genizah copy, dating to the eleventh or twelfth century, the recipe includes some *charaktêres*, and these match quite well with what has been preserved on the clay shards, dating to the sixth or seventh century. Thus, we can show that at least some of the recipe's many copyists and users were quite careful when copying the magical signs it employed – in fact, careful enough that the signs remained recognizably similar even after five centuries of continuous transmission.²⁸ It must be stressed, however, that not all copyists were as careful as we might expect them to be – if we assume, as they must have assumed, that for a magical recipe to work it must be copied very carefully – since in many other cases we can point to the faulty

²⁷ For a fuller breakdown of the Genizah fragments relating to magic, astrology, divination and alchemy, see Bohak 2010b.

²⁸ For the Horvat Rimmon shards and the many later copies of the magical recipe according to which they were produced, see Bohak 2008, 156-158, 271.

transmission of magical recipes from one practitioner to another.²⁹ Thus, when we look at three versions of the same “path jumping” recipe (i.e., to travel long distances in a short period of time) found in three different Genizah fragments, we can see many overlaps between the *charaktêres* they display, but also many differences, clearly demonstrating how textual transmission often entailed extensive textual transformation.³⁰

Another interesting process which can be documented in the Genizah fragments is the attempt, whose earliest history has yet to be elucidated, to “decipher” the *charaktêres*, or to develop new mystical and magical alphabets by providing the supposed Hebrew equivalent of each *charaktêr*.³¹ There clearly were many different attempts to produce such alphabets, and these attempts were in no way limited to the Jewish magicians only.³² The end result often was presented as the “alphabet of Metatron,” the “writing system of Gabriel,” and so on, and with the passage of time, the number of alphabets grew almost exponentially, as we shall presently see.

In addition to the *charaktêres*, the magical texts from the Cairo Genizah, and especially those written in Arabic and Judaeo-Arabic (i.e., Arabic written in Hebrew letters) also display a plethora of “Siegel”, or “string letters,” which clearly were borrowed by the Jews of the Orient in the Middle Ages from their Muslim neighbors. This borrowing is a part of a much wider phenomenon, namely, the extensive absorption into the Jewish magical of numerous elements of Muslim-Arabic magic, an absorption that was greatly facilitated by the Jews’ routine use of Arabic, the language of their host society.³³ Thus, to give just one specific example, two unpublished Genizah fragments which belong to the same quire (T-S K 1.113 + T-S Ar. 43.116) contain parts of a longer text, which is titled “Holy Names for each month,” and provides instructions for magical practices for each month of the Muslim year, each recipe accompanied by the special magical signs that belong to that specific month. The signs themselves consist of rectangular “seals” produced by joining together the typical “string letters” of the Arabic magical tradition (see, for example, the magical seal of the month Muharram, in Table 1.4), and the text itself clearly is a Muslim

²⁹ And see Bohak 2008, 145-148, on the “textual entropy” evident in many Jewish magical texts. For the transmission of magical signs and designs from one language to another, see Burnett 2007.

³⁰ The three recipes may be found in T-S NS 322.19 and T-S Ar.43.91, whose *charaktêres* are virtually identical, and T-S AS 142.28, whose *charaktêres* clearly resemble those of the other two, and yet are quite different. Elsewhere, I hope to publish all three fragments.

³¹ For a typical example, from the Cairo Genizah, see Bohak 2008, 275.

³² For some Arabic comparanda, see Hammer 1806, 35-36 and Fahd 1975.

³³ A detailed study of this process has yet to be written; for a starting point, see Bohak forthcoming.

magical text, transliterated by its Jewish users in Hebrew characters, and perhaps slightly modified by them to suit their own needs. There are many more fragments in the Cairo Genizah with Arabic and Judaeo-Arabic magical texts that employ such “string letters,” and in some cases we even find both *charaktêres* and “string letters” on the same magical fragment.³⁴

While the Cairo Genizah is the best source for the study of early medieval Jewish magic, the study of later Jewish magic in the lands of Islam is greatly facilitated by non-Genizah manuscripts as well, including several very large manuscripts, with hundreds of magical recipes each. In such manuscripts – and, more specifically, in MS New York Public Library Heb. 190 (olim MS Sassoon 56), written in the 1460s, and in MS Geneva 145 (olim MS Sassoon 290), written in the early 16th century – one finds numerous magical signs, which have yet to receive the attention they deserve.³⁵ But even a cursory survey of these magical signs reveals a large variety of both *charaktêres* and “string letters,” as well as the series of seven magical signs which circulated in the Muslim magical tradition under the name of the “Seal of Solomon.” One also finds an almost endless variety of “alphabets of angels,” often copied one after the other and making one wonder what exactly their users made of all these supposedly secret scripts, which seem to have been of no use whatsoever in deciphering the actual *charaktêres* found in dozens of magical recipes within the very same manuscripts. And while a full analysis of all these magic signs might shed more light on their transmission history, one point may already be made with certainty, namely, that at least in some cases, the copyists of the magical recipes did so with a great deal of care. Thus, to give one specific example, a magical spell from the Cairo Genizah, written on cloth and intended to make a certain man named Tarshakin son of Amat-Allah love a certain woman named Ghadab, daughter of Tuffaha (T-S AS 142.174, published as AMB, G1), displays *charaktêres* that are almost identical with those displayed by a recipe found in MS NYPL Heb. 190, page 181, lines 21-26, and preserving ritual instructions very similar to those according to which the Genizah piece of cloth must have been produced (see Table 3). As the Genizah piece dates to the 12th or the 13th century, and the magical recipe book dates to the 1460s, it is clear that this recipe was more-or-less faithfully copied, together with its *charaktêres*, for at least

³⁴ For example, Mosseri VI 9,3, a small fragment from a magical recipe book, contains both types of magical signs. Similar mixtures may be found in Muslim and in Christian magical texts – see, for example, Delatte 1927, 104.

³⁵ I am currently preparing a complete edition of the former manuscript, to be published shortly. For the latter manuscript, see Benayahu 1972. For some of its magical signs, see Weinstock 1981, 53.

two or three centuries, and possibly for much longer.³⁶ As with the Horvat Rimmon shards, here too we see, though much more clearly, that the magical signs found in Jewish magical recipes usually were not an *ad hoc* invention, but the result of the copying, and gradual corruption, of the magical signs found in older copies of the same recipe.³⁷ This, of course, is why some of the *caraktêres* in this specific example still look suspiciously similar to like Greek uncial letters (for example, E, T, H, and the lunate *sigma*).

Before leaving the world of Oriental Jewish magic, one more comment is in order. As we shall see below, in medieval Ashkenaz there was a great interest in the “alphabets of angels” and their decipherment. Apparently, one medieval Jewish mystic also received from Oriental Jewish sources the seven magical signs which often went under the name of the “Seal of Solomon,” and offered an elaborate explanation of each of these signs. This explanation then circulated far and wide, and may still be read in MS NYPL Heb. 190, which includes several occurrences of this series of seven signs (e.g., on page 65), as well as their mystical interpretation (on pages 146-7). In both cases, the signs are slightly different from those which may be seen in Table 1.5 below, but the similarity is close enough to assure us that they are, in fact, a partly-garbled version of the same series. Further research will no doubt shed more light on the origins of this intriguing text, and on its transmission history within the Jewish magical and mystical traditions.

d) The Middle Ages – The Lands of Christendom:

Of all the magical signs found in the Jewish magical tradition, those found in the European Jewish magical manuscripts of the Middle Ages are the most neglected by scholars, not least because many of the older publications on medieval Jewish magic were not accompanied by good photographs of the manuscripts in question. Thus, the following remarks are bound to remain tentative, at least until a fuller survey of all the relevant manuscripts is undertaken by competent scholars. And yet, even a cursory survey suffices to note that the *charaktêres* were well-known to, and well-used by, the Jewish magicians of medieval Europe, and they appear in numerous Jewish magical manuscripts from medieval Ashkenaz (Germany and Northern France), from Spain, and from Italy. Moreover, in addition to the older *charaktêres*, one can see the entry into the Jewish magical tradition of new magical signs, clearly borrowed by the

³⁶ I am grateful to Judith Olszowy-Schlanger and to Edna Engel for dating the Genizah fragment for me.

³⁷ However, here too the copyists’ accuracy should not be overrated; a look at two parallel recipes in MS NYPL Heb. 190, page 100, lines 24-31 and Sassoon 290, page 492, no. 1,702, reveals two very different sets of magical signs, with only some overlaps.

Jews from their Christian neighbors. Thus, when we look, for example, at a collection of astro-magical recipes found in fols. 141-144 of manuscript Munich Heb. 214, written in an Ashkenazi hand of the 15th century, we note some elaborate seals of planets and angels – seals that are made up of rectangular frames inside which are strewn elaborate magical signs, some of which have rings at their tips but most of which do not. These seals look very different from those found in most Oriental Jewish magical manuscripts, but look very much like the seals found in Latin, Christian magical texts of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.³⁸ Similar seals may be found in manuscript Moscow Guenzburg 738 (for example, on fol. 142), written in a 15th-century Italian hand, and presumably in other European Jewish magical manuscripts as well. In a few cases, these new magical signs even made it to the Jews of the lands of Islam (presumably, especially after the Spanish Expulsion of the Jews in 1492), and they may be found even on some late amulets from the Cairo Genizah.³⁹ The same is true of a slightly different type of seals, namely, the elaborate circular seals, usually associated with the seven planets, that appear frequently in Christian magical texts and may also be found in the Jewish ones. As a typical example, we may take manuscript Lehmann 343, an 18th-century Moroccan-Jewish manuscript, which includes the seals of the seven planets, with several seals for each planet (see Table 2).⁴⁰ Each of these seals is made up of two concentric circles, between which and inside which are strewn various signs and symbols, including geometric designs, *charaktêres*, “Hebrew *charaktêres*,” magical words and Names written in the regular Hebrew script, and so on. A comparison of these seals with the seals of the seven planets found in Christian magical texts of the Renaissance would no doubt show that they were borrowed from Christian sources, but probably also transformed along the way, in order to make them look more Jewish than their Christian counterparts.⁴¹

In addition to the copying of older magical signs and the borrowing of new ones, some Jews of medieval Europe were also interested in deciphering them. As we already noted, the production of “angelic alphabets” was quite common in the Middle Ages, and its origins probably lie in the lands of Islam. The Jews of Europe received such alphabets, invented new ones, and in some cases wrote detailed commentaries explaining why each of these signs looks the way it

³⁸ For these comparanda, see above, nn. 10-11.

³⁹ For a case in point, see the two seals in T-S K 1.152, published by Schiffman and Swartz 1992, 138. T-S K 1.9 is a magical handbook, written in a late hand, and containing such seals (see Table 1.6) side-by-side with the more standard *charaktêres*.

⁴⁰ These seals are beautifully reproduced in Hallamish 1988, 187-192.

⁴¹ For another example, see the many magical signs in the manuscript published in Gollancz 1914.

does. One such explanation, published by Israel Weinstock, has recently been identified by Moshe Idel as coming from the pen of Nehemiah ben Shlomo, the mystical prophet of Erfurt of the 13th century.⁴² Such interpretations must have done much to convince their Kabbalistically-minded readers of the great sanctity and legitimacy of the various “angelic alphabets” that they found in older manuscripts of Jewish magic, but most Jewish magicians probably had no need for such long-winded interpretations. For them, the great appeal of the *charaktêres* lay in their powers, vouchsafed by generations of copyists and users of the Jewish magical tradition; their supposed mystical meanings were of secondary importance only.

Before ending our survey, let me add a brief word on the use of magical signs in Modern Jewish magic, up to the very present. With the invention of printing, and its gradual use for the wide dissemination of more and more types of Jewish texts, many Jewish magical texts were printed, often in numerous editions, and many are still being printed in present-day Israel. Looking at these books, be they the numerous editions of *Sefer Raziel* (first printed in 1701), or the lesser-known specimens within this genre, we are sure to run into some magical signs, all of which will look familiar to readers of the above survey.⁴³ But whereas in printed editions these magical signs sometimes are less frequently attested (due either to technical difficulties in printing them, or to the editors’ own choice), when we look in Modern Jewish magical manuscripts, which were still being copied (mostly in the lands of the Ottoman Empire and its heirs, where – for political reasons – printing was slow to gain acceptance) up to the twentieth century, we find as many magical signs as in the older Jewish magical manuscripts. Thus, when we leaf through a manuscript of Jewish magic copied by a Kurdish-Jewish sage ca. 1896 and faithfully printed by his grandson in present-day Israel, we find a whole range of *charaktêres* and “string letters,” and the same is true for many of the amulets and manuscripts that some of my students bring to my seminars at Tel Aviv University, amulets and manuscripts that were brought by their parents or grandparents, from Yemen, Morocco, Iraq, and so on.⁴⁴ A similar mixture of magical signs may be found on many of the Jewish magical objects assembled in a recent exhibition devoted to Jewish magic and demonology, and covering the entire Jewish

⁴² Weinstock 1981; Idel 2007.

⁴³ Note, for example, *Sefer Raziel*, fol. 41a (a sequence of *charaktêres*, looking like the Greek letters XMH/NX), 44a-b (numerous *charaktêres*, many of which look like Greek letters, and some “Hebrew *charaktêres*”); see also Trachtenberg 1939, between page 140 and 141, for a reproduction of the magical signs from *Sefer Raziel*, fol. 44b.

⁴⁴ For the Kurdish-Jewish manuscript, see Meiri 1998.

magical tradition, from Antiquity to Modernity.⁴⁵ A study of Jewish magical signs is, in other words, not merely an antiquarian enterprise, or a study in Jewish history, but an attempt to analyze an aspect of Jewish culture that is still alive and well today, and is likely to remain so for many years to come.

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⁴⁵ As may also be seen from the excellent catalogue, Vukosavović 2010.

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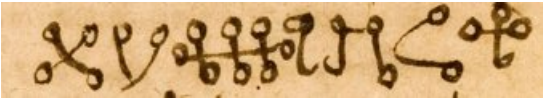
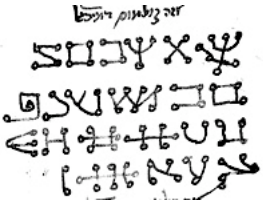
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Table 1: Types of magical signs in Jewish magical texts:

<p>1.1 <i>Charaktères</i> (from NYPL 190, page 140)</p>	
<p>1.2 The “Alphabet of Michael,” with 23 letters (from Sassoon 290, page 566)</p>	

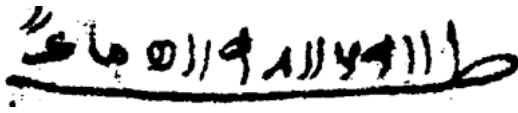
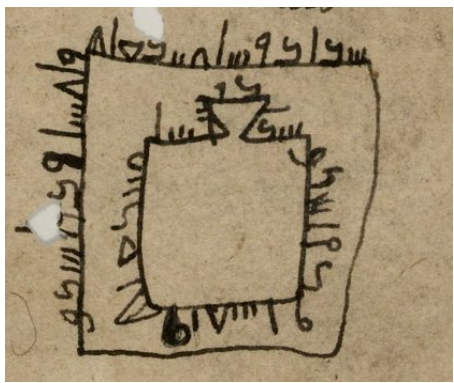

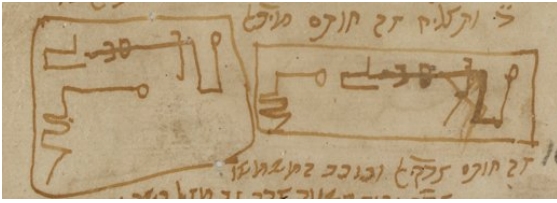
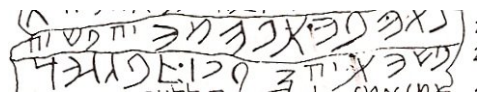
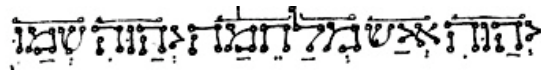
<p>1.3 "String letters" (from CUL Or. 1080.14.13)</p>	
<p>1.4 A "seal" made of "string letters" (from T-S K 1.113)</p>	
<p>1.5 The Arabic "Seal of Solomon" (from Winkler 1930, 59)</p>	
<p>1.6 The seals of Michael and Zidkiel (from T-S K 1.9)</p>	
<p>1.7 "Paleo-Hebrew" signs (from AMB, A4 ll. 21-22)</p>	
<p>1.8 "Hebrew <i>charaktères</i>" (from Sassoon 290, page 224)</p>	

Table 2: Planetary seals of Christian origin in Jewish magical texts (from Hal-
lamish 1988, 191):

The seal of Mercury	The seal of Venus

Table 3: Faithfully copying the *charaktères*:

<p><i>Charaktères</i> from AMB, G1 = T-S AS 142.174</p>	
<p><i>Charaktères</i> from NYPL 190, page 181, line 23</p>	