

TWO APOTROPAIC TEXTS FROM THE JEWISH MUSEUM OF BUDAPEST

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The Jewish Museum possesses two printed apotropaic texts concerning the warding off of demons (I am indebted to Dr. Ilona Beneschofsky, Director of the Museum who was kind enough to make them available to me). The texts are printed on sheets of 9 by 15 cm. According to Jewish tradition they were to be placed in the window of the room of women in childbed. This practice is believed to ward off demons that threaten mother and child. It is to be noted that they are *printed* texts, which means that they must have been widely in use at the time when they were printed, at the beginning of this century (they were printed in Budapest, in Király Street).

The Old Testament tradition frowns on all kinds of magic and belief in demons¹. But in spite of all disapproval, the practice of magic has a long tradition in Jewish lore, from antiquity up to the present day. Beliefs in demons have been widely known since ancient times, together with various methods of magic used to avert the evil influence of demons.

According to the Biblical story of the birth of the twin sons of Tamar (Gen. 38:27-30), the midwife ties a red thread around the arm of the newborn baby Perez. In the story we are told that this served to differentiate him from his brother. In reality the red thread must have had an apotropaic function. According to the Biblical story of Saul, the illness of the king was caused by a demon (*ruah*, "wind", "demon", "spirit"). This same Saul, on the eve of his final battle with the Philistines conjured up the spirit of the dead prophet Samuel in order that he

¹ Deut. 18:10-13, cf. I. Sam. 28, the story of the witch of En-Dor who conjured up the spirit of the prophet Samuel.

might know the battle's outcome. Other kinds of demons (*sdym*) are often mentioned in the Old Testament, without name or function. Demons (*rwḥ*) causing illness appear too in the Jewish Aramaic texts found in Qumran: one of them is a fragmentary work entitled "Prayer of Nabonid"², where the illness of the king Nabonid (probably a kind of skin disease) is said to be caused by a demon (*rwḥ*). In another text, "Genesis Apocryphon", an Aramaic paraphrase of the stories of the Genesis³, one reads that the Egyptian Pharaoh was unable to lie with Sarah after he had taken her from Abraham. The impotence of the Pharaoh was caused by a demon (*rwḥ*). According to the stories of the New Testament Evangelists, Jesus and his disciples healed illnesses by exorcising demons (*pneumata*)⁴. The Testament of Solomon⁵ – a Hellenistic Jewish work surviving in Greek translation, and reworked by a Christian redactor – reflects a sophisticated system of demons in Jewish lore.

Apotropaic methods were widely practised according to the 2nd Book of Maccabees, which mentions (2.Makk.12:40) warriors of the Maccabean army wearing amulets of Canaanite type. The Aramaic magic bowls – bowls with magical texts written inside – were widely used among Syrian Arameans and Jews, with an apotropaic purpose (Shaked & Naveh 1986). Other types of apotropaic texts as well as amulets written either in Hebrew or Aramaic were widely used in late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. Greek magical texts witness that the use of Hebrew formulae and names for magical purposes was considered to be highly effective (Preisendanz 1928-31:1-2).

As a result of the many prohibitions of magical practices, the authors of the Jewish collections of magical texts made a point of emphasizing that the practice described in the text belonged to "white

² Edition of the text: Jongeling, Labuschagne & van der Woude 1976.

³ The best edition of the text (with commentary) is by Fitzmyer (1971).

⁴ Mt. 8:16-17, 32-34, Mark 3:15, Lk. 8:26-39, 9:1-2 etc.

⁵ Edition of the Greek text: McCown 1922. For a standard English translation, with introduction see Duling 1983.

magic", i.e. that it was a magic art practised for the purpose of helping, and not of causing harm, to others. This is why Jewish magical collections dating from the Middle Ages bear titles demonstrating the helpful character of the collection and are at pains to refer to Biblical precedent: eg: *Sepher Razim* (Book of Mysteries), *Hereb Moshe* (The Sword of Moses). The roots *ksp* or *'sp* (both mean "work charms", "practice magic") are totally missing from the titles of these texts and from the epithets of the fictive authors – these words were used traditionally to designate the magic practices of other cultures. In a similar way to the titles of the large collections, the titles of shorter apotropaic texts also make use of words different from *ksp* and *'sp*: they are called *segullab* ("possession"). The same name is employed for the apotropaic texts of the Jewish Museum of Budapest. The two texts have many common motifs, although they represent two different types of the family of the *segullab*-texts.

Our first *segullab* (hereafter referred to as text A) is in fact a well-known Biblical composition, the text of Psalm 121, with some additions. The psalm is a hymnic meditation on the nature of Yahweh, helper, comforter, and source of all good.

It is generally known that Biblical psalms were considered from Antiquity to be very efficacious for magical purposes. Psalms and prophetic texts were often used for divining. Both kinds of text – psalms and prophecy – were taken to contain revelations, not only for the age when they were written, but also for the distant future. Both genres – psalms and prophetic texts – were interpreted in this manner in the Qumran community: they were considered to be texts foretelling events connected with the history of the community⁶. The belief in the efficacy of psalms for apotropaic purposes was based on the idea that the

⁶ These texts are called *peshtarim* (on the basis of their common characteristic, the use of the word *pesher* "interpretation"). Interpretations written to the books of Habakkuk, Isaiah, Nahum, Zephaniah, Micah are known, but other prophetic books are supposed to be interpreted, too. Ps.37 was interpreted in a similar way. A new edition of the *pesher* to the book of Habakkuk, with commentary: Nitzan 1986. For other *pesher*-texts see: Barthélemy & Millik 1955, and Allegro 1968.

situation of the user of the psalm was similar to the situation described in the psalm. The psalm used in *segullah* A is a so-called pilgrim-psalm. The psalm describes Yahweh as the Lord, protecting man from harm.

Ps. 121 was not the only psalm used for apotropaic purposes: other pieces of the collection, Pss. 93, 126, 127, were also in use for the same purpose. The collection Shimmush Tehillim, compiled in the Gaonic period, is a guide for the use of psalms for magical purposes (Trachtenberg 1939: 109, 262). The work mentions Psalm 126 as a text to be used against demons. In later times Ps.121 was used for the same purpose – and the text noted as text A of the Jewish Museum may belong to this later tradition.

The text of the psalm itself is to be read on the lower part of the sheet, in a frame. The use of frames is characteristic of the *segullah*; other parts of the texts thought to be important are also framed: as the name Shadday (*šdy*), printed in bold characters. The name Shadday occurs in the Old Testament a by-name for El or Yahweh. It was considered in the medieval tradition to be the most effective apotropaic name. The name occurs very often as the first element of the texts of the *mezuzoth*, the phylacteria protecting Jewish homes. Another important element framed in our *segullah* is the sentence “annihilate the enemy” (*qr^r stn*) and the felicitations “good luck”, “good constellation” (*mzl twb*). On the upper part of the sheet, around the name Shadday, there are the names of Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Jacob and Leah, Isaac and Rebecca – referring to the legendary ancestors of the newborn baby who is to be defended. The magic name of God, the felicitations and the names of the ancestors have together a protecting function.

On the lower part of the sheet, around the frame encircling the text, one reads words asking for the help of Yahweh, mighty God of Israel. On the bottom of the sheet the name Shadday can be read, in a frame. On both sides of the name, upside down, one reads the words of a formula for warding off the witches, in various orders.

The whole sheet is encircled by an inscription enclosed in a frame composed of a pair of lines. The text of the inscription is a short prayer

asking for the protection of Yahweh and referring to the former deeds of the God who defends the weak against the powerful.

As to the *segullab* noted as text B, it uses, for apotropaic purposes, the same text - Ps. 121 - as *segullab* A, but in a different form. The frame enclosing the text of the psalm is here not a line or ornament, as in the case of *segullab* A, but another text. The text encircling the text of the psalm is a narrative about the prophet Elijah, and Lilith, who is, according to Jewish belief, the demon who attacks newborn babies. Elijah meets Lilith and her entourage (*byt dylh*). The prophet reproaches the demon for her wickedness and impurity. Lilith replies that she is on her way to visit a woman (here follows the name of the owner and user of the *segullab*), in her bedroom, in order to destroy both her and her child. She wants to seize the newborn baby, to drink his (or her) blood, gulp down his brain, weaken his body. Elijah puts a spell (*h̄rm*) on Lilith, paralyses her, so that she becomes powerless. The demon begins to beg: she takes an oath in the name of "the hosts of Israel" (i.e. the angelic host) that she will depart if the prophet lets her live and that she will not do any harm to the woman in childbed or to her child. Finally she imparts to him her names - these names must be written down and hung up in the room of the woman in childbed in order to serve as a protection from Lilith and her train.

The names of the list of *segullab* B are corrupted, they are hard to interpret. The first element of the list, preceding the name Lilith, reads as "stryñ". In fact, this is not a name, but an attribute of Lilith. The correct form of the word is *striga* - it is the name of a blood-sucking demon who kills newborn babies. The figure of the striga was well known in the eastern Mediterranean and in the Balkans from Byzantine times. The characteristics of Lilith in *segullab* B are similar to those of the striga.

The figure of *Lilith striga* is relatively late in Jewish demonology. Lilith herself is an ancient figure in Jewish demonology. She is first mentioned in the Book of Isaiah, among other demons, as a spirit dwelling in desert places and ruins. In the prophetic text there is no reference to the special function of destroying babies and women in childbed. As

to the name Lilith, a demon called Lilu or Lilitu was known in Mesopotamia from the second millennium. The Biblical name Lilith may have originated from this name. The same demon appears as the figure of a winged woman on an ivory tablet from Arslan Tash, dating from the turn of the 8th and 7th centuries. The tablet bears Hebrew and Canaanite words. On the other hand, the Testament of Solomon, a work about magic dating from the Hellenistic period, mentions a demon called Obizut. Obizut is a demon which destroys newborn babies and their mothers (the name is corrupted: its ending leads us to believe that it was a feminine name)⁷. As to her characteristics, the text does not give any information. (Blood-sucking is not mentioned).

The corruption of the figures of Lilith and that of the striga, and the story itself about the meeting of Elijah with Lilith may represent a relatively late tradition. The tradition is rooted in South-European folk-belief, centred around Greece and the Balkans. The story of Lilith meeting with an enemy who subdues her is first mentioned (of a Hebrew incantation written in Candia (Crete), in the 15th century (Cassuto 1934: 260). The enemy of Lilith is here not Elijah, but the archangel Michael, coming from Sinai. The Candian text contains several names of Greek origin. The names mentioned in it and also its structure as a whole are similar to those of the incantations known from the Balkans. The incantations are to ward off the baby-killing female demon *Güllo* (or *Gello*).

The Jewish tradition of Lilith may have been influenced by the Balkan tradition. The text of our *segullah* B mentions, together with Elijah, three other names, the names of three angels who help Elijah. Their names are: *synynrw*, *snsnyrw* and *smnglwp*. The names are of Greek origin and can be found in Christian apotropaic texts against baby-killing demons appearing as the names of the angels Sines, Sysinos and Synodoros. The figures and names of the three angels originate, in all probability, from Greek Christian tradition. By the 18th c. they have become a standard element of Jewish apotropaic texts against Lilith.

⁷ Testamentum Solomonis xiii.3. = McCown 1922:43*-44*.

As to the figure of Elijah and his meeting Lilith, this element first occurs in an 18th century Jewish work, in the second edition of the book entitled *Sod ha-shem* ("The Glory of God") by David Lida (1710). Since that time the name of the prophet occurs on several amulets and in several apotropaic texts. The same texts mention Lilith striga or Lilith Astriga, similarly to *segullah* B of the Jewish Museum of Budapest.

The figure of Elijah has of old been connected with healing and protection from illness, since, according to the Bible, the prophet healed several sick, and even raised a boy from the dead (1.Kings 17, 2.Kings 2). In addition, Elijah appears in the Biblical stories as a magician, multiplying supplies of food and oil; a rain-maker – in short, as a person possessing magic powers. The New Testament and the Rabbinical tradition ascribe to the figure of Elijah a special importance. In contemporary Jewish tradition he is considered as the precursor of the Messianic age. It is to be noted that the stories narrating the healings and miracles of Jesus, narrated in the Gospels, are, from a typological point of view, parallels of the stories of the healings and wonders of Elijah. The cave at the Mount of Carmel, which was, according to the Bible, the scene of the famous competition between the prophets Baal and Elijah (1. Kings 18:20-40), has been connected from Antiquity with a tradition concerning wondrous healings. Apart from the tradition connected with Lilith, and discussed above, Elijah was seen in later Jewish tradition as a figure protecting newborn children from harm. This is demonstrated by the chair called *kisse shel Elijahu* ("Elijah's chair") used at the ceremony of the circumcision of male babies. The chair symbolizes the prophet himself. The words of the ceremony refer to his protecting power as illustrated in the story where he raises a boy from the dead (1.Kings 17:17-24).

The golden age of legends about Elijah was the period of Hasidism, an 18th century East-European Jewish movement. According to Hasidic tradition, the prophet foretold the birth of Israel Baal Shem Tov, founder of Hasidism. Elijah is perhaps the most popular Biblical figure in the legends of Hasidism – he is more popular than David or Solomon. In

the Hasidic legends he embodies the idea of righteousness: he is a popular hero who rewards the righteous and punishes the evil.

Coming back to our *segullab* B, we can conclude that its final form comes from Hasidic tradition. According to the superscription of the *segullab* it is a *smyrh lhyld mnhb 'l sm twb* "a protection for the child against Baal Shem Tob". The superscription, together with the other elements of the *segullab* – the text of the psalm, the story about Elijah and Lilith, the wishes *mzl twb, qf stn*, and *'dm whwh pnymh – lylyt wbt dylh hws* ("let Adam and Eve be with them – Lilith and her followers outside"), the Name of God, the names of Biblical ancestors, the apotropaic sentence in various combinations of words – was intended to assure, according to the belief of the user of the *segullab*, an efficacious protection for the child against the dangers and illnesses of early babyhood.

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