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Contents

Preface — V

In memoriam Walter Burkert (February 2, 1931 – March 11, 2015) — IX

I Authoritative Traditions and Ritual Power in the Ancient World

Raʿanan Boustan, Jacco Dieleman, and Joseph E. Sanzo

Introduction: Authoritative Traditions and Ritual Power in the Ancient World — 3

David Frankfurter

The Great, the Little, and the Authoritative Tradition in Magic of the Ancient World — 11

Theodore S. de Bruyn

An Anatomy of Tradition: The Case of the *Charitêsion* — 31

Sarah Iles Johnston

The Authority of Greek Mythic Narratives in the Magical Papyri — 51

Joseph E. Sanzo

The Innovative Use of Biblical Traditions for Ritual Power: The Crucifixion of Jesus on a Coptic Exorcistic Spell (Brit. Lib. Or. 6796[4], 6796) as a Test Case — 67

Raʿanan Boustan and Michael Beshay

Sealing the Demons, Once and For All: The Ring of Solomon, the Cross of Christ, and the Power of Biblical Kingship — 99

II New Directions in the Study of Myth

Hanne Eisenfeld

Ishtar Rejected: Reading a Mesopotamian Goddess in the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* — 133

Laura Feldt

Ancient Wilderness Mythologies – The Case of Space and Religious Identity Formation in the Gospel of Matthew — 163

Jan N. Bremmer

The Self-sacrifice of Menoeceus in Euripides' *Phoenissae*, *II Maccabees* and Statius' *Thebaid* — 193

Fritz Graf

Early Histories Written in Stone: Epigraphy and Mythical Narratives — 209

H. A. Shapiro

Lost Epics and Newly Found Vases: Sources for the Sack of Troy — 225

R. Scott Smith

Bundling Myth, Bungling Myth: The Flood Myth in Ancient and Modern Handbooks of Myth — 243

Daniel James Waller

Echo and the *Historiola*: Theorizing the Narrative Incantation — 263

III **Varia**

Eric Rebillard

Popular Hatred Against Christians: the Case of North Africa in the Second and Third Centuries — 283

Sarah Rey

Aperçus sur la religion romaine de l'époque républicaine, à travers les comédies de Plaute — 311

Ra‘anan Boustan, Jacco Dieleman, and Joseph E. Sanzo

Introduction: Authoritative Traditions and Ritual Power in the Ancient World

The overlapping domains of authority and tradition—and their amalgam “authoritative tradition”—have acquired in recent decades significant power as analytical categories. Prompted in large measure by the pioneering work of Eric Hobsbawm, scholars now examine the diverse ways that authority is generated for certain social groups through the invention of traditions.¹ For Hobsbawm, this impulse and capacity to invent traditions is particularly symptomatic of modern societies that during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have been characterized by

...a rapid transformation of society [that] weakens or destroys the social patterns for which ‘old’ traditions had been designed...or when such old traditions and their institutional carriers and promulgators no longer prove sufficiently adaptable and flexible, or are otherwise eliminated...²

Hobsbawm contended that, under such conditions, traditions (e.g., the royal Christmas broadcast in Britain), while invented, are typically presented as invariant; they generally attract fictive genealogies and are often linked with a (mythic) past. Moreover, these traditions are maintained through the repetition of spectacles and rituals and are designed to promote social cohesion and to legitimize existing or emergent structures of authority.³ In Hobsbawm’s estimation, premodern societies did not have “invented” traditions in this technical sense, but rather possessed “genuine” traditions, with a concomitant range of “customs” (i.e., common sets of behaviors) that, within socially contingent limits, were mutable and thus adaptable to the fluctuations and exigencies of quotidian life.⁴

Some have challenged Hobsbawm’s operative dichotomy between premodern and modern approaches to “tradition.” For instance, in an essay that explores the dialectic of tradition in Jewish history, Albert Baumgarten and Marina Rustow have recently argued that traditions were neither more nor less “invented” during the premodern period than in modern societies.⁵ Instead, Baumgarten and Rustow find it more heuristically useful to differentiate between two types of *appeals to* tradition: weak appeals refer to what is simply passed down through time, while strong appeals serve specific contemporary aims.⁶ They demonstrate, for example, that the Mishnah’s reference to the knowledge of the location of the ark by the families of

¹ Hobsbawm 1992. For the impact of Hobsbawm on the study of religion, see the various essays in Engler and Grieve 2005.

² Hobsbawm 1992, 4–5.

³ Hobsbawm 1992, 9.

⁴ Hobsbawm 1992, 2.

⁵ Baumgarten and Rustow 2011, 207–37. See also von Stuckrad 2005, 224.

⁶ Baumgarten and Rustow 2011, 209.

Rabban Gamaliel and R. Hananyah (mSheq 6:1) was not merely an “invented tradition,” but was, more importantly, a specific claim to authority in the here-and-now based on a connection with the past (i. e., a “strong” appeal to tradition).⁷ Similarly, twentieth-century rabbis appealed to, but reframed, earlier rabbinic traditions in light of the modern doctrine of *Daʿat Torah* (lit. “knowledge of Torah”) in order to expand their authoritative purviews beyond the limits of halakhah.⁸ For Baumgarten and Rustow, “modern and premodern Jewish appeals to tradition and continuity share more than divides them.”⁹

Scholars of ancient “magic”—especially those focusing on the so-called Greek Magical Papyri (PGM) and Demotic Magical Papyri (PDM)—have likewise found significant explanatory power in the discursive spheres of authority, tradition, and authoritative tradition.¹⁰ Hans Dieter Betz explored how the magical practitioners behind PGM defined themselves in relation to authoritative traditions.¹¹ For Betz, the “Graeco-Egyptian” authors and redactors of PGM—somewhat reminiscent of Hobsbawm’s modern inventors of tradition—appealed to ancient traditions (Greek, Egyptian, Jewish) in composing spells, while simultaneously couching their theoretical reflections on the nature of their practices in terms borrowed from contemporaneous Greek philosophical schools, such as Neoplatonism and Neopythagoreanism. The latter tendency is for Betz “evidence of the rise of magic from the lower strata of society reflected in many of the spells to the higher levels of the cultural *élite* in the Roman Empire.”¹² This view has been criticized by Egyptologists, most strongly by Robert Ritner, for being overly Hellenocentric. It confuses Greek language with Greek culture and ignores the presence of Egyptian languages and scripts on several of the papyri preserving the Greek spells.¹³ By contrast, Egyptologists advocate for resituating PGM alongside PDM within their proper geographical and historical context, that is, Roman Imperial Egypt. Accordingly, Jacco Dieleman regards PGM and PDM as the (reworked) products of bilingual scribes who had been trained in Egyptian temple scriptoria and were equally conversant with Greek religion, mythology, philosophy, and literature.¹⁴ Dieleman maintains, however, that the two corpora were marketed for different audiences. He contends that the Greek spells presuppose that their readers appreciate the “prestige” of multiple cultural traditions (e. g., Egyptian, Greek, and Jewish).¹⁵ They cater to a Hellenized clientele. The Demotic spells are more con-

7 Baumgarten and Rustow 2011, 212.

8 Baumgarten and Rustow 2011, 230. See now also Brown 2014.

9 Baumgarten and Rustow 2011, 209.

10 On the problems with the term magic, see most recently Aune 2007 and Otto 2013.

11 Betz 1982, 161–70 [= Betz 1990, 173–83].

12 Betz 1982, 163 [= Betz 1990, 175].

13 Ritner 1995, 3358–71.

14 Dieleman 2005, 185–284.

15 See also Suarez dela Torre 2014, 243–62.

servative in nature, targeting an audience that looks to Egyptian models and formats for ritual authority.¹⁶

Several scholars have examined the relationship between religious traditions and authority by considering the extent to which the formularies in PGM deploy “Jewish” elements as a source of cultural capital. Thus, John Gager and Gideon Bohak have stressed that the “Hebrew” or “Jewish” connotations of divine names like *Iaô* or *Adônai Sabaôth* were no longer evident within the context of the PGM, having been absorbed into the transcultural *koiné* of late-antique magic.¹⁷ By contrast, Morton Smith has argued that the Jewish tradition was consciously invoked in several spells either for advertising purposes or because of the efficacy that non-Jewish practitioners attributed to Jewish magic or to the Jewish god.¹⁸ These conflicting analyses testify to the difficulties involved in determining how scribes, ritual specialists, and clients might have valued elements from various religious traditions within ancient magic—and whether they even perceived the presence of “foreign” elements in the first place.¹⁹

But historians of ancient magic have also explored authoritative tradition in a more restrictive sense. A growing body of scholarship has focused on the deployment of long-standing corpora, texts, and stories for healing, protection, or cursing. The formularies in PGM, for instance, readily make use of citations of Homeric poetry that presumably have some kind of analogical connection to the concerns of the formulary²⁰ or evoke a broader narrative or performative context that was deemed relevant in some way to the concerns of the spell.²¹ Scholars have also explored the ways biblical lore was deployed in various ancient magical contexts, including the Greek and Coptic amulets and formularies from late antique Egypt,²² the incantation bowls from Sasanian Iraq,²³ and the magical media from the Cairo Genizah.²⁴ Taken together, these analyses are beginning to reveal the continuities and discontinuities in the magical uses of specific authoritative texts in the ancient, late antique, and medieval Mediterranean.²⁵

16 Dieleman 2005, 281–84. While agreeing with Dieleman that the practitioners and readers of Demotic spells were certainly Egyptian, Lynn LiDonnici argues that the Greek spells do not necessarily reflect a non-Egyptian context (2007, 91).

17 Gager 1972, 135–36; Bohak 2003, 69–82; Bohak 2008, 196–209.

18 Smith 1996, 255.

19 On the relative utility of the category syncretism, see the various papers in Cassidy 2001 and Frankfurter 2006.

20 See Collins 2008.

21 See Faraone 1996, 85; Versnel 2002, 124 (drawing on Foley 1991, 7).

22 E.g., Kraus 2006; De Bruyn 2010; Sanzo 2014.

23 E.g., Müller-Kessler 2013.

24 E.g., Salzer 2007; Salzer 2010.

25 On the similarities and differences between the magical uses of the Bible and Homer, see e.g., Sanzo 2014, 171–76.

Despite these important scholarly developments and achievements, there remain several dimensions to the relationship between ancient magic and authoritative tradition that require further study. How did magical practitioners negotiate the dynamic boundaries between local and translocal traditions? How did practitioners maintain a sense of tradition and authority while adapting ritual practices to changing cultural conditions? How did practitioners in their engagements with pre-existing authoritative traditions negotiate the creative and conservative impulses that were characteristic of ancient magic more generally? How did magic figure into the construction and maintenance of religious identity?

It is the goal of the present collection of papers to address these questions. This volume is based on a colloquium that took place at the University of California, Los Angeles on 26 October 2012 by the same title.²⁶ The regional focus of the papers is the ancient and late antique Mediterranean world, with a particular emphasis on Egypt and Byzantium. Moreover, while the concerns of several of the studies reside at the intersection of Christianity and magical practice, all of the papers illuminate in their own ways magic's role in the shifting and contested boundaries between indigenous Egyptian religion, Greco-Roman religions, Christianity, and Judaism.

In "The Great, the Little, and the Authoritative Tradition in Magic of the Ancient World," David Frankfurter argues for using the term "magic" to describe local reflexes of "great" religious traditions. He contrasts his approach to earlier scholarship that viewed magic as the degenerate form of the noble religious traditions of antiquity, but suggests that this view, while untenable, did hit on a fundamental point: many of the ritual acts, symbols, and materials used in magical writings and practices relied on the authority of more established, translocal traditions. Building on Robert Redfield's heuristic dichotomy between the Great Tradition and the Little Tradition, Frankfurter demonstrates through a series of case-studies the creative tension between local needs and customs and the overarching great traditions that legitimate, however distantly, both practitioner and practice. Thus, many magical objects link themselves to the Great Tradition through the performance of the written word, even when the exact form of the writing deviated from the manifest content of the Great Tradition. Other magical traditions develop on the local level with reference to figures from an authoritative past. Altogether, Frankfurter delineates three primary ways in which magical practices gain performative efficacy by reference to a Great Tradition: an authoritative representative of that tradition can directly mediate its recognized, institutional forms; a practitioner can improvise on elements of a religious tradition, whether living or moribund, often in the face of official sanction; or a practitioner can generate novel narratives, gestures, sacred objects, and so on, that were not in fact part of the authoritative tradition to which these "invented" traditions are meant to refer.

²⁶ The editors of this volume would like to express their gratitude to Center for the Study of Religion at the University of California, Los Angeles for serving as the primary sponsor for this event.

Theodore de Bruyn's essay, "An Anatomy of Tradition: The Case of the *Charitêsion*," investigates the relationship between tradition and authority in shifting cultic environments. In particular, de Bruyn examines the *charitêsion* ("good-luck charm") in Demotic, Greek, and Coptic ritual exemplars. Bearing in mind insights from ritual theorists Roy Rappaport and Catherine Bell as to how ritual or ritualizing activity conveys a sense of tradition while allowing for innovation, de Bruyn traces over time the use of the *charitêsion* in Roman Egypt to determine how practitioners maintained a sense of both tradition and relevance. The extant record reveals that practitioners conveyed authority by reproducing the structure or formulation of the *charitêsion*—albeit in manifold ways. At the same time, while the texts of many *charitêsia* merely reflect the eclectic predilections of their practitioners, the particular coordination of idioms in select *charitêsia* made their texts relevant to specific cultic contexts, such as the Egyptian temple cult or a Valentinian Christian community.

The essays by Sarah Iles Johnston and Joseph E. Sanzo explore the intersecting roles of creativity, authority, and evocation in the magical use of long-standing traditions. In "The Authority of Greek Mythic Narratives in the Magical Papyri," Sarah Iles Johnston discusses how the authors of the Greek Magical Papyri used the authority of Greek mythic narratives to compose ritual texts that made the practitioner susceptible to believing that he achieved what the rite promised to deliver. Greek myths held great authority as accounts about the gods and as products of acclaimed poets. Drawing on media theory, Johnston argues that Greek myths facilitated belief in the gods through their episodic delivery and plurimedial instantiations (i.e., via encounters in books, festivals, and other contexts). These modes of storytelling help inculcate in the listener a belief in the existence of the story world and form close bonds between the listener and the story's characters. The authors of the Greek Magical Papyri inherited the authority of these earlier narratives and, by evoking these narratives in the incantations—often simply by the use of names—they crafted spells that predisposed the practitioner to vividly experience interaction with the gods and to believe in the rite's success. As Johnston puts it herself: "The credibility of this world and the authority behind the ways in which the spells describe it rest on long-standing and highly vivid poetic and artistic conventions for representing Greek gods and the spaces they inhabited."

In his paper, "The Innovative Use of Biblical Traditions for Ritual Power: The Crucifixion of Jesus on a Coptic Exorcistic Spell (Brit. Lib. Or. 6796[4], 6796)," Joseph E. Sanzo investigates the intersection of innovation, biblical text, and ritual power by examining a seventh-century C.E. spell that constructs ritual efficacy in part by creatively engaging with the crucifixion story. In particular, this practitioner juxtaposes disparate biblical texts dealing with the resurrection, adds news details to the story, and visually engages with the story through an assortment of images of the crucifixion scene and words, which are written in a ring-script around those images. Sanzo then reflects on the implications of the spell's complex version of the crucifixion for understanding the tacit traditions that were metonymically invoked through the use of names, especially Jesus. He concludes that the creative use of biblical traditions

on artifacts, such as Brit. Lib. Or. 6796(4), 6796, suggests that the implied stories, which imbued names with relevant paradigmatic power, would probably only partially correspond to known traditions and thus be unrecognizable to us in many cases.

Finally, in “Sealing the Demons, Once and For All: The Ring of Solomon, the Cross of Christ, and the Power of Biblical Kingship,” Raʿanan Boustan and Michael Beshay investigate how authoritative traditions can be put to use in the construction and maintenance of identity. Boustan and Beshay re-examine the widespread and influential tradition that Solomon possessed a signet-ring with which he mastered the demons and put them to work in the construction of the Jerusalem Temple. Through close readings of the earliest sources for this tradition, they show that the connection between Solomon’s signet-ring, the demons, and the building of the Temple did not crystallize during the Second Temple period nor did it develop within a Jewish context, but was instead a Christian innovation of the third and fourth centuries. This tradition is most fully articulated in the *Testament of Solomon*, which the authors situate within the context of early Christian debates concerning the ritual efficacy and symbolic meanings of baptism and Holy Land pilgrimage. They thus trace the shifting significance of Solomon’s magical signet-ring as it came to reflect the concerns of a Christianity that was increasingly intertwined with Roman imperial power and prestige. They suggest that the signet-ring, which by the late fourth century had been produced as an actual object and put on display as a relic alongside the True Cross at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, became a symbol of divinely ordained kingship and transformed Solomon’s provisional victory over the demons with his signet-ring into a pre-figuration of Christ’s ultimate victory over the demons through the crucifixion.

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