CHAPTER 5

Sorceresses

Professor Saul Lieberman, on the occasion of a lecture given by Gershom Sholem, is known to have said: “Nonsense is nonsense, but the history of nonsense is scholarship,” referring to the study of Kabbalah; by extension, his observation can also apply to the study of sorcery.

This chapter sets out to examine the feminine aspect of Jewish sorcery in antiquity. Though the study will focus chiefly on the talmudic period, the biblical period will be examined by way of introduction and background. The information presented here serves to facilitate a study of the historical aspect of sorcery in Jewish antiquity and to clarify the pertinent social aspect of this occupation. It will be seen that the history of sorcery is an integral component of any inquiry into the status of women and of men’s attitude towards women in antiquity.

I. The Bible

Magic and sorcery permeated the ancient world; words were invested with the power of effecting material consequences so that there was no need to resort to action. The believers consulted experts who could change or improve nature, merely by uttering a word.1 The Bible bans the practice of any kind of witchcraft whatsoever, and underscores the interdiction several times. Deut 18:10-12 reads:

Let no one be found among you who consigns his son or daughter to the fire, or who is an augurer, a soothsayer, a diviner, a sorcerer, one who casts spells, or one who consults ghosts, or familiar spirits, or one who inquires of the dead. For anyone who does such things is abhorrent to the Lord...

Lev. 19:26 reads: “You shall not practice divination or soothsaying.” King Manasseh is castigated for doing “what was displeasing to the Lord...”

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Lord, following the abhorrent practices of the nations that the Lord had dispossessed before the Israelites” (2 Kings 21:2 ff.) and these sins are then stated explicitly: “He consigned his son to the fire, he practiced soothsaying and divination, and consulted ghosts and familiar spirits; he did much that was displeasing to the Lord, to vex Him” (2 Kings 21:6): this interdiction applied to witches and to the practice of witchcraft. Another interdiction appears in Ex. 22:17: “You shall not tolerate a sorceress,” adding two new dimensions: the death penalty for those practicing sorcery and the specific mention of women who practice sorcery. This emphasis is unclear, especially given the literary evidence of the activity of sorcerers and not sorceresses.\(^2\) As a rule, the Bible employs the masculine form to refer to men and women alike; here the interdiction is directed specifically against women. This is perhaps what led the medieval grammarians to the conclusion that נוכשף (mekhashefa) is not the feminine singular of נוכש (mekhashef), but rather a collective noun (like זה daga).\(^3\)

Only one detailed description of witchcraft occurs in the Bible: that of the woman from En-Dor “who consulted ghosts”. 1 Sam. 28 tells how Saul, before leaving for his battle against the Philistines, consulted a medium in En-Dor. She called upon the dead prophet Samuel, and from the ensuing conversation between Saul and the medium, we learn that Saul had put mediums and sorcerers to death, in compliance with the decree “You shall not tolerate a sorceress.” Indeed, some commentators have it that the medium tricked Saul into thinking that the prophet Samuel himself spoke to him,\(^4\) but this rationalistic

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\(^2\) Pharaoh’s sorcerers and magicians (Ex. 7:11); sorcerers in the court of the king of Babylon (Daniel 2:2); the elders of Moab, versed in divination, who performed spells at the bidding of the king of Moab (Num 22:7). Similar cases of sorcerers appear among the Israelites as well (Micah 3:5). On the other hand, there is no mention of sorceresses (see below) aside from the metaphor employed by Nahum (3:4) comparing Nineveh to a “mistress of sorcery” and a harlot, and by Isaiah (47:9), speaking of “enchantments and countless spells “ of Chaldea.

\(^3\) This is the opinion expressed by R. Jonah ibn Janah, Sefer ha-Rikma, M. Wilenski (ed.), (Jerusalem, 1964), p. 393 (Hebrew), and see H. Heller, Peshita – Sefer Shemot (Berlin, 1929), p. 100 (Hebrew). The best example of this is the collective noun daga, which is not the feminine form of “dag,” neither is ziyya the feminine of zi, nor is a hasida the wife of a hasid. In any case, the sages interpreted it differently, see below.

\(^4\) See the commentary of R. David Kimhi to 1 Sam. 28:25. He cites an argument between the geonim on the question whether the woman knowingly tricked him, or whether it was indeed sorcery. See also: L. Ginzberg, Ginzei Schechter, I (New York, 1926), pp. 299-300 (Hebrew). The Church Fathers were also divided on this question. See: M. Summers, The History of Witchcraft (The Mystic Press, USA not dated, reprint of 1925 edition.), pp. 176 ff.; K. A. D. Smelik, “The Witch of Endor: 1 Samuel in Rabbinic and Christian Exegesis till 800 A.D.,” Vigiliae Christianae, 33 (1977), pp. 160-179. See also Y. Kaufman,
interpretation does not change the relevance of the incident for the present discussion about women and sorcery in antiquity.\(^5\)

Jezebel, daughter of the king of Sidon, is also called a sorceress: "How can all be well as long as your mother Jezebel carries on her countless harlotries and sorceries?" (2 Kings 21:2 ff.). A similar connection between licentiousness and sorcery emerges from the invocation of the prophet Nahum of an image of a whore for the city Nineveh: "Because of the countless harlotries of the harlot, the winsome mistress of sorceries" (Nahum 3:4). It seems that it was commonplace to link licentiousness with witchcraft,\(^6\) both being skills or professions practiced on the fringes of society, catering to the base needs of men.\(^7\)

The prophet Ezekiel (12:17-23) castigated Jewish women who dealt in witchcraft and magic for the purpose of causing death or bringing the dead back to life. Both black magic and white magic — the latter being benevolent sorcery — were considered the domain of women.\(^8\) The biblical approach can be summed up as follows: the Bible tells of women dealing in witchcraft; though it distinguishes between sorceresses and sorcerers, the Bible does not identify women alone with the practice of witchcraft as thoroughly as do post-biblical sources.

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\(^5\) "Ha-Sippur al ba’alat ha-ov," A. Biram (et al., eds.), Sefer Neiger, Ma’amirim be-heker ha-Tanakh (Jerusalem, 1959), pp. 88-95 (Hebrew).


\(^7\) The connection between harlotry and witchcraft (in the descriptions of Jezebel and Nineveh) is emphasized in the discussion of the sages of the Canaanites as sorcerers and harlots (Lev. Rabbah, 23:7). In medieval Europe, the casting of spells (causing a miscarriage) and prostitution were frequently mentioned together. See: Shulamit Shahar, Ha-Ma’amad ha-revi’i: ha-Isha be-hevrat Yemei-ha-Beinayyim (Dvir, Tel-Aviv, 1983), p. 114 (Hebrew).

\(^8\) Ez. 13:19: "You have profaned my Name... in return for morsels of barley and handfuls of bread." This refers probably to the human forms women would fashion out of dough and stick pins into (black magic practiced in medieval Europe, or voodoo in America), i.e. sympathetic magic. It must be recalled that pagan civilization was accustomed to making idols. However, while the statue of a human being made out of wood or stone required artistry and money, the fashioning of a human figure from dough was cheap and required no expertise.
II. The Pseudepigrapha

The affinity between women and witchcraft is rarely mentioned in the apocrypha. The first reference is in 1 Enoch (Ethiopian), composed circa the third century B.C.E., that is, before the completion of the biblical canon.⁹ 1 Enoch (chapters 6-8) may be seen as a type of commentary to Genesis 6:1-4, telling how the divine beings took wives from among the daughters of men. 1 Enoch amplifies the terse biblical prose, explaining that two hundred angels, headed by Semyaz (he who sees God) descended upon Mount Hermon:

and they took wives unto themselves, and everyone (respectively) chose one woman for himself, and they began to go unto them. And they taught them magical medicine: incantations, the cutting of roots, and taught them about plants.¹⁰

That is, humans got their knowledge of witchcraft from the angels (1 Enoch 8:3). The angels taught humans witchcraft, women being the first to practice magic. Man thus attributed all the evil in the world to woman.

The Testament of Reuben 5:5-6 tells how women seduced the giants: “for every woman who schemes in these ways is destined for eternal punishment for it was thus that they charmed the watchers, who were before the flood” (Charlesworth, p. 784). According to the author, then, women did not learn magic from the angels; they were already adept at it, and used magic to entrap the angels.¹¹ It seems that this inclusive approach regarding women as the source of witchcraft in the world can serve as an apt introduction to the treatment of this subject in talmudic literature.

III. The Talmud

In the first centuries B.C.E. and C.E., Jews were reputed far and wide to be adept in the practice of magic, though no specific mention of women as sorceresses is made.¹² The predominance of magic in antiquity led

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¹¹ However, see The Testament of Judah in which the sons of Judah are accused of: “the licentiousness and witchcraft and idolatry that you practice ...following ventriloquists, omen dispensers, and demons of deceit (Testament of Judah, Charlesworth, I, p. 801). On sorcery directed against the authorities, see, for instance, M. Margaliot, *Sefer Ha-Razim* (Jerusalem, 1967), p. 82 (Heavenly sphere II, 17): “If one seeks to cast a spell on a great number of people, or a ruler, or a judge, or townspeople, or countrymen, etc.” (Hebrew). A similar text denouncing spells has been found in Qumran but has not yet been published.
modern scholars to address this subject to greater or lesser degree, but the social aspect of witchcraft has hitherto been neglected. The earliest evidence of witches in talmudic literature refers to the non-Jewish witches killed by Simeon b. Shetah, in the first century B.C.E. According to the story in y. Hagigah 2:5, 77d, Simeon b. Shetah had eighty witches hanged in Ashkelon, women who sat together in a cave and plotted and schemed to destroy the world. The talmudic description dwells in detail on how his men caught the witches, exhibiting familiarity with the witches’ practices, and leaves no room for doubt that there was indeed a historical background underlying this story, though it is not entirely clear. It is difficult to learn from this story if Simeon b. Shetah conquered Ashkelon, or why he killed the witches rather than his enemies. It seems that these witches were idolatrous priestesses, as it is clear that any sorcerer and sorceress must address whatever god they worship. It is therefore evident that Simeon b. Shetah’s act should be linked with the drive to banish idolatry from the land. Be that as it

15 ff. (Hebrew); M. Stern, “Te’ur Eretz-Israel biydei Plinius ha-Zaken va-halukatah ha-administrativit shel Yehudah besof yemei bayyit sheni,” Tarbiz, 36 (1968), pp. 215-229, especially p. 219 (Hebrew). See also b. Pesahim 8b, that is, a gentle, seeing the Jew searching for bread, would suspect him of practicing witchcraft. The Jews believed, then, that gentiles thought every Jew was suspect of practicing witchcraft. See also the bibliography in: M.D. Herr, “Inyanei halakha be-Eretz-Israel ba-Me’a ha-Shishit veha-shevi’it lisefirat ha-Notzrim,” Tarbiz, 49 (1988), pp. 37-50 (Hebrew).

13 On different aspects of this act, see E.E. Halevi, Ha-aggada ha-historit-biographit (Tel Aviv, 1975), pp. 81-84 (and the parallel variants: ibid., p. 72), (Hebrew).

14 According to the Talmud, when the men of Simeon b. Shetah lifted the women off the ground – their spells were broken. This suggests that they were engaged in some form of worship in the cult of the Earth goddess; moving away from the earth decreased the power of the goddess. See R. Patai, Adam va-adama, 2 (Jerusalem, 1943), pp. 113-119 (Hebrew).

15 See A. Kasher, “Milhamt o she l ha-melekh Yannai be-arim ha-Hellenistikyyot be-aspaklariyya shel kitvei Yosef ben Matityahu,” Cathedra, 41 (1987), pp. 11-36 especially 21 (Hebrew); Y. Efron, “Ma’aseh Ashkelon shel Shimon ben Shetah,” Appendix, in: A. Kasher, Cenaan, Pleshet, Yavan ve-Yisrael (Jerusalem, 1988), pp. 222-223; 298-320 (Hebrew). Kasher speculates that the witches were priestesses of Athargatis, the Canaanite Ashtoreth, identified later with the Greek Aphrodite, based on the evidence of cult worship in Ashkelon. Be that as it may, an examination of the type of witchcraft practiced reveals that the witches were occupied mainly in worship of the Earth goddess (Ashthoreth), and not the goddess of the sea (the Ashkelon goddess is described by Diodorus as half-woman, half-fish, following the later Greek type). On witches in antiquity and their identification with female and earth cults, see J.C. Baroja, The World of the Witches (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1971), pp. 177 ff.
may, these witches were not Jewish, and can teach us nothing regarding
Jewish society in Eretz-Israel in antiquity.

The Talmud links women and witchcraft on several occasions.
Mishnah Aboth 2:7 has a saying by Hillel (first century C.E.): “The more
possessions the more care; the more women the more witchcraft; the
more bondswomen the more lewdness.” That is, as the accumulation of
property generates worry, it is equally clear that owning many maid-
 servants breeds licentiousness.16 A woman could seek to cast a spell on a
younger woman and make her barren, or cause her not to find favor in
the eyes of the master of the house.17 The tannaitic literature from the
second century C.E. makes several references to the link between
women and witchcraft, phrased in extreme terms. In b. Berakhot 53a we
find the following halakha:

Our Rabbis taught: “If one was walking outside the town and smelt an odour [of
spices], if the majority of the inhabitants are idolaters he does not say a blessing, but
if the majority are Israelites he does say a blessing. R. Jose’ says: Even if the majority
are Israelites he does not say a blessing, because the daughters of Israel use incense for
witchcraft.

That is, R. José the Galilean (second century) believed that each and
eye Jewish woman was suspect of practicing witchcraft, of offering
incense in idolatrous worship.18 The gemara makes an attempt to soften
this opinion, saying that only a minority of women who burned
incense were engaging in witchcraft, but R. José’s sweeping generalization —
that any incense that one smells derives from the witchcraft of
Jewish women — cannot be ignored.

R. José’s categorical assurance of the inevitable tie between women
and witchcraft accords with the opinion attributed to R. Simeon b.
Yohai, his junior. The discussion in b. Eruvin 64b refers to the halakha
pertaining to a situation in which a person finds food by the wayside: is

16 On “the more bondswomen – the more licentiousness,” see S. Assaf, be-Oholei Ya’akov
(Jerusalem, 1943), p. 223 (Hebrew).

17 Cf. the commentary of R. Jacob b. Asher (baal ha-Turim) to Deut. 21:15: “Many wives
cause much witchcraft; even if a man has two wives, one casts spells to make him hate
the other.” Another example of a woman casting spells against another is found in
in unto Hagar, and she conceived” – why does it say “you have conceived” – to teach us
that Sara cast an evil eye upon her and she miscarried.” The quote is based on the

18 See, for a case of incense-burning while casting spells, M. Margaliot, Sefer ha-Razim,
p. 68 (Heavenly sphere I, 29): “Take myrrh and frankincense on fiery coals for the angel
called Orpaniel.” On the use of incense and smoke in witchcraft in antiquity (and in
later periods), see A. Marmorstein, “Minhagim Kadmonim be-eretz-Yisrael,” Ma’assaf
Zion, 2 (1927), pp. 17-27 (Hebrew).
he permitted to ignore it, or must he pick it up. From the story recounted there of R. Gamliel, the gemara concludes that one may not ignore foodstuffs found by the wayside. This opinion raises the following comment:

R. Johanan laid down in the name of R. Simeon b. Yohai: this applies only to the earlier generations when the daughters of Israel did not freely indulge in witchcraft, but in the later generations, when the daughters of Israel freely indulge in witchcraft, one may pass them by.

R. Simeon b. Yohai believed, then, that the daughters of Israel were wanton and practiced witchcraft, and this would seem to be the opinion held by the majority. Thus, if one finds bread by the wayside — there is a suspicion that the bread is part of a spell (for instance, a figure fashioned out of dough, in order to achieve the death of one’s enemy) and thus it is forbidden to pick it up. 19

In the parallel account in y. Abodah Zarah 1:9, 40a there is a similar, though slightly different opinion. The remark is brought there in the name of R. Abbahu, not R. Simeon b. Yohai, and merely says “because of witchcraft,” without specifying women, though it may be assumed that women, not men, baked the bread. A study of the textual variants shows that it is unclear if in fact it was R. Simeon b. Yohai who voiced these strong opinion against women. However, we do possess another text that may tip the balance in favor of a conclusive identification of R. Simeon b. Yohai in y. Kiddushin 4:11, 66c: 20


R. Simeon b. Yohai was nothing if not consistent: it is he who said that the daughters of Israel are wanton in witchcraft, and also that even the best of women is a sorceress. 21 Most, if not all, women in Israel were thus suspect of dealing in witchcraft.

19 An example of black magic is found in Pesikta Rabbati 21 “Thou shalt not kill — in the end it is his own wife who practices witchcraft and kills him.” The obscure saying about the witches of Ashkelon — that they schemed to destroy the world — may allude to murder committed by women.
20 Mekhilta de R Ishmael, (tr. J. Lauterbach, Philadelphia 1933, p. 201) — The nicest among the idolaters — kill! The best of serpents — smash its brains.” The allusion to women was probably purposely omitted. On the other hand, the expression “the best of women practices witchcraft” appears in the name of R. Simeon b. Yohai in Midrash Ha-Gaddol to Exodus (14:7). The full version appears in Tr. Sofrim.
Anonymous sayings in tannaitic sources show perhaps that others besides these two sages were of the opinion that most of the daughters of Israel dealt in witchcraft. In b. Sanhedrin 67a, the following baraita is quoted in relation to the verse “You shall not tolerate a sorceress” (Ex. 22:17):

Our rabbis taught – “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live,” this applies to both man and woman. If so, why is a [female] witch stated? – Because mostly women engage in witchcraft.\(^\text{22}\)

This opinion precedes the discussion between R. Jos( and R. Akiva. We have here a conclusive opinion regarding the connection of most women with the practice of witchcraft. It would be hard to imagine a greater insult to such a large segment of the population.

It should be noted that Sifre Deut. 11:25, siman 52 reads:

“There shall no man be able to stand against you” (11:25). This refers to a single man; what about a nation, a family, or even a woman plying her witchcraft? Hence the verse says, ‘There shall no man be able to stand’ – in any combination (Sifre Deut., tr. by R. Hammer, p.109).

The male author of the midrash, fearful of going to war, shows no fear of strong, experienced warriors, but of a woman, a sorceress wielding her spells against the Israelites. In this case, of course, it would be a non-Jewish woman, but it is important to note how dangerous a sorceress was considered in antiquity. Among various peoples, the sorcerer or sorceress would go to war with the troops to aid the general and warriors from afar.\(^\text{23}\) However, before we examine practices in other times and among other peoples, let us turn again to Ex. 17:11. According to the verse, “whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed; but whenever he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed.” The Israelites won that battle due not to their experience or superior military strength, but to the aid of their spiritual leader who was too elderly to take part in the battle himself and was known to practice spells.\(^\text{24}\) The later, tannaitic interpretation (m. Rosh Hash. 2:8) ignored the biblical allusion to magic

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\(^{22}\) Cf. parallel in y. Sanhedrin 7:16, 25d: “‘You shall not suffer a witch to live’ – man and woman alike, but the Torah teaches us the way of the world, since most women are sorceresses.” It should be noted that many instances of sorcery are cited there in the gemara, all perpetrated by men.


in this account and transformed it into a spiritual understanding with God. However, the tannaitic remarks about the fear of a sorceress going to war against Israel show that they were aware of actions such as those described in the Bible. Such acts of magic were probably still current in their own time, even if they still refused to admit that Moses’s actions constituted witchcraft.

Another opinion linking women to witchcraft is found in Sifre Deut.: A parable – a certain king issued a decree to the effect that anyone who eats unripe figs grown in the sabbatical year shall be paraded in disgrace around the arena. Now a woman from a noble family proceeded to gather such figs and ate them, and as they were parading her around the arena, she said to the king, “I beg of you, my lord king, let my offense be publicly proclaimed, so that the citizens would not say, she seems to have been caught in an act of adultery or witchcraft” (Hammer, p. 47).

Herein are three sins: a minor transgression of the decree of a king, and two major ones, adultery and witchcraft. According to this approach, just as a woman is likely to commit adultery, she is likely to practice witchcraft. The discussion in the gemara in b. Sanhedrin 100b follows along the same lines, revolving around the interpretation of the words of the book of Ben Sira: “A daughter is a vain treasure to her father; through anxiety on her account, he cannot sleep at night.” The gemara explains this: “As a minor, lest she be seduced, in her majority, lest she play the harlot; as an adult, lest she be not married; if she marries, lest she bear no children; if she grows old, lest she engage in witchcraft!” This reflects the belief that any woman was likely to practice witchcraft, and nothing could prevent her from doing so.

All the sources mentioned above refer to Eretz-Israel, and it may be assumed that the same beliefs and practices held in Babylonia. There, too, women were considered sorceresses. A group of sorceresses is

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25 In light of this, the verse in Judges 4:8 might be more readily understood: “But Barak said to her: ‘if you go with me, I will go; if not, I will not go.’” Just as Joshua’s victory in war depended on a prophet overlooking the fray from a nearby hill, so did Barak want the prophetess Deborah to sit on Mt. Tabor and watch the forces. All the while, she was to carry out various acts to ensure their victory in battle.


28 S. Lieberman, Greek in Jewish Palestine (The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York, 1942), pp. 97-114.
mentioned in b. Pesahim 110a: "Amemar said: the chief of the sorceresses told me: He who meets sorceresses should say thus..." The leader of that group revealed to Amemar, one of the greatest sages of Babylonia in the fourth century C.E., how he could do away with sorceresses.

A similar piece of advice is found in b. Pesahim 111a, in a discussion of various affairs related to witchcraft:

When two women sit at a crossroads, one on one side of the road and the other on the other side of the road, facing each other, they are certainly engaged in witchcraft.

These examples do not indicate whether these were Jewish sorceresses, but it can be assumed that they were in fact Jewish, especially since a great sage such as Amemar spoke with the leader of the group. The Jewishness of the sorceresses of Babylonia can be borne out by the story told about the daughters of R. Nahman. B. Gittin 55a recounts the following story: "The daughters of R. Nahman used to stir a cauldron with their hands when it was boiling hot. ...They stirred the cauldron by witchcraft." They apparently stirred the boiling pot on the fire with their bare hands without getting burned. According to the Babylonian tradition cited in the name of a certain R. Ilish, the daughters of an important talmudic sage dealt in witchcraft.

The Babylonian Talmud has preserved the name of one Jewish sorceress, but the full story was apparently excised in compliance with the demands of internal censorship. B. Sotah 22a has "a maiden who gives herself up to prayer, a gadabout widow, and a minor whose months are not completed — behold, these bring destruction upon the world." The gemara cites an example of a righteous, praying maiden and then of a widow. The discussion then proceeds, rightly, to reject the example of the widow, saying that it referred to Yohani daughter of Ratibi. The gemara does not elaborate any further, though Rashi provides a thorough explanation, clearly drawing upon a gaonic tradition, such as that found in the writings of R. Nissim Gaon:

She was a pleasant and good widow in the eyes of men, but she was a sorceress and cast spells on every pregnant woman so that she would not give birth. When the labor pains grew, this widow would come and say: "I will pray for you to the Creator of the Universe and you will deliver your child immediately." Then she would go home and remove the spell and the woman would deliver the child immediately. People thought she was a righteous, pious woman, pregnant women would go to her when

29 On the antidote for the spell, see S.H. Kook, *lyyunim umehkarim*, 1 (Jerusalem, 1959, Hebrew). Note that the leader of the group of women advised a man on how to overcome her subordinates, quite possibly in exchange for money.

they were about to deliver the child and cajole her to pray for them. One day, she left a young lad guarding her house. The lad heard shaking in the back of the house, but saw nothing. He looked and found a covered barrel. He opened the cover, and found the spells in the barrel, and thus the woman's evil was revealed and the spells were broken. And from that day on, women went to her no more, and the townspeople cast her out from among them.\(^{31}\)

A woman's name is explicitly mentioned here, an exception to the usual anonymity surrounding sorceresses, in connection with the practical application of witchcraft as birth control in antiquity.\(^{32}\) Moreover, the author is aware both of the deception involved in the casting of the spell, as well as of its use by a sorceress as a means of enhancing her own power. In any case, even if this story is not known from the talmudic text itself and despite its pseudo-biblical style, its talmudic origin can be credited. It is difficult however to say with certainty if Yohani b. Ratibi was active in Eretz-Israel (as seems to be indicated from the gemara) or in Babylonia (given the source of the story in the Babylonian Talmud).

IV. The social aspect

The traditional historiographical approach has ignored women in antiquity; needless to say, it listed witchcraft under the heading of "nonsense". The occasional scholarly forays into the question of

\(^{31}\) In: B.M. Levin, *Otzar ha-Geonim*, XI, Sotah (Jerusalem, 1942), pp. 241-242. The following different version appears in S. Abramson, "Le-R. Baruch b. Melekh," *Tarbiz*, 19, (1948), p. 42-44 (Hebrew): "Yohani bat Ratibi was a witch and gave all the women a potion to prevent them from giving birth. She would put the potion in two vessels, and while the two vessels were closed, no women's womb would open. She would pretend to be praying for the woman in labor, and when she would stretch out on the ground to plead, she would open the two vessels, so that the spell was broken, and the woman's womb would be opened. Once, two sages went to ask her to beg for mercy for a woman who was suffering in labor, and found the two vessels containing the spells. They mistakenly opened them; straightforth, the woman's womb was opened and she gave birth easily. Then they knew that she had cast spells." The major differences between this version and that of R. Nissim Gaon are: the elaboration on how the spell was cast; the witch prays; sages and not a youth discover her trickery; there is no attempt to imitate biblical linguistic usage; here the matter of payment to the witch, and her punishment, are lacking. Regarding the so-called spell, see R. Patay, "Masekhet Segulot," *Sefer Ha-Shanah le-Yehudei America*, 10-11 (1949), pp. 473-487 (Hebrew).

\(^{32}\) It has hitherto been shown that sorceresses were believed to cause unexplained death and to achieve victory in battle; here, they are believed to cast a spell that produced long and difficult labor pains. Rabbi Judah believed (b. Yoma 83b) that a dog would go mad if "spell-casting women played with it", meaning that they would torment a dog until he went mad. According to Ezekiel, women could also restore the dead to life, so that power over life and death, from the process of birth itself, are attributed to women and sorceresses.
women and sorcery were limited to the sources mentioned above. In the view of the new historiographical approach, however, the subject of women should be treated separately, and all the historical findings about witchcraft should be considered a worthy subject of study with the purpose of ascertaining the social significance of this information.\textsuperscript{33}

It remains for us to clarify the degree of historical truth: is there, a feminine tendency to practice witchcraft, and did most of the Jewish women in talmudic times indeed practice witchcraft?

An examination of biblical and talmudic sources does not reveal that women in particular practiced witchcraft. On the contrary: sorcerers outnumber sorceresses in the sources. The books of witchcraft from talmudic times, \textit{Harba de-Moshe}\textsuperscript{34} (The Sword of Moses), and \textit{Sefer ha-Razim}, are attributed to men, and many of the talmudic examples deal with men practicing sorcery, several even designated by the title "rabbi". Sorcery should therefore not be seen as a particularly feminine occupation. Moreover, there is no historical corroboration for the opinion of R. José the Galilean and R. Simeon b. Yohai that most Jewish women in their time dealt in witchcraft. Two other extra-rabbinical sources also show that all women did not necessarily practice witchcraft: Ben Sira and the scrolls of Qumran. Ben Sira lived in Jerusalem in the second century B.C.E., and displays a fair amount of misogyny, but these do not include any allegation of sorcery;\textsuperscript{35} an "essay" on wicked women was discovered in Qumran (4Q184), again without any specific mention of witchcraft.\textsuperscript{36}

It may be concluded, then, that the accusation of the practice of witchcraft leveled against women was no more than the reflection of prevailing contemporary beliefs and prejudices, and not an objective historical truth pertaining to Jewish women in antiquity. If so, why were women suspected of practicing sorcery, and all of them at that?

It seems that the answer to this twofold question is to be sought in the social sphere, in the sexual politics of antiquity which decreed women's inferiority.\textsuperscript{37} Two possible explanations for the problem at


\textsuperscript{34} On the book \textit{Harba de-Moshe}, see M. Bar-Ilan, "Ketivat sefer-torah," (above, n. 12), and idem., \textit{Sitrei Tefillah ve-Hekhalot} (Ramat-Gan 1987), p. 110 ff. (Hebrew).

\textsuperscript{35} See Ben Sira 25:16-26:4. Cf. the spells that the Talmud attributed to the text of Ben Sira, as cited above, and: W. C. Trenchard, \textit{Ben Sira's View of Women} (Scholars Press, Chico, 1982).


\textsuperscript{37} On the status of women in Jewish society in the time of the Mishnah and Talmud,
hand will be proposed, both of which relate to the structure of ancient society; the two proposals, though perhaps incompatible, do complement each other: any inclusive categorization of women by men, especially such a severe accusation as the practice of witchcraft, is rooted in prejudice. This is the only possible explanation for the categorical tone of this accusation, though it is not yet a solution to the problem. The origin of the accusation that women practiced witchcraft is embedded in the very structure of male opinions about men’s superiority and women’s inferiority. These opinions were not held by Jews alone, of course; harsh misogynist prejudices were rife among the gentiles of the period, even more so than among Jews. In any case, the association of women with witchcraft was but a part of the overall process of the demonization of women, in which women were accused of consorting with the devil himself. This example of men’s derogatory attitude towards woman is in keeping with their overriding suspicion of women as a threat to the “strong” sex — despite the blatant reality of men who killed women, not vice versa. The cause of such beliefs lies in the structure of traditional societies in which inequality between the sexes reigned, resulting in permanent tension.

Accusations of witchcraft exacerbated the mutual tension, and the strong grew stronger at the expense of the weak; accusations against the physically and politically weaker sex became a program for a solution for all ills of society. The scapegoat is thus found (women, in this case, or the Jews, in another social context) and blamed for all the ills and misfortunes of the ruling masculine society, or the Christian society,


39 On the ancient link between women and the devil, see Genesis Rabbah 17:6 (tr. H. Friedman and Maurice Simon (London: Soncino, 1951), p. 137: “R. Hanina, son of R. Adda said: From the beginning of the Book until here no samech is written, but as soon as she [Eve] was created, Satan was created with her. While should one quote, “That is it which compasseth” – sobeb – (Gen. 2:11) answer him: the text refers there to rivers.” The text can be altered (by writing “Satan” with a samech, in order to link the creation of Eve with Satan). According to Kiddushin 81a, Satan, when mingling with human beings, assumes the form of a woman. Christian theology developed this idea extensively, and woman is considered the devil’s partner. See S. Ashkenazi, *Ha-Isha baspeklaryiyat ha-Yahadut*, 1 (Tel-Aviv, 1943), p. 81 ff. (Hebrew).

40 This explanation holds for other times and places as well, where witchcraft was attributed chiefly to women. See Shulamit Shahar (above, n. 6), p. 223 ff.
which it is incapable of resolving. The association of women with sorcery illuminates the dynamics of the oppression of the weak and the way in which the ruling class constantly strengthens its political position.

A further aspect of the sexual division on the present issue should be noted. In effect, all the sources expressing derogatory opinions of women's sorcery are masculine. All the sources cited above were composed, to the best of our knowledge, by men like R. José and R. Simeon b. Yohai, who accused women of sorcery. However, it must be noted that R. Simeon b. Yohai, who castigated women as sorceresses, actually practiced sorcery himself. He is said to have exorcised a demon that had entered the body of the emperor's daughter (b. Megilla 17b). It was R. Simeon b. Yohai who turned his eye upon one of his opponents and transformed him into a heap of bones (y. Shevi'it 9:1, 38d). He was adept at casting an "evil eye," and other miracles were attributed to him as well. When R. Simeon b. Yohai, then, employs supernatural means, it is a miracle; when a woman does the same thing, however, it is witchcraft. Moreover, when Moses threw a staff and it turned into a snake it was a sign from God, but when an Egyptian did the same thing, it was sorcery. Clearly, then, the dividing line in antiquity between miracle and spell depended on both the religion and sex of the agent.

One social aspect of witchcraft can now more readily be understood. The emphasis in the sources on women's involvement in sorcery cannot be ignored; even if reduced to more modest proportions, the references are still substantial. The attribution of witchcraft to women derives from the very essence of the traditional society, its social institutions and the human desire for power. Political power was limited to men in antiquity; a few queens reigned but they were a negligible minority in the ruling masculine world. Traditional society cut women off from the sources of power and leadership in all fields. Women were

43 Cf. y. Shevi'it for how he raised the dead from their graves in Tiberias; a similar use of the "evil eye" (b. Shabbat 33b); creating gold (Ex. Rabbah 52,3).
44 Cf. the approach explaining feminine witchcraft as aggression and male sorcery as defensive: Esther Goody, "Legitimate and Illegitimate Aggression in a West African state," Mary Douglas (ed.), Witchcraft, Confessions and Accusations (Tavistock Publications, London, 1970), pp. 207-244. However, this explanation is far from convincing, as it merely transfers the question to another conceptual system. See also: N. Rubin, Reshit Hahaim (Tel-Aviv, 1995), p. 27 (Hebrew).
excluded from war, which required a man’s physical strength, but were also excluded from serving in the capacity of political or personal advisors which required no physical strength at all. Women, then, were denied access to the sphere of social leadership. This being so, it seems that the tendency among women to practice witchcraft served as a means of expressing the feminine desire for power. As normative society banned women from attaining positions of leadership from within, women would try to overcome the ban and to achieve a different sort of power. Women’s involvement in witchcraft in antiquity expressed their desire to attain a position of power from outside the accepted social institutions that were closed to them.

King Saul, in seeking out the advice and professional services of a sorceress, was carrying out the will of a woman. Men who went to war would consult a sorceress to inquire what day was favorable for battle: the perfect example of the sway women held over men. Though in traditional society, man used women for their own needs — biological or psychological (desire for power) — sorceresses demonstrate the reverse: women making use of men for their own purposes — control and submission. The subversive activity by sorceresses was the sole option open to them, since normative channels were blocked to women. For this reason, society, ruled by men, views these acts as deviation.45

This background explains the transformations that the Israelites underwent. Whereas the biblical period had prophetesses, charismatic women in positions of influence and power, this means of attaining power was no longer feasible for women in the talmudic period. Prophecy had disappeared altogether and religious leadership had passed to the sages and was based on the teaching of the oral law, which was forbidden to women. There was not a single woman in the masculine world of the sages, and women had no influence on general society. For a woman with leadership potential, or, shall we say, a woman with the power to manipulate others, her sole recourse for expression was outside institutionalized frameworks, through witchcraft, for example. Even if the women themselves did not accord any importance to this occupation, masculine society enabled women to wield influence only by subversion. Women managed to find a way to make men do their will. This can be seen as a kind of revenge exacted by women on the

45 Shahar (above, n. 6) presents an interesting approach for the solution of a similar problem in a different culture. On one hand, she believes, rightly, that women joined heretical movements in order to improve their social standing, since it afforded a greater degree of equality than did mainstream traditional society. On the other hand, in her attempt to explain the link between women and witchcraft, she resorts to psychological approaches (p. 244) that seem to lack adequate foundation.
masculine world that spurred them to become involved with the supernatural. It is thus clear that with the evolution of civilization, including Jewish society, and the move towards the promotion of equality, talented women could reach positions of decision-making and leadership (over men as well), a development which rendered witchcraft no longer relevant.

It follows that the accusation leveled by men against women is ultimately self-incrimination, since it reveals the glaring inequality created by men towards women. Sorcery as practiced by women constituted insurrection against the social structure no less than sorcery practiced by men, and was much less destructive than men's usual activities. If women turned to sorcery, this stemmed indirectly from the male oppression that frequently brought about the opposite result: women, as sorceresses, gained control over the men who needed them.

Finally, we must address the issue of how widespread was the belief that all women were practicing sorceresses. A comparative analysis of sorcery among Jewish women of antiquity and women in Europe and America in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is most instructive. In two completely different societies, women were accused of practicing witchcraft, but the outcome was entirely different. In Eretz-Israel there was nothing resembling a witchhunt, and aside from the non-Jewish witches killed by Simeon b. Shetah, we have no knowledge of any Jewish woman put to death for being a sorceress, despite the biblical injunction. In Christian Europe, however, more than a millennium and a half later, accusations of witchcraft were the cause of the death of hundreds of women and some men, over a period of about two hundred years.

Perhaps the reason that Jewish society refrained from acting upon its prejudices is that the sages lacked any real political power, while, in Christian society, the religious authorities could put their beliefs into

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47 Trevor-Roper’s article refers to Europe in general, cf. an article discussing a single area in England, surveyed over a period of about 120 years: A. Macfarlane, “Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart Essex,” Mary Douglas (ed.), Witchcraft, Confessions and Accusations, pp. 81-99. The author examines the statistics that indicate that 2.5% of the population were accused (!), among them over 90% were women, 40% of these widows. About 20% of the accused were executed or died in prison.
practice in the form of a trial and execution.\textsuperscript{48} The witch hunt in Europe seemed like a direct continuation of the Spanish Inquisition against the Jews; in both cases the Christian establishment wielded its power against minorities — Jews and women.

The significance of the difference between the two societies is revealed in the consequences of their attitudes: death on the one hand, compared with prejudice alone on the other. This essential difference may show how the act of accusing someone of the practice of witchcraft became a social tool not only for the ruling class that stood to gain strength by putting its opponents to death, but as a social means of controlling population growth. It must be recalled that precisely while the cruel witch-hunt was in progress, European population was growing, following centuries of zero growth, even demographic regression (during the years of the plague). In a society that practiced no birth control, the threat of over-population was very real. Burning women at the stake, in the name of religion, provided some means of controlling the problem. In the popular mind, women were responsible for birth, and the death of a woman would decrease population more effectively than the death of a man.\textsuperscript{49} This, then, may provide an explanation as to why women were so frequently accused of witchcraft.\textsuperscript{50}

It is perhaps impossible to provide proof for this deterministic explanation;\textsuperscript{51} even if incorrect, it still raises interesting questions about the wretched situation of women in antiquity and the start of the modern era, physically and politically inferior in a masculine society. Moreover, the data and social insights gathered here may serve the needs of any ruling social class, though this oversteps the boundaries of the present discussion.

\textsuperscript{48} This explanation can be only partly true, since ancient Rome, for instance, did exercise the death penalty for witchcraft, though only rarely. On the nature of the occupation of witches, their link to prostitution and their beliefs, in medieval Italy and ancient Rome, (based on the description of Horatio) see: J. Burckhardt, \textit{The Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy} (tr. S.G.C. Middlemore, London: George Allen – New York: The Macmillan, 1914), pp. 524-540.

\textsuperscript{49} The reverse was practiced regarding sacrifices at the Jerusalem temple. Male animals were sacrificed almost exclusively, clearly so as not to decrease the population of animals for sacrifice in the future.

\textsuperscript{50} It should be noted that Trevor-Roper (above, n. 46) attributes the witchhunt to religious tension in Christendom. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that it is relevant to the present discussion, as his explanation answers only part of the social questions discussed here.

\textsuperscript{51} At the same time, see the explanation that views the cessation of witch trials as stemming from the rise of rationalism and the decline of religious belief (this explanation fails to deal with the differences between the two societies): R. Thomas, \textit{Religion and the Decline of Magic} (Penguin Books Harmondsworth, 1973), pp. 681-698.
Conclusion

The issue of women and the practice of witchcraft is perhaps a minor chapter in the role of sorcery in Jewish history, but it is certainly central to the history of the status of women in Judaism in antiquity. Whereas in the biblical period, the connection between women and witchcraft was not conclusive, as time went on the association between women and sorcery became firmly established. The apocrypha is the median point, both chronologically and ideologically, telling how women practiced witchcraft, though stopping short of the Mishnah’s dictum that all women, even the most pious, were initiated into the practice of sorcery.

There is no doubt that the study of witchcraft merits analysis in the fields of history as well as the social sciences. We have suggested that the link between women and witchcraft was a result of the inferior status of women in antiquity. On the one hand, sexual politics led to the accusation of the weak of demonic activities that threatened the stronger sex. Thus, the ruling class strengthened its position and took advantage of the weakness of the inferior class of women. On the other hand, social inequality brought about—if not outright then indirectly—a situation in which charismatic women dealt in witchcraft, if only to attain a degree of social power and status denied them by men.52

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