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MAGIC AND MIRACLE

The Rabbinic doctrine concerning God's all-embracing power has a bearing on other concepts. It excludes the possibility of the existence of magic power capable of influencing the laws of nature and the decrees of God. We have referred to the problem that confronted the Greeks in regard to the question of fate and the deity: if fate has independent and separate power, over which the gods have no control, what then is the nature of the divinities? If, on the contrary, the gods determine fate, what is the significance of fate as an independent force? The same reasoning applies to magic—it is impossible to reconcile it with the existence of an All-Powerful God. The Tanna R. Nathan, who flourished in the second half of the second century, said: 'If all the magicians of the world were to come together and seek to change morning to evening, they could not do so' (*Tanḥuma*, ed. Buber, Qoraḥ, § 6). Opposition to sorcerers is in keeping with the spirit of the Torah, only in Rabbinic literature it is much more detailed and is discussed with emphasis, indicating the actuality of the issue. Indeed R. Simeon b. Eleazar's appraisal of the matter in the Mishna is: 'fornication and sorceries have made an end of everything' (*M. Soṭa* ix, 13); and in the Tosefta (*Soṭa* xiv, 3): 'When the number of "whisperers" in court increased, wrath came upon the world and the Shekhina departed from Israel.' The Amoraim of the first generation, in the third century, held similar views: 'R. Joḥanan said: Why are they called *kashshāfīm* ['sorcerers']? Because they contradict the heavenly household [*KashshaFiM* is regarded as an abbreviation of *Kaḥash, Familia (shel) Ma'ala*]' (*T.B. Sanhedrin* 67b). On

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the verse ‘There is none else beside Him’ (Deuteronomy iv 35) R. Ḥanina commented: ‘Even in respect of sorceries’ (*T.B. loc. cit.*). Rashi gives the explanation with precision: ‘They are impotent before His decree, for there is no power besides Him.’

But this was not the accepted view among the broad masses of the people, and hence the prolonged debates and discussions on these questions. Magical practices and sorcery were widespread in the ancient world in the areas where the Sages lived, that is, throughout the Orient. The power manifested in sorcery and also the means employed in connection with it are called δύναμις.¹ The name of the God of Israel, as the God of power and might, is extensively used in magical papyri and invocations.²

In truth, there is a clear distinction regarding the concept of power between the prophetic-Biblical-Jewish ideology and the magical-mystic belief of the Hellenistic world. The might of God is revealed, in the Bible, in the act of creation, and in the historical Providence with which He watched over His people, which serves as a source of hope to those who love and revere Him. The power remains even when He manifests Himself—the power of an invisible God, who is immaterial. On the other hand, in the Hellenistic world the power was conceived as something impersonal, which was found in people and substances. It was a visible and material power. Magical acts were a concomitant of the nature of idolatry. Idolatry, in all its forms, believed in the existence of a source of power apart from the godhead, for it did not recognize a god who transcended the existential system that controlled everything and whose will was absolute. Magic flows from the desire to utilize these forces, and idolatry associates man with the deity in the need for magic.³ Nor does the fact that there was also opposition to sorcery and sorcerers affect the position. Idolatry forbade injurious magic, especially in the case of a rejected and defeated religion.

To what extent the ancient world took the existence of magic for granted may also be deduced from the interesting story about R. Johanan b. Zakkai and the red heifer. The narrative is found, it is true, in a relatively late source, in an Amoraic account, but it may be assumed that it is older. ‘A certain Gentile questioned Rabban Joḥanan b. Zakkai, saying to him: “These things that you do seem

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like magical practices. A heifer is brought and slaughtered and burnt and pounded and its ashes are collected, and when one of you is defiled by the dead, two or three drops are sprinkled upon him and you say to him: ‘You are clean’”. He [Rabban Joḥanan b. Zakkai] answered him: “Has the spirit of *Tězāzît* [demon of madness or epilepsy] never entered you?” He replied: “No!” The (Sage) then said to him: “Have you not seen any one else into whom the spirit of *Tězāzît* has entered?” He replied: “Yes!” Thereupon (Rabban Joḥanan b. Zakkai) said to him: “And what do you do?” He replied: “We bring roots and fumigate under him and spray water upon it [the demon-spirit], and it flees.” Said (the Rabbi) to him: “Do not your ears hear what your mouth speaks! Such, too, is this spirit—it is the spirit of uncleanness, as it is said: ‘And also the prophets and the unclean spirit’, etc. (Zechariah xiii 2).” When (the Gentile) had left, (Rabban Joḥanan b. Zakkai’s) disciples said to him: “O Master, him you have thrust aside with a reed [i.e. dismissed with a paltry reply]; but what explanation will you offer us? Said he to them: “By your life! neither the dead person defiles nor does the water purify; only this is the decree of the Holy One, blessed be He. The Holy One, blessed He, hath said: I have ordained a statute, I have issued an edict, and thou hast no right to transgress mine edict.”⁴

This narrative is instructive from many aspects. The enquiring Gentile wishes to show that in Israel’s Torah, too, there are magical practices like those accepted in the ancient world round about. But the exorcism of the evil spirit is for him a fact not open to doubt; and when Rabban Joḥanan b. Zakkai explains to him that the sprinkling of the water mingled with the ashes is a form of exorcism, the explanation appeals to the Gentile. But to his own people, Rabban Joḥanan b. Zakkai reveals his true opinion, namely that this ritual of the sprinkling of the water of purification, which was prepared with the ashes of the heifer, has only a ceremonial significance. A corpse defiles, for this is the Halakhic rule, but this uncleanness is not an independent power, nor has the water any magical force; however, it is a precept, and by virtue of the precept, the corpse defiles and the water purifies.

We have here complete sublimation and demythologization of the heifer ritual, which served, of course, as an example of a statute [without stated reason], as it is said ‘I have ordained a statute, I have

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issued an edict, and thou hast no right to transgress mine edict.' Whether the story was authentic—that is to say, belonged to the time of Rabban Joḥanan b. Zakkai—or not, it shows to what extent the problem was real and a subject for discussion.

But the Halakha, too, was compelled to take a stand with regard to the widespread magical practices. The Mishna defines who is a sorcerer. 'The sorcerer that performs an act is culpable,⁵ but not he that (merely) creates an illusion. R. Akiba said in the name of R. Joshua: If two were gathering cucumbers (by sorcery), one may gather and not be culpable, and the other gather and be culpable: he who performs an act is culpable, (but) he who creates an illusion is not culpable (*M. Sanhedrin* vii, 11; *T.B. ibid.* 68a). According to this Halakha, which goes back to the generation of Rabban Joḥanan b. Zakkai's disciples, only one who performs a real act of magic is guilty; whereas one who creates an illusion—'who merely pretends'—he is actually not held culpable.⁶ A mere conjuror, who performs such conjuring tricks without being serious about the matter, is not guilty. The decisive condition is that the sorcerer who performs the magical act should treat his actions seriously, that is, that he should regard sorcery as something real.

Philo's approach was different from that of the Halakha; he distinguished between 'true magic', 'the visual science (ὀπτική ἐπιστήμη) that examines the works of nature on the basis of clear concepts'—a most honoured science—and the delusive jugglery of itinerant magicians, who deceive and exploit the ignorant multitude. He is influenced by the Stoic definition of divination as 'the science of speculation (ἐπιστήμη θεωρητική) and of the interpretation of signs'. While the Mishna upholds the law of the sorcerer only with regard to one who performs a magical act, but not in respect of 'one who creates an illusion', Philo's entire opposition is directed principally against the latter.⁷ This doctrinal attitude did not, of course, prevent the spread of magical practices—for which there is considerable evidence—especially among women. Simeon b. Sheṭaḥ ordered eighty women to be hanged in Ashkelon (*M. Sanhedrin* vi, 4). In the Palestinian Talmud (*Hagiga* ii, 2, 77d; *Sanhedrin* vi, 9, 23c) it is narrated at length that these women were witches. Referring to the verse 'Thou shalt not suffer a sorceress to live' (Exodus xxii 17), the

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Baraita states: ‘The Rabbis taught: (The law of the) sorceress applies to both man and woman. If so, why is “sorceress” specifically mentioned? Because mostly women engage in witchcraft’ (*T.B. Sanhedrin*, 67a; cf. *T.B. Berakhot* 53a). R. Simeon b. Yoḥai testified: ‘in the later generations when the daughters of Israel were addicted to magical practices’ (*T.B. ‘Eruvin* 64b); and in his name was reported the following dictum, phrased with the extremism characteristic of this Sage: ‘The best of women is a sorceress’ (*Tractate Soferim*, xv, end). But there is ample evidence of the widespread practice of sorcery, not only among women and simple folk, but also among the scholars in Eretz-Israel and even more so in Babylon.

In actuality, even the Sages of the Talmud and Midrash—despite their fundamental recognition that there is none besides God and that consequently witchcraft does not exist—could not ignore the facts, to wit, that broad masses of the people believed in and made use of these practices. They sought to find a compromise, in accordance with the teaching of R. Eliezer b. Jacob: “Neither shall ye practise divination nor soothsaying”—although there is no divination there are signs’ (*T.P. Shabbat* vi, 10, p. 8c). Nor was any clear distinction drawn between science and magic, especially in the field of medicine. Among magical practices were included medicaments that originated in scientific experimentation. Hence the Sages, who prohibited an entire series of customary practices on account of ‘the ways of the Amorite’ [i.e. superstition],⁸ were compelled to qualify their opposition. R. Samuel and R. Abbahu (said) in the name of R. Joḥanan: ‘Anything that heals does not fall under the head of “ways of the Amorite”’ (*T.P. ibid.*, and *T.B. ibid.*, 67a in the name of Abbaye and Rava). We know that even Sages, especially in Babylon, used remedies that were obviously of a magical character.⁹ Knowledge of witchcraft is attributed to R. Eliezer and R. Joshua (*T.B. Sanhedrin* vii, 4, 25d; *T.B. ibid.*, 68a). Rav recounted, as a fact, that ‘a certain Arabian traveller’ killed a camel and dismembered it [and that subsequently, it became alive again], while his uncle R. Ḥiyya told him that it was an illusion, and nothing more.¹⁰ Of Rav himself it is said: ‘He went up to a cemetery and performed certain acts’, and Rashi explains what he did thus: ‘He knew how to utter incantations over the graves and to comprehend, at each grave, by what kind of death (the occu-

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pant) had died, whether he had died at his proper time or through the evil eye.’¹¹ R. Ḥanina used to rely, in cases of inheritance, on the tradition that the spittle of the firstborn of a father heals.¹² R. Simeon b. Laqish did not refrain from allowing witchcraft to play a part in Halakhic argument.¹³ There were Amoraim who endeavoured to make their curses against their enemies coincide with the moment of God’s wrath, and even took steps to prevent the effects of sorcery.¹⁴ Practices that were extremely widespread among the people were not always disallowed, but the attempt was sometimes made to give them a religious character consonant with the spirit of Israel’s faith, although it was clear that the custom stemmed from a magic-mythological source. It is stated in a Baraita: ‘If a tree casts its fruit, it should be painted with *siqra* [a red paint] and loaded with stones. Thereupon the Gemara asks: ‘Granted that it should be loaded with stones so as to lessen its strength, but what remedy is effected by painting it with *siqra*?’ The answer given is: ‘So that people may see it and pray for it, as it is taught: “And he [the leper] shall cry, ‘Unclean, unclean’”—he must make his grief known to the public, so that many may make supplication for him.’¹⁵ Obviously, the original reason for the red paint derives from a popular belief in the power of the red colour. This is an example of the extrusion of magical aspects from widely current customs and their replacement by religio-ethical explanations.

A much more difficult problem than the spread of magical practices among the people was the question of legitimate miracles.

Undoubtedly, the religion of Israel, like every other religion and faith, postulates the possibility of miraculous acts. The problem is how to distinguish between miracles, which break nature’s barrier and laws and accentuate the absolute power of God, and acts of magic, which likewise appear as wondrous deeds. This problem has confronted many religions, and it also challenged the Sages. Elijah’s prayer on Mount Carmel, ‘Hear me, O Lord, hear me’ (I Kings xviii 37) was interpreted by the Amoraim of Eretz-Israel in the third century as follows: ‘Hear me, that fire may come down from heaven; and hear me, that it should not be said these things are witchcraft.’¹⁶

Already in the Bible we find miraculous deeds—signs and portents—alongside acts of magic. The means are the same and common

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to both, but there is a clear, basic difference. God in the Bible does not employ, in contrast to the other gods, magical devices. Those who make use of them are only His messengers. The wonders of the Egyptian sorcerers emanate from their magical arts, which influence supradivine forces. Moses' wonders are a finger of God, who commanded him to perform them; they thus stem from His will. It is God who works miracles. The miracle serves in Scripture as a sign to the prophet-messenger, but the supreme criterion remains the same—whether it occurs by the command of the Lord. If a prophet comes and gives a sign or a portent, saying 'Let us go after other gods, which thou hast not known, and let us serve them; thou shalt not hearken unto the words of that prophet.'¹⁷ Elisha, who seeks to heal Naaman by enjoining him to bathe seven times in the water of the Jordan, employs a means that has its parallel in Babylonian lore, but his object is to prove not only 'that there is a prophet in Israel', but also, and primarily, 'that there is no God in all the earth, but in Israel' (II Kings v 15).

The Sages of the Talmud and Midrash followed in this sphere, too, the Biblical lead, but, characteristically, they broadened and deepened their perception by viewing Biblical teaching as a whole, and by taking up an attitude towards manifestation of sorcery close to them, while controverting the beliefs and notions of their time. The common people were, of course, interested in one thing only—in the result of the action, without differentiating its source. On the other hand, the interest of the Sages was focused on emphasizing the fact that it was God who wrought the miracle¹⁸ rather than on the miraculous act. Hence we find that their attitude to miracles, without which, as we have stated, religion cannot be envisaged, is ambivalent. The point is brought into relief in the well-known story about Honi ha-Me'aggel ['the Circle-Drawer'] and the attitude of Simeon b. Sheṭaḥ to his actions. Honi ha-Me'aggel worked a great miracle; he uttered a decree and the Holy One, blessed be He, fulfilled it and brought down rain when it was most needed. But Simeon b. Sheṭaḥ sent word to him: 'Were you not Honi ha-Me'aggel, I would pronounce a ban against you'.¹⁹ One cannot fail to sense in Simeon b. Sheṭaḥ's words an expression of concern lest the language used by Honi ('I swear by Thy great Name that I will not stir from here')

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and the act that he performed ('He drew a circle and stood inside it') should be misconstrued; only Ḥoni's personality and the veneration in which he was held by the people saved him from being banned. The same Simeon b. Yoḥai, who was opposed to the practice of witchcraft, was 'well-versed in miracles', and upon leaving the cave together with his son, he reduced men with a glance to heaps of bones,²⁰ and also exorcised an (evil) spirit from the emperor's daughter (*T.B. Me'ila* 17b). Both Talmuds and the Midrashim are full of miracles wrought by Ḥoni ha-Me'aggel, Naqdimon b. Gorion, the Tannaim R. Ḥanina b. Dosa, R. Simeon b. Yoḥai, his son-in-law R. Phinehas b. Jair, and other wonder-workers down to the time of the last Amoraim.²¹ However, Rav Papa enquired of Abbaye: 'Why is it that miracles happened to the former generations, but to us no miracle happens' (*T.B. Berakhot* 20a). This question testifies to a feeling of decline in miraculous deeds. But those who experienced miracles did not wholly come to an end; there are accounts of wonders that happened even to the last of the Amoraim (*ibid.* 54a).

In the interpretations that the Sages give to the Biblical miracles there is apparent the desire to emphasize the proof that they provide of God's strength and might. 'R. Simeon the Sidonite expounded:²² When the wicked Nebuchadnezzar cast Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah into the fiery furnace, Yurqamu,²³ the Prince of Hail, stood before the Holy One, blessed be He, and said to Him: "Sovereign of the Universe, let me go down and cool the furnace and deliver those righteous men from the fiery furnace." Said Gabriel to him: "The might of the Holy One, blessed be He, will not be (revealed) thereby, for thou art the Prince of Hail and all know that water extinguishes fire. But let me, the Prince of Fire, go down and cool it from within and heat it from without, and thus perform a miracle within a miracle." The Holy One, blessed be He, then said: "Go down!" At that moment Gabriel began (to praise God) and said: "And the truth of the Lord endureth for ever..." (*T.B. Pesahim* 118 a–b). Here emphasis is given to the greatness of the miracle with its inherent wonder, and *pari passu* the might that finds expression therein is demonstrated. In a parallel Midrash (*Canticles* vii 9) the practical outcome of the miracle is also mentioned: 'When the nations of the world saw the miracles and mighty deeds that the Holy One,

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blessed be He, had wrought for Hananiah and his companions, they took their false idols and broke them in pieces and made them into pairs of bells and hung them on their dogs and asses, and clattered them, saying: “Ye see now what we were worshipping.” The miracle must lead to but one result, and therein lies its importance, namely the recognition of God’s might and uniqueness, resulting in the breaking of the idols. Stories of this kind, which have a mythological aspect, preserve the essential principles held by the Sages. The importance of the miracle lies not in itself, but in the extent to which it accords with the faith in Him who performs the miracle. Thus R. Eleazar of Modi’im expounded the verse ‘And Moses built an altar, and called it Adonai-nissi [the Lord is my banner or miracle]’: ‘The Omnipresent called it “My miracle”... as long as Israel is in the miracle, so to speak, the miracle is before Him.’²⁴

Most instructive is the following narrative, which has been preserved in a late Midrash, but its source is ancient. There the ethical aspect of miracles is made expressly clear to us:

R. Phinehas said: It once happened in Damascus, where there was an idol-shrine, which had a priest called Abba Gulish, who ministered to the idol many years. Once trouble [*’ăninqê* (ἀνάγκη) *shel ša’ar*] came upon him. He cried to the idol many days, but to no avail. Thereafter he went out at night, and said: ‘Sovereign of the universe, hearken unto my prayer and redeem me from my trouble.’ Forthwith (God) hearkened to his prayer and he was healed; he then stole away and came to Tiberias and was converted to Judaism; he zealously kept the commandments and was appointed administrator of the poor. Now when money came into his custody, the hands that were accustomed to pilfer in the idol-house pilfered also the sacred funds; immediately one of his eyes began to hurt him and it went blind. Once again he misused the sacred funds, and his other eye began to pain and become blind. When compatriots of his came to Tiberias and saw that he was blind, they said to him: ‘Abba Gulish, to what purpose did you mock the idol and forsake him?...’ what did he do? He said to his wife: ‘Arise, that we may go to Damascus. She took hold of his hand and they went. When they reached the hamlets in the vicinity of Damascus, people gathered about

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him and said: 'Lo, it is Abba Gulish.' And they further said: 'The idol was right to blind your eyes'. Said he to them: 'I, too, have come only to entreat him and to make my peace with him; perchance he will restore my sight. Go and gather together all the people of the state.' They went and multitudes upon multitudes assembled in the idol-house and (even) went up on the roofs. When the place was full, he asked his wife to stand him upon a pillar that he knew there. He went and stood upon it and said to the assembly: 'My brethren, citizens of Damascus, when I was a priest and ministered to the idol, people used to leave deposits with me, and I subsequently denied receiving them, because the image has neither eyes to see nor ears to hear, so that he might punish me. Now I went to a God whose eyes roam the whole world, and no plot is hidden from Him, and my hands wished to pilfer and take as they were accustomed to do, but I scarcely managed to carry out my intention when he punished me; hence He blinded my eyes.' R. Phinehas ha-kohen bar Hama said, and R. Abbun also reported in the name of our teachers: Before ever he descended from the pillar the Holy One, blessed be He, gave him better sight than he had enjoyed before, so that His name might be sanctified in the world; and thousands and myriads of Gentiles were converted through him.²⁵

R. Phinehas bar Hama belonged to the Amoraim of Eretz-Israel of the second half of the fourth century. This narrative, whose motif reminds us of the story of the conversion of Achior in the Book of Judith xiv 10, and whose language testifies that it was translated from Aramaic, makes it clear that the purpose of the miracle was to demonstrate the truth of Israel's faith and of his Torah, which forbids the misappropriation of charity or Temple funds. To the priest who was guilty of embezzlement while he was still ministering to the idol nothing happened, but once he was converted—and the conversion itself was the result of a miracle—then he was punished for his speculation. In Damascus he demonstrated this difference between idolatry and the worship of God, and the further miracle led to mass conversion.

Tales of this sort, which give expression to the purpose of the miracle in general terms, emphasizing at the same time the concept

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of power, are not many. More numerous are the dicta that use a miracle for the purpose of justifying the value of the commandments or of religious institutions. Of R. Akiba it is reported that he told Tineius Rufus that the River Sa(m)bation proved which was the Sabbath day.²⁶ Noteworthy for our subject is the story of the beast [cow] of a Jew that was sold to a non-Jew, and she refused to work on the Sabbath under the ownership of the Gentile, until her former owner came and whispered to her that she now belonged to a Gentile and is allowed to work on the Sabbath. The non-Jew said to the Jew: "I shall not let you go till you tell me what you did to her in her ear, I wearied myself with her and beat her, yet she would not get up." Thereupon the Jew began to console him, saying: "I performed no witchcraft nor sorcery; I merely told her thus and thus, and she stood up and ploughed." The Gentile was immediately seized with fear, saying: "Now if a cow, which has neither speech nor understanding, recognized her Creator, shall not I, who have been made by my Maker in His image and have been endowed by Him with understanding, go and acknowledge my Creator? Forthwith he went and was converted and studied and acquired knowledge of the Torah, and he was named Judah b. Torta, and to this day our teachers cite Halakha in his name."²⁷ The non-Jew interpreted the whispering in the ear as an act of magic, but the Jew denied this. Undoubtedly we have a miracle here in the fact that the cow reacted to the whispered information that she had been transferred from the ownership of the Jew to that of the non-Jew, but this miracle is a consequence of the Halakha and confirms its truth; the Gentile was converted and merited the privilege that Halakha should be cited in his name. Miracles also serve to affirm the piety and virtue of the righteous in the past and in the present, as the Roman general said to Naqdimon b. Gorion 'I know that your God has brought this commotion upon the world only for your sake'.²⁸ Most of the miracles take place in order to deliver and save individuals or a community in times of trouble and distress, but the different motifs are frequently interlinked. The miracles and salvations that are wrought for the public are dependent upon their merit and deeds. The contradiction between the belief that God performs miracles and the difficult and depressed position of the nation served as a starting point for homilies of re-

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proof; for example, on the verse ‘Unto thee, O Lord, belongeth righteousness’ (Daniel ix 7) the Midrash states:

R. Eleazar asked, who said this verse?—Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah uttered it. When they rose up from the furnace, all the nations of the world assembled, as it is stated, ‘And the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, and the king’s ministers, being gathered together,’ (*ibid.* iii 27). And they stood up and spat in Israel’s face, saying to them: ‘You knew that your God performs such miracles and wonders, yet you brought it upon yourselves that He should destroy His house.’ They spat into their faces, until they made all their bodies a mass of spittle, and Hananiah and his companions lifted their faces to heaven and justified the judgment, declaring: ‘Unto Thee, O Lord, belongeth righteousness, but unto us confusion of face’.²⁹

The argument put into the mouth of the Gentiles ‘You knew that your God performs miracles and wonders’ was derived from actual life. The belief of the Jews in miracles was well known. When Horace heard the story of the lamp that burnt without oil, he said: ‘That the Jew Apella believes, not I.’³⁰ He was undoubtedly right in saying that Jews believed this, as the words of R. Hanina b. Dosa testify: ‘He who commanded the oil to burn will likewise command the vinegar to burn’ (*T.B. Ta’anit* 25a). But while Horace and other Greek and Roman writers regarded such tales as *Superstitio Judaica*, it was accepted in the time of R. Eleazar that the God of Israel wrought miracles and wonders, and the readiness to believe in miracles was exceedingly widespread. The problem was to reconcile this belief with the nation’s destiny and with other elements of faith.

The religious value of the miracle is not absolute; it is controlled by and subject to other principles, and this is done, it appears, in various ways.

The former generations were vouchsafed miracles, because they gave their lives for the sanctification of God’s Name. Precisely on account of the conception that a miracle served only to prove God’s greatness and might—that is, the sanctity of his Name—the entire reason for the miracle is negated if there is no willingness to sanctify God’s Name on the part of those who perform miracles or wait for them. But whoever offers his life for the sanctification of the Divine

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Name must not do so with a view that a miracle should be wrought for him. When Trajan was about to have Pappus and Lulianus executed in Laodicea, ‘He said to them: “Are you not of the people of Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah? Let your God come and deliver you from my hand.” They replied: “Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah were righteous men, and Nebuchadnezzar was worthy of having a miracle performed through him; but you are a wicked king and you are unworthy that a miracle should be wrought through you, and we are deserving of death unto Heaven....”’³¹

The best example of this standpoint, which regards the miracle as a means of sanctifying the Divine Name and makes it conditional on the other deeds of him who wishes to be vouchsafed the wonder, is to be found in the tales concerning R. Ḥanina b. Dosa, ‘who was once praying when an *‘arwād* [venomous lizard] bit him, but he did not interrupt his prayer. His disciples went and found the reptile dead at the mouth of its hole. Said they: Woe to the man whom an *‘arwād* bites; but woe to the *‘arwād* who bites Ben Dosa!’ (*Tosefta Berakhot* iii, 20). In the Babylonian Talmud the story is recounted with differences of detail. There it is added: ‘He put it on his shoulder and brought it to the House of Study, saying to them [the disciples]: “See, my sons, it is not the *‘arwād* but sin that slays”’ (*T.B. Berakhot* 33a). Here the moral drawn from the miracle is expressly stated. The miracle points to an act sanctifying the Divine Name: by placing himself in danger and not interrupting his prayer, although the *‘arwād* had bitten him, R. Ḥanina b. Dosa was vouchsafed a miracle. The miracle, which came in the wake of the act of self-sacrifice, still further enhanced the sanctification of the Divine Name by being instrumental also in others’ regarding the miracle as a consequence of R. Ḥanina b. Dosa’s devotion to prayer.

The connection between the miracle and the law of recompense is clearly brought out in another story about R. Ḥanina b. Dosa. The Rabbis taught: It once happened that the daughter of Neḥunia, the well-digger, fell into a large cistern and people came and informed R. Ḥanina b. Dosa. The first hour he said to them: “All is well.” The second hour he (likewise) said: “All is well.” The third hour he said to them: “She has come up...” So the people said to him: “Are you a prophet?” He replied: “I am neither a prophet nor the son of

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a prophet, but is it conceivable that in the work in which the righteous man is engaged his seed should come to grief?...”³² The miracle was necessary in order to prove God’s righteousness.

The problem of the relationship between the laws of nature and miracles did not greatly exercise the minds of the Sages. Changes in the natural order are mentioned in Tannaitic sources in relation to the generation of the Flood—‘the Omnipresent changed for them the order of the universe, so that the sun rose in the west and set in the east’³³; nevertheless they persisted in their rebellion. The changing of the order of the universe was not a miracle. Express differences of opinion in relation to change in the natural order is first found in the days of the Amoraim. ‘The Rabbis taught: It once happened that a man’s wife died and left a sucking son, and the father had not the means to pay for a wet-nurse; then a miracle happened to him and he developed breasts like the two breasts of a woman, and he suckled his son. Rav Joseph said: Come and see how great is this man that such a miracle was wrought for him! Said Abbaye to him: On the contrary, how inferior is this man, that the natural order was changed for him’ (*T.B. Shabbat* 53b). Abbaye discerns an indication of inferiority in the change of the natural order that was wrought for the man, not only because ‘he did not merit that the gates of remuneration should be opened to him’ (Rashi), but primarily because we do not hear of any act of his warranting the miracle. The happening thus remained a breach of the order of nature³⁴ and was not a miracle.

Corresponding to Elihu’s invitation to Job to stand and consider the wonders of God in natural phenomena (*Job xxxvii* 11), the view is current among the Sages that the order of creation—that is, the order of nature—bears greater testimony to the Lord’s mighty deeds than the miracles that breach this law-bound system. When R. Akiba came to the verses in *Leviticus xi*, in which the names of beasts, birds, and crawling creatures are mentioned, ‘he used to say: “How manifold are Thy works, O Lord!’ etc. Thou hast creatures that live in the sea and that live on land. If those that live in the sea go on to the land, they die; and if those that live on dry land go into the sea, they die. There are creatures that live in fire and creatures that live in the air. If those that live in fire go into the air, they die; if those that live in the air go into the fire, they die. The place of life of the

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former spells death for the latter; and the place where the latter live spells death for the former. Thus Scripture declares: ‘How manifold are Thy works, O Lord!’ etc.”³⁵

Similarly, Philo argues ‘that these extraordinary and seemingly incredible events are but child’s play to God’ in comparison with the truly great things, namely the marvels of nature and existence.³⁶ At first blush it seems as though this view represents a return to primitive thinking, but it is precisely comparison with the latter that serves only to accentuate the difference. Primitive man lives in a world of miracles. Every event contains magical elements, and the sorcerer can perform miraculous deeds whenever he wishes,³⁷ but these miracles create no sense of wonder, nor do they serve as a sign or proof of God, who reveals His power through them and forms no part of nature. However, it is not only in nature but also in everyday life that the boundaries dividing the normal and natural from the miraculous are blurred. It once happened that ‘two men went forth to do business, and a thorn got lodged in one of them; he thereupon began to blaspheme and revile (the Lord). After a time he heard that his companion’s ship had sunk in the sea, whereupon he began to thank and praise (the Lord)... and this illustrates R. Eleazar’s teaching: What is the meaning of the verse “Who doeth wondrous things alone; and blessed be His glorious name for ever”?—Even the one to whom the miracle happens is not conscious of the miracle vouchsafed him.’ (*T.B. Nidda* 31a). R. Eleazar’s statement, on the basis of which we say in the ‘Prayer of Thanksgiving’ [Singer’s Prayer Book, p. 53] the words ‘and for the miracles, which are daily with us’, are explained in *Midrash Tehillim* (Psalms cvi, 1) thus:

Many miracles and wonders dost Thou perform for us every day and no man knows. Then who does know?—Thou, O Lord. R. Eleazar b. Pedat said: See what is written: ‘To Him who doeth great wonders alone’—He alone knows. And what is written thereafter? ‘To Him who divided the Sea of Reeds in sunder’—the piece of bread [*pěrûsā*, literally: ‘the divided’, i.e. livelihood]³⁸ is equal in importance to the sea, which was divided in sunder. Just as the world cannot do without the piece of bread,³⁹ so it is not possible for the world to do without miracles and wonders. How are we to envisage this? A man is lying on a

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bed, and a serpent is on the ground before him. When he seeks to rise, the serpent becomes aware of him. When he is about to put his feet on it, the serpent flees from him. And (the man) does not know what wonders the Holy One blessed be He performs for him ...

Other Amoraim went even further than R. Eleazar and said that (the problem of) livelihood is greater than that of redemption and harder than the partition of the Sea of Reeds.⁴⁰ Although it is possible to argue that the miraculous construction put on earning one's livelihood is to be explained in the light of the difficult economic position obtaining in the third century in Eretz-Israel, yet this problem could have been solved by withdrawing the question of livelihood from the realm of miracles, in the spirit of Rav Naḥman bar Isaac's dictum⁴¹: 'Note that miracles are wrought ("by Heaven for the salvation of many human lives"—Rashi), yet food is not created' ('but that food should be created for the righteous in their homes, i.e. that they should find wheat growing in their houses, is not a common miracle'—Rashi). Hence it seems that the sayings of the Amoraim of Eretz-Israel stem from their tendency to regard the natural order and normal occurrences as miracles. The bringing down of rain is accounted as equivalent to the resurrection, and according to R. Ḥiyya bar Abba and R. Abbfhu 'The day of rain is greater than of the resurrection of the dead.'⁴²

The influence of this view is discernible also in the sphere of Halakha. With reference to the ruling in the Mishna (*M. Yevamot* xvi, 3) that evidence may be given of a man's death, in order to permit his wife to remarry, 'only after his soul has departed, even though he was seen amputated, or crucified, or being devoured by a wild beast', it is stated in the Palestinian Talmud (*ibid.* 5, p. 15c): "Even if he was seen amputated" for I presume that he was burnt with a heated blade and lived. "Crucified", in the case of a crucified person I presume that a Roman matron passed by and redeemed him. "Or being devoured by a wild beast", for I presume that Heaven had compassion on him. If he fell into a pit of lions, no testimony (concerning his death) is given, for I presume that he was vouchsafed miracles, as was Daniel. If he fell into a fiery furnace, no evidence (of his death) is given for I presume that miracles were wrought for him, as for Hananiah,

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Mishael, and Azariah.’ The explanations of the ruling of the Mishna are not essentially different from those given in regard to the statements of the Baraita:⁴³ ‘If he fell into a pit of lions, if he fell into a fiery furnace.’ Both sets of interpretations emanate from the presumption that we must take into account the possibility that ‘Heaven would compassionate him’, and that an unusual happening—in other words, a miracle—would occur to bring about the deliverance of the person in peril. The Mishna that we have cited—and also the additional Halakhot of the Baraita—is in accord with R. Meir’s view, as we can infer from the next Mishna: ‘If a man fell into the water, whether it has (a visible) end or not, his wife is forbidden (to remarry). R. Meir said: It once happened that a man fell into a large cistern and came up again after three days.’ In the Baraita⁴⁴ the Sages dispute R. Meir’s view and declare that (if a man fell) into water that has (a visible) end, his wife is permitted (to remarry), and concerning his story they said to R. Meir, ‘miracles are not cited’. According to the interpretation of the Palestinian Talmud, we must conclude that they disagreed with R. Meir in regard to the other cases, too. They do not deny that the miracle occurred or the possibility of its recurring, only it may not be cited for the purpose of establishing the Halakha, because it does not belong to the permanent order. This view found its general formulation in the words of R. Jannai: ‘A man should never stand in a place of danger, assuming that a miracle would be wrought for him, for perhaps it will not be wrought.’⁴⁵ R. Zera expressed himself in similar vein: ‘A miracle does not happen every time’⁴⁶; and after him Rava declared: ‘We may not rely on miracles’.⁴⁷ Abbaye differed from him, saying that we may rely on a miracle. This is also related of Rav, at least when he was in the company of a scholar ‘whose merit was great’. Those Sages who did not rely on miracles also did not wish to make use of their merits in order to effect a miracle. R. Jannai said: ‘And if you should say that a miracle is wrought for him, his merits are reduced.’ Rav Joseph also thought ‘lest it be deducted from my merit in the world to come’.⁴⁸ Underlying the Sages’ unwillingness to rely upon miracles is the tendency to restrict miracles. We also find a trend to limit the miracles of the past. The Mishna that informs us that the mouth of the earth that swallowed up Korah, the mouth of Balaam’s ass, the rainbow, the rod, and the

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cloud were all created on Sabbath eve at twilight (M. 'Avot, v, 6) wishes to incorporate these miracles within the confines of nature. When the world was created, the universe was given the power to produce things that are outside the natural order. In the spirit of this Mishna is also the exposition of R. Jonathan, who belonged to the last of the Tannaim: 'The Holy One, blessed be He, stipulated with the sea that it should be rent asunder; this is the meaning of the verse "and the sea returned *lě-'ětānô* [E.V. 'to its strength']" (Exodus xiv 27)—that is, *li-těnāô* ['to its stipulation']' (*Gen. Rabba* v, 3, p. 35). R. Jonathan interprets the word *lě-'ětānô* in the sense of *li-těnāô* apparently with the intention to set the miracle within the bounds of the natural order. The passage continues there as follows: 'R. Jeremiah b. Eleazar said:⁴⁹ Not with the sea alone did the Holy One, blessed be He, make a condition, but with everything formed in the Six Days of Creation. This is the significance of the verse "I, even My hands, have stretched out the heavens, and all their host have I commanded" (Isaiah xlv 12)—I commanded the sea to be cleft, and the heavens to be silent before Moses, as it is said "Give ear, ye heavens", etc. (Deuteronomy xxxii 1); I commanded the sun and the moon to stand still before Joshua; I commanded the ravens to feed Elijah; I commanded the fire not to harm Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah; I commanded the lions not to hurt Daniel, the heavens to open before Ezekiel, the fish to vomit out Jonah'—the entire gamut of Biblical miracles is included in the act of creation.

This view that the miracle was implanted in nature since the six days of creation is found also in Philo's writings. Although he holds that God fixed immutable laws of nature, to which powers (*δυνάμεις*) were given, yet, in opposition to Plato's teaching, which allows no room for miracles, Philo takes the view that these powers are not independent or autocratic. The qualities revealed in objects by miraculous acts—the sweetening of the water by means of the rod, the well in the rock—were inherent in their nature. The miracle consisted in the fact that God made them available to Moses at the requisite time. In a similar way the Stoics explained the existence of divination and astrology.⁵⁰

It is difficult to say whether the Rabbinic dicta that we have cited on the subject resulted from extraneous influence, but it is clear that

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the incorporation of past miracles in the natural order is a form of rationalization that served the aim to restrict miraculous acts in the present. Just as the accentuation of God's might by means of analogies that compared Him with a human king, and by stories about miracles in the past and in the present, was explained by us against the background of religious life in the milieu of the Talmudic and Midrashic Sages, so, too, the restriction and limitation of miracles are to be understood against the background of the existing reality. Immanental tendencies and polemical aims in relation to other faiths are interlinked in this restriction. We have already stated that all faiths claim miracles in proof of their truth. That the miracle corroborates the truth and existence of God was an accepted principle in the ancient world. Stories about miracles close with the words 'Great is god so-and-so'. 'What is god?—That which is strong' is stated in a catechism preserved in a papyrus.⁵¹ Every religion, especially one that raised the banner of proselytization, was confronted by the problem of what attitude to take towards miracles—the miracles of its own tradition and of those of other religions. Ancient Christianity adopted the principle that 'The miracle is legitimate magic, while magic is an illegitimate miracle.' On the one hand, the Apostles were opposed to magic and sorcery, and the Fathers of the Christian Church regarded the founders of sectarian groups as sorcerers, whilst the antagonism to Simon Magus (The Acts viii 9) is well known. But on the other hand, miracles occupied such an important place in the new faith that the Apostles and the Fathers of the Christian Church were caught up by the general prevailing trend and became integrated in it, while differentiating between permissible and forbidden magic. Without doubt miracles played a great role in the propagation of Christianity in the ancient world.⁵² Instances of the exorcism of spirits, which occur very frequently in the Gospels, served as proof of the power of the new faith. Although it is easy to cite parallels to the miracles in the Gospels, both from the Bible and Rabbinic sources and from Graeco-Roman literature,⁵³ yet the importance ascribed to them by Christianity is to be explained against the background of the Messianic consciousness and the realization of the prophetic promises.⁵⁴ It is noteworthy that in the scant reports about Jesus and his disciples in Rabbinic literature they are primarily described as enchanter and

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sorcerers. ‘It once happened that R. Eleazar b. Dama was bitten by a snake, and Jacob of Kefar Samma came to heal him in the name of Jesus b. Pantera, but R. Ishmael did not permit him. They said to him: “You are not permitted, Ben Dama.” He answered him: “I shall bring you proof that he may heal me.” But before he was able to bring such proof, he died. Said R. Ishmael: “Happy are you, Ben Dama, that you departed in peace, and did not breach the fence of the Sages, for whoever breaches the fence of the Sages suffers retribution in the end, as it is said: “He who breaketh through a fence, a serpent shall bite him.”’⁵⁵ ‘... And a master said: Jesus practised magic, and enticed and led Israel astray.’⁵⁶ Needless to say, Christians denied this, but, on the other hand, they spoke of the power that inhered in the name ‘Jesus’ to exorcise evil spirits. Justin maintains (*Dial. c. Tr.*, 1, 2, 85) that the Jews cannot exorcise a single spirit by virtue of the names of their kings, saints, prophets, or patriarchs. In the light of this, we can understand the story about R. Eleazar b. Dama, which we cited above, and likewise the claim that the books of the Minim are diviners’ books, that is, works on witchcraft.⁵⁷ Minim here denotes Christians or Gnostic sects. Past enemies of Israel—Pharaoh, Balaam, Amalek—appear as sorcerers. ‘The Pharaoh who lived in the days of Moses was a Magus’ (*T.B. Mo’ed Qatan* 18a). On the other hand, we find that Roman writers, including Pliny,⁵⁸ speak of Moses as a magician; his name also appears in magical papyri. It is noteworthy that, in the Midrash to the Scroll of Esther, Haman—he is the spokesman of all the revilers and blasphemers of Judaism, and sometimes the reference is not to the historical Haman—is made to say: ‘There arose a sorcerer unto them called Moses the son of Amram, and he took his rod in his hand and muttered an incantation over the sea and it became dry, and he took them [the Israelites] across the seabed, but I do not know by what means he made it dry...’⁵⁹ Similarly, the victories of Joshua and David are there depicted as acts of magic. R. Jonathan and those who adopted his doctrine said, in reply to all this argumentation, that the miracles related in the Scriptures were not acts of Moses, Joshua and Elijah, but conditions made by the Holy One, blessed be He, with the work of creation.

An outstanding feature of the miracle stories in Rabbinic literature

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is the fact that the personality of the miracle-worker is not emphasized. The Sages were careful not to turn the person himself, who performed the miracle, into a wonder and marvel. The prayer 'He who answered Abraham' (*M. Ta'anit* ii, 4) is evidence of this. We do not pray to Abraham, our father, but to Him who answered Abraham. This point established a difference of principle between these stories and the tales about the miracles of Jesus, whose entire purpose is to accentuate his might and power. It will suffice to set side by side the following two narratives, which are similar in detail, but differ in their basic aim:

John iv 46–54

And there was an official, whose son was ill at Capernaum. When he heard that Jesus had come... he went and begged him to come down and heal his son... Jesus therefore said to him: 'Unless thou seest signs and wonders thou wilt not believe.' The man said to him... 'Sir, come down before my child dies.' Jesus said to him, 'Go, thy son will live.' The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went his way. And as he was going down, his servants met him, and told him that his son was living. So he asked them the hour when he began to mend, and they said to him, 'Yesterday at the seventh hour the fever left him.' The father knew that was the hour when Jesus said to him 'Thy son will live'; and he himself believed, and all his household.

T.B. Berakhot 34b

Our Rabbis taught: Once the son of R. Gamaliel fell ill. He sent two scholars to R. Ḥanina b. Dosa to ask him to pray for him. Upon seeing them, he [R. Ḥanina b. Dosa] went up to an upper chamber and prayed for him. On coming down, he said to them, 'Go, for the fever has left him'. Said they to him: 'Are you a prophet?' He answered: 'I am neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet; but I have this tradition: if my prayer is fluent in my mouth, I know that he [the sick person] is accepted, and if not, I know that he is rejected. They sat down and wrote down the exact moment; and when they came to R. Gamaliel, he said to them: 'I swear by the Temple Service! you have stated the time neither too soon nor too late, but so it actually happened. At that moment the fever left him and he asked us for a drink of water.'

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The Christian story seeks to confirm ‘that this is indeed the Christ, the saviour of the world’ (*ibid.*, v. 45), while the Jewish narrative puts into the mouth of R. Ḥanina b. Dosa—and also in the story that we cited above (p. 109)—the words ‘I am no prophet, nor the son of a prophet’.

Even the line of demarcation drawn between the miracles of the pious and saints within the Jewish camp and the miracles of others, by proclaiming the latter witchcraft, did not satisfy everyone. There were those who preferred to regard the miraculous acts as due to the operation of God’s edict, despite the fact that idolaters proclaim them to be miracles of their idols. This approach is clearly seen in the story that we cited in another connection,⁶⁰ according to which R. Akiba said to Zonin that ‘when afflictions are sent upon a man, they are adjured to come upon him only on a given day and to leave him only on a given day, and through the medium of such-and-such a person⁶¹ and such-and-such a medicine. When their time came to depart, (the sick person) happened to go to his idolatrous shrine. Thereupon the afflictions said: Rightly we should not leave. Then they added: But because⁶² this fool acted improperly shall we break our oath?’ R. Akiba’s views in regard to Providence we shall discuss later on (ch. xi). At any rate, the reply he gave was acceptable to the questioner, who was apparently a follower of the popular Stoic philosophy, which taught that Fate decides the incidence and disappearance of suffering. This philosophy is also consonant with R. Akiba’s inclination to regard God’s miracles as forming part of the order of nature and creation (above, p. 110). The Sages were able to come to terms with miracles. Undoubtedly, personal leanings and experiences motivated each Sage either to emphasize or minimize miraculous happenings. There were always Sages who would not forgo miracles that transcended the bounds of nature, and did not refrain from relating and transmitting such occurrences even about Sages who themselves are seen to belong to those who reduced and limited all miraculous deeds. Even in regard to the role of transcendental forces and proofs, instead of logical reasoning, in the field of Halakha, there is no unified opinion. As against dicta and rules such as ‘we pay no heed to a Heavenly Voice’ (*T.B. Pesahim* 114a, and the parallels cited there), ‘A prophet is not permitted from now on to introduce anything new’ (*Sifra*, end

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of Leviticus; *T.B. Temura* 16a), ‘Even if Elijah were to come and say... he would not be listened to’ (*T.B. Yevamot* 102a), Talmudic tradition knows of the intervention of such forces in the Halakhic sphere, and R. Eliezer b. Hyrcanus was not alone in saying ‘If the Halakha accords with my view, let this carob-tree prove it; thereupon the carob-tree was torn away a hundred cubits from its place... If the Halakha accords with my view, let the water-canal prove it; thereupon the water flowed backward... If the Halakha accords with my view, let the walls of the schoolhouse prove it; thereupon the walls of the schoolhouse inclined to fall... Again he said to them: If the Halakha agrees with me, let proof be given from heaven; thereupon a Heavenly Voice came forth and said: “Why do you dispute with R. Eliezer, for the Halakha accords with his view in all matters...’⁶³

Despite all the divergences of opinion, the essential premise that miracles are possible cannot be doubted; to believe in miracles is to believe in a Living, Omnipotent God. This omnipotence is beyond all doubt and is not subject to argument. Noteworthy from this standpoint is the criticism levelled by Galen against the Jewish concept of God’s omnipotence: ‘For Moses it sufficed to say that God willed the ordering of matter and forthwith it was set in order, for he believed that everything was possible to God, even if He should wish to form a horse or a bull out of dust. But we do not hold this view; we say that certain things are impossible by their nature, and God does not attempt to do them. He chooses the best of the creative possibilities.’⁶⁴

The Tannaim, who were contemporaries of Galen, strenuously rejected his viewpoint, for the actual belief in the unrestricted power of God was of primary importance in their estimation, and not the miracle. ‘Like the case of R. Johanan, who sat and expounded: The Holy One, blessed be He, will bring precious stones and pearls, thirty (cubits) by thirty, and He will make an engraving within them ten (cubits broad) by twenty (cubits) high, and will set them up in the gateways of Jerusalem, as it is said: “And I will make thy windows of agates, and thy gates of carbuncle”, etc. (Isaiah liv 12). A certain disciple derided him, saying: “Nowadays we do not find a gem the size of a dove’s egg, shall we then find (precious stones) of such size?” After a time, he went on a sea-voyage and saw the Ministering Angels

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sawing precious stones and pearls. Said he to them: "What are these for?" They replied: "The Holy One, blessed be He, is due to set them up in the gateways of Jerusalem." Upon returning, he found R. Joḥanan sitting and expounding. Said he to him: "Master, teach, for it is fitting that you should teach; exactly as you have said, so have I seen." He (R. Joḥanan) replied: "Wretch!, *if you had not seen, you would not have believed!* You deride the words of the Sages!" He set his eyes upon him, and turned him into a heap of bones.⁶⁵ The paradox in the story is that the disciple in question, called in one source 'a sectarian' [*Mîn*], believes in signs and wonders, but only if he sees them with his own eyes. Complete understanding of the mighty deeds and wonders of the Lord are in the end vouchsafed only to one who realizes his inability to conceive and depict these wonders, as the Amora R. Aha expressed it: 'We are unable to recount thy wonders and thoughts, which Thou dost execute; He is beyond praise. The case may be compared to two men, one of whom is strong and the other weak. Can the weakling relate the praise of the strong man? No! Why? Because he has no inkling of the strong man's prowess. But the strong man, who knows his own power, is able to tell the praise of (another) mighty one. This is the meaning of David's words: "Who can express the mighty acts of the Lord?"' (*Midrash Tehillim* cvi 1). Here bounds are set to the praises of God's might.

We have before us a phenomenon similar to that which we observed when we spoke of the immanence of the Deity. In the feeling of God's nearness there is present religious explosive material; there lurks within it the danger of the identification of God with nature, just as in extreme transcendentalism there exists danger of removing God from the world. Praising God and stressing His might, that is, the fact that man is filled with wonder at His mighty deeds and miracles, contains much that is positive, but the attempt to express all His mighty acts and leaving this expression to human ability are liable to destroy our sense of distance and sublimity in regard to God, and thereby to detract from His greatness and majesty. Hence the Halakha proceeded to fix the praises of the Omnipotent. After they had been drawn up in proper order, 'it was forbidden, from then on, to relate the praise of the Holy One, blessed be He, for R. Eleazar said: 'What is the meaning of the verse "Who can express the mighty acts of the

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Lord, or make all His praise to be heard (Psalms cvi 2)?” For whom is it fitting to express the mighty acts of the Lord? For one who can make all His praise to be heard. Rabba bar Ḥana said in the name of R. Joḥanan: Whoever eulogizes the Holy One, blessed be He, to excess is uprooted from the world.’⁶⁶ So, too, they acted in practice: ‘R. Joḥanan and Jonathan went to establish order and harmony in certain cities of the South; on coming to one place, they found the superintendent saying “The great, mighty, and awe-inspiring, the eminent and the valiant God”, and they silenced him. They said to him: “You are not permitted to add to the formula fixed by the Sages for the benedictions...” R. Jacob of Kefar Nibburaya interpreted in Tyre: “Praise is due to Thee, O God in Zion” (Psalms lxxv 2 [1])... the case is comparable to a priceless pearl, the more one praises it one devalues it...’⁶⁷ The danger inherent in the free recitation of the Creator’s praises is given its most original expression by the Amora R. Phinehas⁶⁸: ‘Moses formulated the wording of the prayer “The great, mighty and awe-inspiring God” (Deuteronomy x 17); Jeremiah said “The great, the mighty God” (Jeremiah xxxii 18), but he did not say “awe-inspiring”. Why? He said: “the mighty”—it is fitting to call Him “mighty”, because He sees the Temple in ruins and is silent. But why did He not say “awe-inspiring”? Because He inspires awe only in the Temple [*bě-ēt ha-miqdāsh*],⁶⁹ as it is said “Awe-inspiring is God out of the holy place”. Daniel said: “The great and awe-inspiring God” (Daniel ix 4), but he did not say “the mighty”. His children are held in chains—where then is His might? But why did he say “awe-inspiring”? It is fitting to call Him “awe-inspiring”, because of the awe-inspiring things He did unto us in the fiery furnace. But when the men of the Great Assembly arose, they restored the greatness to its former estate, (saying): “The great, the mighty and the awe-inspiring God”.’ In this homily the question of giving expression to God’s greatness is connected with that of theodicy. While the expositor ascribes to Jeremiah and Daniel a diminution of God’s praise, corresponding to the reduced manifestation of Divine righteousness and power, the men of the Great Assembly restored the crown (of the Lord’s attributes) to its former estate and fixed it for future generations out of absolute faith in God’s unlimited power and in His righteousness, which transcends all human questions.

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Like Job (xliii 1–3), who declares after the Lord’s answer:⁷⁰ ‘I know that Thou canst do all things... Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know’, the act attributed to the men of the Great Assembly ascribes an intrinsic value to the realization that God is inconceivable, a realization that is both calming and attractive to man, and, at the same time, a justification of the Godhead. However, this answer, which released the sovereign will of God from the ethical yardstick of man, and reaffirmed His mighty and awe-inspiring deeds in a world that appeared to deny them did not satisfy everyone, as can be seen from the explanation given for the action of the men of the Great Assembly in the Babylonian Talmud: ‘They came and said: On the contrary, these are His mighty acts, these are His awe-inspiring deeds. Therein lies His might, that He suppresses His anger and is long-suffering towards the wicked. Therein lie His awe-inspiring deeds, for were it not for the awe-inspiring deeds of the Holy One, blessed be He, how could one nation maintain its existence among the (other) nations!’⁷¹ According to this recension there is no difference in principle between the approach of the men of the Great Assembly and that ascribed to Jeremiah and Daniel. The latter formulated His praise according to the extent to which His power and might were felt, according to its actual manifestation, and they were not afraid ‘to set a limit in these matters’, for, as R. Isaac b. Eleazar expressed it, ‘The prophets know that their God is truthful; hence they do not flatter Him’.⁷²

The designation of a multiplicity of praises as flattery and the silencing of the superintendent who multiplied such eulogies in one of the towns of the South, seem to allude to mystic circles, which, like the literature of the *Hěkhālôt* [‘Heavenly Palaces’] in our possession, created hymns and prayers, basically composed of praise and glorification of God, by repeating and duplicating the honorific epithets, and the monotony of their rhythm was intended to induce in the worshipper a state of enthusiasm and ecstasy, and to arouse in him the *mysterium tremendum* towards the Holy King. In prayers of this kind the emphasis is primarily placed on the sublimity of the might and majesty of God, other aspects, such as the Lord’s love and nearness to man, being set aside. Holiness transcends all ethical meaning, and is none other than the glory of His majesty.⁷³ Despite

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the opposition expressed in Halakhot, in the course of time the prayers formulated in these circles penetrated the established liturgy,⁷⁴ and it would appear that the prohibition was already relaxed in the days of the Amoraim. Thus R. Abbahu reports in the name of R. Lazar ‘Wherever a worshipper has transgressed and said “glorious in majesty” [instead of “the Holy God”] he has not fulfilled his obligation, except if he substituted it for “the Holy God” in the New Year liturgy, and then only in Musaph [“Additional Prayer”].’⁷⁵ The use of this benedictory ending ‘glorious in majesty’ instead of ‘the Holy God’ emanates apparently from these circles. Outside the house of prayer, praises of God free from all restrictions used to be composed at gatherings of joy or mourning. Resh Laqish once invited the Meturgeman Judah bar Naḥmani to say words of praise to the Holy One, blessed be He, and the latter ‘began and said “The God who is great in the abundance of His greatness, majestic and strong in the abundance of His awe-inspiring deeds, who by His word revives the dead, does great things that are unsearchable and wonders that are numberless”’ (*T.B. Ketubbot* 8b).