

Greek Magical Terminology in the Septuagint

From Homer to Plato, the evolution of magical terminology in the Greek language has been fairly well documented in recent years (see most notably Graf 1997). Beginning with the relatively neutral Homeric terms *pharmakon* and *epaoide*, magic in the Classical period came to be increasingly judged, with terms like *goes* and the new loanword *magos* cast in a negative light particularly by philosophers such as Plato. This paper will continue to follow the evolution of magical terminology in the Greek language by focusing on the use of these and other such terms in one particular corpus, the Septuagint (that is, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible). As a work likely to have originated primarily in Alexandria, one of the largest Greek-speaking cities of the Hellenistic world, the Septuagint provides a window into the semantic evolution of these terms into the last two centuries BCE as well as the translators' attitudes towards the ideas they represent.

The Hebrew Bible is a book full of magic and magical terminology. From the Egyptian magicians pitted against Moses to the dream interpreters of Nebuchadnezzar, the translators of the Hebrew Bible had ample opportunity to make use of the set of Greek magical terminology as they rendered the ancient Jewish stories into a new and very different language. If the linguistic differences between Greek and Hebrew were profound, the cultural differences between the two groups were perhaps even more so: the urban Jews of Alexandria may well have had more in common with cosmopolitan Greeks than with the hyper-conservative Jews of Judaea, or indeed with the ancient Israelites of Biblical times. These cultural differences both complicate and illuminate the study of magical terminology in the Septuagint. Specifically, the biggest cultural difference was in the cultural attitude toward magic and its accoutrements. Of the ten major Hebrew roots used to discuss some kind of magical act or practitioner, virtually all of them come

in for condemnation at one point or another in the Hebrew Bible. The Greek terminology with which the translators had to work, on the other hand, is more often historically neutral, taking its value from context.

The choices made by the translators are often revealing both of their own cultural sensitivities and perhaps of the increasingly negative valence of certain magical terms in the milieu of Hellenistic thought. Most commonly, terms with a decidedly negative connotation in the Hebrew Bible are translated without additional comment by Greek terms which several hundred years earlier might have been neutral or even positive. While the translators may simply have expected their readers to pick up on the implicit negative connotation of the passages in question, a close analysis shows that the translators nonetheless seem to reserve particular Greek words for especially negative situations. For instance, the Greek terms *pharmakon* and *pharmakeia*, hardly negative words in the works of Homer or even consistently in Classical thought, are used by the translators of the Septuagint only in decidedly negative contexts, suggesting that this family of words had largely lost any positive connotations in the sizable and influential Greek-speaking Jewish community at Alexandria. Other terms, such as *epaoide*, appear to be used in somewhat more favorable (although still largely negative) situations, suggesting a gradation of negativity among these elements of magical terminology.

The use of magical terminology by a small group of Jewish translators living in Hellenistic Egypt would eventually come to impact the entire Greek-speaking world as first the New Testament and then early Christian writers took their cues from the semantic standards set by the Septuagint. This paper, then, gives a snapshot of the semantics of Greek magical terminology at a pivotal moment, just as it is evolving from its Homeric and Classical roots into its Hellenistic, Imperial, and eventually Byzantine form. In so doing, it also provides a window

into the roots of modernity's attitudes toward "magic", as the attitudes evident in the Septuagint were themselves carried on in translation in the Latin-speaking West and onward to our own day.

Bibliography

Graf, Fritz. *Magic in the Ancient World*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Press, 1997.