

MAGICAL PAPYRI

The magical [papyri](#) are a collection of documents from Greco-Roman antiquity that have come to be recognized as important witnesses to the common folk beliefs and practices of the NT era. Their contents include incantations, rituals, formulas, spells, hymns and a variety of magical symbols, characters and names. The majority of these texts were written in Greek, but some were composed in Demotic, [Coptic](#) and even [Aramaic](#). Written on paper made from the [papyrus](#) reeds grown in the Nile region of Egypt, these texts are part of a broader set of witnesses attesting to [magic](#). In addition to parchment manuscripts and the many literary references to [magic](#), there are numerous curse tablets, amulets and a variety of magical items that provide further perspective on the practice of [magic](#).

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1. Description of the Papyri

The discovery of magical texts written on [papyrus](#) took place simultaneous to the discovery of many other [papyrus](#) documents, including NT fragments, in the early 1800s in Egypt. The largest and most significant find occurred in the 1820s in Thebes, where some villagers discovered a large number of [papyrus](#) rolls in a tomb. Bought by Giovanni Anastasi, the Anastasi collection was subsequently sold in 1828 to a number of libraries throughout Europe, including the Rijksmuseum in Leiden, the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris and the British Museum. Since then, many additional discoveries have been made. There are now about 230 [extant](#) magical [papyri](#).

The Great Paris Magical Papyrus (*P. Bibl. Nat. Suppl. Gr. 574; PGM IV*) has garnered the most attention. The longest of all the texts yet discovered, *PGM IV* is a [papyrus codex](#) containing 36 leaves written on both sides with a total of 3,274 lines. Each leaf measures roughly 30 × 13 centimeters (11.7 × 5 inches). The book appears to have been a collection of magical incantations and formulas belonging to one magician in ancient Egypt. Dating to the early fourth century A.D., the document contains a wide variety of magical traditions from much earlier sources.

The definitive critical edition of the magical [papyri](#) was compiled by K. Preisendanz in two volumes titled *Papyri Graecae Magicae: Die Griechischen Zauberpapyri*, published in 1928 and 1931 and now appearing in a second edition by A. Heinrichs (1973–74). References to the magical [papyri](#) are customarily cited by the abbreviation of Preisendanz's work (*PGM*). A projected third volume with

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indexes was scheduled to be printed, but the Teubner publishing house in Leipzig was destroyed in an Allied bombing raid in World War II. The few surviving galley proofs were never reset and printed. R. W. Daniel and F. Maltomini have begun a re-edition of some *PGM* texts under the title *Supplementum Magicum*.

H.-D. Betz of the University of Chicago gathered a team of scholars to translate into English the Preisendanz texts, some Demotic [papyri](#) and a few other magical [papyri](#) appearing since Preisendanz's edition. *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation (GMPT)* has become the indispensable source for NT students wanting easy access to the contents of these distinctive texts.

2. The Date

Some NT scholars dismiss the relevance of the magical [papyri](#) for NT interpretation because the majority of the documents postdate the NT. But this response fails to recognize how crucial these documents are for understanding the [worldview](#) of the masses in the Greco-Roman empire. There are a number of good reasons for affirming the importance of these texts for NT interpretation.

First, a number of these documents can be dated to the first century A.D. and before. The earliest [papyrus](#) is known as the curse of Artemisia (*PGM* XL) and should be dated to the late fourth century B.C. (see Brashear 1995, 3413). It was incorrectly labeled as fourth century A.D. in the *GMPT*. A few magical [papyri](#) can be dated to the first century B.C. (*PGM* XX, CXVII and CXXII) and the first century A.D. (*PGM* XVI and CXI). A comparison of these texts with the others demonstrates a strong affinity of vocabulary, forms and rituals. The only observable difference is that there is a development of *voces magicae* (magical use of vowels) and *characteres* (magical symbols) in the later texts (Brashear 1995, 3414).

Second, unlike [Gnosticism](#), which did not emerge as a religious system until the second century, [magic](#) not only existed but also was widely practiced for centuries leading up to the time of Jesus and the apostles. There are numerous references to magical practices in a variety of literary sources. The existence of magical scrolls in the first century is corroborated in part by [Suetonius](#), who says that Augustus ordered two thousand magical scrolls to be burned in 13 B.C. (Suetonius [Augustus 31.1](#); see Betz 1992, xli). In the mid-first century, [Pliny](#) complained that “the fraudulent art has held sway throughout the world for many ages” (Pliny [Nat. Hist. 30.1.1](#)). He also speaks of “the greatness of its influence” in his day (Pliny [Nat. Hist. 30.1.1](#)), noting that “[magic](#) rose to such a height that even today it has sway over a great part of mankind” (Pliny [Nat. Hist. 30.1.2](#); see also [30.4.13](#)).

Third, many of the magical [papyri](#) are recipes for the [creation](#) of amulets and lead curse tablets. Archaeologists have unearthed more than fifteen hundred of these curse tablets, many dating as early as the fifth century B.C. Hundreds of amulets have also been discovered. These material witnesses have demonstrated that the kind of [magic](#) illustrated in the magical [papyri](#) was practiced all over the Mediterranean world throughout the [Hellenistic](#) and Roman periods.

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Finally, magicians prided themselves on the antiquity of the traditions they used. Classicists agree that the collections of traditions found in the scrolls have been handed down for generations. G. Luck concludes, “they reflect much older ideas, and the doctrines and techniques they embody were probably developed in the late Hellenistic period. Many are considered to be copies of copies” (Luck, 16).

3. The Nature and Significance of Magic

In the Roman era, [magic](#) was a set of rituals and practices that enabled people to coerce the gods and spirit powers to accomplish whatever they might ask. Fundamental to [magic](#) is an animistic [worldview](#). Spirits are everywhere and involved in everything. Spirit beings are associated with the sun, moon, stars and planets; they populate the underworld; they are involved with animal life, plants and the elements. The magical [papyri](#) ostensibly provide the directions for managing the spirit realm as it touches on every facet of daily life.

F. Graf notes that “the practice of [magic](#) was omnipresent in classical antiquity” (Graf, 1). The magical [papyri](#) are particularly valuable in providing us with a window on popular beliefs and practices in the Greco-Roman period. They are the primary source documents of folk [belief](#) in the lives of people living at the time of Jesus and the apostles. A. D. Nock went so far as to emphasize the necessity of using the magical texts to interpret the religion of the common people. He writes, “We may and must make use of magical [papyri](#) in our attempt to reconstruct the religious attitude of the mass of mankind in the Roman world” (Nock, 34).

Many of the spells in the [papyri](#) prescribe rituals and formulas for protection from curses, malevolent spirits and disembodied souls (*biaiothanatoi*) that could cause harm. Such apotropaic, or protective, spells typically involved the performance of a ritual, the uttering of magical words and names of spirits or deities and often the [creation](#) of an amulet to be worn. *PGM* IV.1932–54 illustrates some of these elements:

I call upon you, lord Helios, and your holy [angels](#) on this day, in this very hour: Preserve me, NN [insert name], for I am *thenor*, and you are holy [angels](#), guardians of the *ardimalecha* and [nine lines of *voces magicae* follow], I beg you, lord Helios, hear me NN and grant me power over the spirit of this man who died a violent [death](#) [*biaiothanatos*], from whose tent I hold [this], so that I may keep him with me, [NN] as helper and avenger for whatever business I crave from him.

Related to these protective charms are spells designed to expel harmful spirits and for obtaining healing from various ailments, especially fevers and headaches. Spirits and sickness were seldom separated in the magical texts. Indeed, the spirits were believed to be behind the afflictions.

There are also numerous love spells of attraction in the magical [papyri](#). In these the suppliant summons infernal powers to compel the person who is the object of desire to submit herself to the conjurer. A variety of other forms of maleficent [magic](#) fill the pages of the [papyri](#). These consist primarily

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of curses against enemies (slanderers, thieves, economic competitors, adversaries at a trial and competitors in the games). A recipe for a lead curse tablet (*PGM* XXXVI.231–55) prescribes a ritual involving bat's blood and the body of a frog. Along with the performance of the ritual, the conjurer is instructed to inscribe this curse on the lead tablet: "Supreme [angels](#), just as this frog drips with blood and dries up, so also will the body of him, NN whom NN bore, because I conjure you, who are in command of fire *maskelli maskello*."

The magical [papyri](#) are also filled with recipes for the conjuring of a dream vision and the appearance of a spirit guide (*paredros*). The spirit assistant is said to come and reside with the one who accomplishes the bidding.

4. Jewish Influence

Many Jews, in Palestine and throughout the [Diaspora](#), participated in the magical arts. W. M. Brashear states that "the repute of Jewish magicians exceeded even that of Egyptian sorcerers" (Brashear 1995, 3426). In his study of Jewish [magic](#), P.S. Alexander notes, "Magic flourished among the Jews despite strong and persistent condemnation by the religious [authority](#)" (Alexander, 342).

Two magical [papyri](#) written in Aramaic have recently been discovered in Egypt, one at Oxyrhynchus and another of unknown [provenance](#) (see Brashear 1995, 3428). It is likely that some of the recipes in the Greek magical [papyri](#) may have been created by Jews. Alexander lists more than a dozen texts from the *PGM* that were probably composed by a Jew based on the overwhelmingly Jewish content of the texts (Alexander, 357–59). The most noteworthy example is *PGM* IV.3007–86, a charm to be used by someone possessed by [demons](#) (see [Demonology](#)). The [demons](#) are conjured by "the God of the Hebrews," and the text makes allusions to the [exodus](#) and other key figures and events in the history of Israel.

Of even greater significance is the pervasive influence of Jewish ideas on [magic](#) as it was practiced all over the Mediterranean world and is evidenced in the magical [papyri](#). Egyptian sorcerers had great respect for the names of the supernatural powers in [Judaism](#). References to Iao (for YHWH), Sabaoth, Adonai, [Moses](#), Solomon, Michael, Gabriel, [angels](#), archangels, cherubim and seraphim abound in the texts.

Jewish [magic](#) continued into the following centuries and is evidenced in such documents as *Sefer ha-Razim*, *Harba de Mosheh*, *Testament of Solomon* and the magical texts found in the Cairo Genizah (see Schäfer and Shaked).

5. The Magical Papyri and the New Testament

The importance of the magical [papyri](#) for NT interpretation lies in their ability to illuminate folk [belief](#). Alexander aptly states, "they open up areas of popular religion which are often inadequately represented in the official literary texts, and which are in consequence frequently ignored by historians.

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As an indicator of the spiritual atmosphere in which large sections of the populace lived—rich and poor, educated and ignorant—their importance can hardly be overestimated” (Alexander, 342).

M. Smith made extensive use of the magical [papyri](#) to develop the thesis that Jesus’ contemporaries understood him to be a magician. This view has been rightly rejected because it fails to take into account the whole of what Jesus said and did, the essential Jewishness of Jesus’ teaching and the many dissimilarities of method and [worldview](#) between Jesus and contemporary magicians.

A more productive approach has been to use the magical texts to illuminate passages in the Gospels that speak about [demons](#) and exorcism, even if for distinguishing Jesus from contemporary beliefs and practices. The magical texts give us insight into the [worldview](#) assumptions of people bringing demon-possessed persons to Jesus and the nature of cursing. The texts also help to explain specific lexical items such as *selēniazomai* (e.g., [Mt 4:24](#); “to be moonstruck,” but often understood to be an epileptic seizure). The moon goddess Selene figures prominently in the magical [papyri](#) and was believed to cause people to go mad.

In the book of Acts, the magical [papyri](#) illustrate the kind of texts burned by the Ephesian believers ([Acts 19:19](#)). But the texts also illustrate many features of certain narratives explicitly involving exorcism and [magic](#), such as Simon the Magus ([Acts 9:9–25](#)), Paul’s encounter with Elymas the magician ([Acts 13:6–12](#)), the failed exorcism of Sceva and his sons ([Acts 19:13–16](#)), Paul’s exorcism of the [slave](#) girl with the spirit of divination ([Acts 16:16–21](#)), and many other passages. S. R. Garrett in particular has made good use of the magical [papyri](#) to illustrate some of these features.

Many aspects of the Pauline epistles (see *DPL*, [Magic](#)) and the rest of the NT (see *DLNTD*, [Magic and Astrology](#)) can be illuminated through the use of the magical [papyri](#).

See also [BELIAL, BELIAR, DEVIL, SATAN; DEMONOLOGY; RELIGION, GRECO-ROMAN; RELIGION, PERSONAL](#).

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