

*Magic Syncretism in the Late Antiquity:
Some examples from Papyri and Magical Gems*.*

CARLA SFAMENI

RESUMEN: La forma más conveniente de acercarse al entendimiento de la magia en el periodo romano tardío, es examinar algunos de los aspectos de sus características sincréticas. Aparte de algunos textos literarios, la principal fuente de conocimiento en su terreno, es ofrecida por los papiros greco-egipcios; el análisis de las piedras preciosas mágicas es también muy útil. De hecho, la reproducción de las *formulae* conocidas de los papiros atestigian el mismo tipo del sincretismo internacional. Las piedras preciosas mágicas son profundamente interesantes a causa de la posibilidad de analizar la asociación entre los conjuros y las imágenes de los dioses con los poderes mágicos. El objetivo específico de este presente estudio, es examinar algunos textos de los papiros y algunos amuletos mágicos donde los elementos de las religiones más antiguas (Egipcios, Griegos, Romanos, Persas, Judíos y Cristianos) puedan ser encontrados en una nueva mezcla. En los textos mágicos, los nombres divinos (pertenecientes a diferentes religiones) están considerados como múltiples manifestaciones de un único y gran poder divino. Lo mismo sucede en el caso de los dibujos en las piedras preciosas: varias deidades referidas en los papiros están aquí esculpidas en unas complejas asociaciones. Lo mágico aparece entonces como una clase muy especial de henoteísmo sincrético (P.Lévêque), donde no se hace ninguna sensación de separar un componente religioso y buscar un origen de la tradición mágica. Así pues, esta misma búsqueda se inserta en el problema complejo de la naturaleza y la función de la magia y su relación a la religión.

SUMMARY: The most convenient way to approach the understanding of magic in the Late Roman period is to examine some aspects of his syncretic characteristics. Apart some literary texts, the main source of knowledge in this field is offered by the Graeco-Egyptian papyri; the analysis of the magical gems is also very useful. In facts, the reproduction of *formulae* known from the papyri attests the same kind of international syncretism. The magical gems are deeply interesting because of the possibility to analyse the associations between spells and images of gods with magical powers. The specific objective of the present study is to examine some texts on papyri and some magical amulets where elements of the older national religions (Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Persian, Jewish and Christian) may be found in a new extraordinary mixture. In the magical texts the divine names (belonging to different religions) are regarde as multiple manifestations of a unique and high divine power. The same is the case of the pictures on the gems: various deities referred to in the papyri are here carved in complex associations. The magic appears, then, as a very special kind of "syncretism henoteism" (P.Lévêque), where it does not make any sense to separate single religious components and to look for an origin of the magic traditions. So this research inserts itself in the complex problem of the nature and function of magic and its relationship to religion.

Some ancient writers and many modern scholars have made several attempts to explain the nature and the origin of magic, but no definition is universally accepted. Among the ancient writers, Apuleius in his apology asked his accusers *quid sit*

magus.¹ The possible answers are two: either the *magus* is a *sacerdos* like in Persian language and so it is not a crime to be a priest and to know rites, *leges cerimoniarum, fas sacrorum, ius religionum*, or the *magus* is someone able to bend the will of the deities to his purposes and so he is very dangerous². This conception has been explained with the trend in the first centuries of our era to see philosophy, magic and theurgy as strictly connected³. The question of the possible differences among various kinds of magic is only one aspect of the more complex problem of the relationships between magic and religion. For a long time many scholars have asserted that magic is easily separable from religion and that it is a decadent cultural phenomenon (or a vestige of an early stage of religious development⁴ or a corrupt form of religion⁵); nowadays the most largely accepted theory is that the categories of magic and religion are indivisible, even if scholars do not agree on the existence of a contrast between magic and religion⁶. For H. S. Versnel, in fact, «it would be utterly impractical to completely eliminate religion as one of the obvious model of contrasts»⁷. The problem is too complex to be discussed here, neither is it possible to examine the acquisitions of modern theories of religion and anthropology on this

*I would like to thank my colleagues Gabriella Lanza and Sandro Giometti for reading this text and suggesting various 'English' improvements and, particularly, many thanks *de todo coração* to Ennio Sanzi who has encouraged my historical-religious researches and who has provided some helpful remarks for this work.

¹Apul. *De mag.* XXV.

²Apul. *De mag.* XXV-XXVI: «*Nam si, quod ego apud plurimos lego, Persarum lingua magus est qui nostra sacerdos, quod tandem est crimen sacerdotem esse et rite nosse atque scire atque callere leges cerimoniarum, fas sacrorum, ius religionum?... Sine vero more vulgari eum isti proprie magum existimant, qui communione loquendi cum deis immortalibus ad omnia quae velit incredibili quadam vi cantaminum polleat, oppido miror cur accusare non timuerint quem posse tantum fatentur*».

³A. F. Segal, *Hellenistic Magic: some questions of definition*, in R. Van Den Broek and M. J. Vermaseren (eds.) *Studies of Gnosticism and Hellenistic Religion*, Leiden 1981, p. 362.

⁴J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, London 1900, 2 ed., vol. I, pp. 62-78.

⁵A. Barb, *La sopravvivenza delle arti magiche*, in A. Momigliano (ed.), *Il Conflitto tra Paganesimo e Cristianesimo nel secolo IV*, Torino 1968, (1 ed. London 1963), p.114.

⁶See J. Blythin, *Magic and Methodology*, «Numen» XVII, 1970, pp. 45-50; H. S. Versnel, *Some reflections on the relationship Magic-Religion*, «Numen» XXXVIII, 2, 1991, pp.177-197; M. García Teijero, *Religion and Magic*, «Kernos» 6, 1993, pp. 123-128; J. N. Bremmer, *The birth of the term "Magic"*, «ZPE» 126, 1999, pp.1-12.

⁷Versnel, *Some Reflections*, p. 176.

matter⁸. I only want to stress that it is impossible to give 'one' definition of magic (and magician) just because there isn't 'one' magic: this means that in different contexts and periods there have been different conceptions of magic⁹.

This research concerns the very special kind of magical theories and practices known in the Late Antiquity. H. S. Versnel thinks that magic and religion were originally distinct entities "blurred through out antiquity"¹⁰. P. Schäfer argues that «magic was an integral part of religion in antiquity, and in late antiquity became a ferment which blurred the distinction between different religions»¹¹. His theory that «the latest magic becomes the common denominator of different religions, some kind of *lingua franca* transgressing the traditional boundaries of the religions of the Mediterranean area»¹² is very interesting, and it deserves a deeper study.

The main source of knowledge in this field is offered by the magical papyri but the analysis of the magical gems is also very useful. The magical papyri are a group of texts from Egypt written in Greek from the early Hellenistic period to Late Antiquity, but most texts belong to the period from the second century to the fifth century A.D.¹³. Some texts are also written in Egyptian Demotic or Coptic. They include all sorts of ancient magic (love magic, apothropaic magic, revelatory magic, exorcism and so on) and they have been considered a kind of handbook for magicians. The first magical papyri were brought from Egypt to Europe in the XIX century by J. Anastasi who acquired a collection of texts discovered in a grave in Thebes. These documents and other magical papyri discovered up to about 1930 were published by K. Preisendanz¹⁴. He called the papyri as "Greek" (*Papyri*

⁸See D. E. Aune, *Magic in Early Christianity*, ANRW II, 23.2, Berlin-New York 1980, pp. 1507-1557; C. A. Faraone-D. Obbink, *Magika Hiera. Ancient Greek Magic and Religion*, New York 1991; F. Graf, *La magia nel mondo antico*, Roma-Bari 1995 (I ed. Paris 1994); G. Luck (ed.), *Arcana Mundi. Magia e occulto nel mondo greco e romano*, vol. I, Milano 1997; P. Schäfer-H. G. Kippenberg, *Envisioning Magic. A Princeton Seminar and Symposium*, Leiden 1997; V. Flint-R. Gordon-G. Luck-D. Ogden, *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe. Ancient Greece and Rome*, London 1999.

⁹Segal, *Hellenistic Magic*, pp. 350-51; Graf, *La magia nel mondo antico*, *passim*.

¹⁰Versnel, *Some Reflections*, p. 188.

¹¹P. Schäfer, *Magic and Religion in Ancient Judaism*, in Schäfer-Kippenberg, *Envisioning Magic*, p. 26.

¹²Schäfer, *Magic and Religion*, p. 43.

¹³History of the studies on magical papyri and bibliography in W. Brashear, *The Greeek Magical Papyri: an Introduction and Survey. Annotated Bibliography (1928-1994)*, ANRW II. 18.5, Berlin-New York 1995, pp. 3380-3684.

¹⁴K. Preisendanz, *Papyri Graecae Magicae. Die Griechischen Zauberpapyri*, 2 voll., Stuttgart 1973-74, 2 ed. (=PGM).

Graecae Magicae) because of their language and especially because he found in them theories and customs coming from the ancient Greek cultural and religious tradition. The following studies on these texts were made by Classicists with little contributions by Egyptologists¹⁵. Then many other papyrological discoveries were made and many other magical texts were published¹⁶. Recently, the English translation of the Greek texts published by Preisendanz (with a selection of texts published afterwards)¹⁷ with the associated Demotic texts,¹⁸ excluded by Preisendanz, enabled scholars to become aware of the importance of the Egyptian tradition¹⁹. However, in this documentation all scholars have noted the presence of elements belonging to several religious traditions and they have sometimes tried to distinguish and isolate them²⁰. Some magical papyri have been considered of probable Egyptian origin, while other could have a Greek or Jewish religious background²¹. Actually, elements belonging to these and other religious traditions are so strictly connected each other in all the papyri texts, that most scholars use the word "syncretism" to designate this phenomenon²². The notion of syncretism has an

¹⁵A. D. Nock, *Greek Magical Papyri*, in Z. Stewart (ed.), A. D. Nock, *Essays on Religion and the Ancient World*, I, Oxford 1972, pp. 176-194.

¹⁶R. Daniel- F. Maltomini, *Supplementum Magicum, I-II*, Cologne- Opladen, 1990-1991.

¹⁷H. D. Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation*, London 1992, 2 ed.

¹⁸F. LL. Griffiths-H. Thompson (edd.), *The Demotic magical Papyrus of London and Leiden*, London 1904, note that the original source of the Demotic texts was probably Egyptian and C. Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets chiefly Graeco-Egyptian*, Ann Arbor-London 1950, p. 22, says: «the magic of the Greek papyri is predominantly Egyptian».

¹⁹J. H. Johnson in Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, p. LV; R. Ritner, *Egyptian Magical Practices under the Roman Empire: the Demotic Spells and their Religious Context*, ANRW II 18.5, Berlin-New York 1995, p. 3371, has particularly stressed the importance of the Egyptian tradition in the writing of magical papyri: «Both Demotic and Greek spells attest to the continuity of Egyptian scriptorium traditions, whether in regard to format, purpose, mythology, incantation or ritual technique»

²⁰They have often based themselves on the own field of research (Greek, Egyptian, Jewish, etc.) and so they have particularly noted the elements related to these traditions.

²¹A. J. Festugière, *La valeur religieuse des Papyrus Magiques*, in Idem, *L'idéal religieux des Grecs et l'Évangile*, Paris 1932, pp. 281-328; E. R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco - Roman period*, New York-London 1953, vol. II; M. Smith, *The Jewish Elements in the Magical Papyri*, in Idem (S. J. D. Cohen ed.), *Studies in the Cult of Iahweh*, Leiden 1996 (EPRO 130), vol. II, pp. 242-266.

²²J. M. Hull, *Hellenistic Magic and the Synoptic Tradition*, London 1974, p. 27: «The most immediately striking feature of the magic of the period we are considering is its syncretism». See H. D. Betz, *Magic and Mystery in the Greek Magical Papyri*, in Faraone-

even too large field of application in the studies of history of religions, so that A. Motte observes: «le mots syncrétisme, syncrétique et syncrétiste sont utilisés dans l'étude scientifique des religions avec une profusion et une confusion telles que leurs signification en devient atypique et quasiment inopérante»²³.

The same kind of associations among different religious traditions can be found in the so called magical gems²⁴. These are semiprecious stones engraved with figures of various deities: they appear under their traditional Greek-Roman and Egyptian form, but sometimes there are new types, monstrous combinations of human and animal elements. Spells are joined to the pictures (the inscriptions can be alone): they are generally written in Greek characters but there are also Egyptian, Hebrew or Aramaic words and sometimes incomprehensible combinations of letters and symbols, so called *voces magicae* and *characteres*. On the gems are often reproduced magical formulas known from the papyri and this attests the same kind of international syncretism²⁵. The production of such amulets probably started in the first century A. D. as the elder Pliny says: «Iam vero etiam Harpocratem, statuas Aegyptiorum numinum in digitis viri quoque portare incipiunt»²⁶. It was widely diffused in the Roman Empire until the fifth century A.D. The most important study

Obbink, *Magika Hiera*, p. 248 and K.Preisendanz, *Zur Synkretistischen Magie in römischen Ägypten, Akten der VIII Int. Kongr. für Papyrologie, Wien 1955*, Wien 1956, pp. 111-125.

²³A. Motte-V. Pirenne Delforge, *Du «Bon usage» de la notion de syncrétisme*, «Kernos» 7, 1994, (Actes du IV^e Colloque international du C.I.E.R.G.A., *Influences, imprunts et syncrétismes religieux in Grèce ancienne, Bruxelles 2 - 4 Sept. 1993*), pp. 11-27: this study is an analysis of the notion of syncretism with related bibliography. The classification pattern of P. Lévêque (*Essai de typologie des syncrétismes*, in *Les syncrétismes dans les religions grecque et romaine*, Colloque de Strasbourg, 9-11 Juin 1971, Paris 1973, pp. 179-187) is still useful, although it has been criticised in some aspects: F. Dunand, *Syncrétisme ou coexistence: images du religieux dans l'Égypte tardive*, in C. Bonnet-A. Motte (eds.) *Les syncrétismes religieux dans le monde Méditerranéen antique, Actes du Colloque International en l'honneur de Franz Cumont à l'occasion du cinquantième anniversaire de sa mort, Rome 25 - 27 Septembre 1997*, Bruxelles-Roma 1999, pp. 97-116. Motte- Pirenne Delforge, *Du «Bon usage» de la notion de syncrétisme*, pp. 11-27.

²⁴The most important studies are: Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets*; C. Bonner, *Amulets chiefly in the British Museum*, «Hesperia» 20, 1951, pp. 301-345; C. Bonner, *A Miscellany of engraved Stones*, «Hesperia» 23, 1954, pp. 138-157); A. Delatte-Ph. Derchain, *Les Intailles magiques gréco-égyptiennes*, Paris 1964.

²⁵On relationships papyri- gems see: M. Smith, *Relation between Magical Papyri and Magical Gems*, in *Actes du XV^e Congrès de Papyrologie, Bruxelles-Louvain 1977*, Bruxelles 1979, pp. 129-147; J. Schwartz, *Papyri Magicae Graecae und Magische Gemmen*, in M. J. Vermaseren (ed.), *Die Orientalischen Religionen in Römerreich*, Leiden 1981, pp. 485-509.

²⁶Plin. *NH* XXXIII, 41.

on this subject is still the one by C. Bonner, but many other researches have been made later and there are also many modern publications of museum collections²⁷.

My primary aim in this study is to examine some papyri texts and some magical amulets, where elements of the older national religions may be found in an extraordinarily complex mixture. The width of the issue makes it necessary to limit the discussion to the analysis of some relevant examples from available documentation.

The Magical Papyrus XII is very interesting because in it is described the making of a ring, with a prayer of consecration: «Placing a ring. A little ring (useful) for every (magical) operation and for success. Very effective. Taking an air - colored jasper, engrave on it a snake with its tail in its mouth, and also in the middle of [the circle formed by] the snake [Selene] having two stars on the two horns, and above this, Helios, beside whom ABRASAX should be inscribed; and on the opposite side of the stone from this inscription, the same name ABRASAX, and around the border you will write the great and holy and omniscient [spell], the name IAO SABAOTH. And when you have consecrated the stone wear it in a gold ring, when you need it [provided] you are pure[at that time] and you will succeed in everything you may wish. You are to consecrate the ring together with the stone in the rite used for all such objects...»²⁸. Such type of amulet is very common: the jasper of various colours is the most used stone in the making of magical gems; the *ouroboros*, the snake with his tail in mouth, is extremely common as a symbol of the universe or of the time. The association among images of "classical" deities with the Jewish name of god is very frequent: Iao, Sabaoth and Abrasax (perhaps the *magicum nomen* above all others, so that the magical gems are sometimes called "Abrasax") are the most common names in the magical inscriptions. The Jewish influence is mainly confined to the inscriptions because of its monotheism and the prohibition to represent God's image²⁹.

The papyrus text proceeds with a prayer of consecration to the cosmic gods: «I invoke and beseech the consecration, O gods of the heavens, O gods under the earth, O gods circling in the middle region from one womb. O masters of all living and dead... O heedful in many necessities of gods and man... O senders of fate who travels around the whole world... O creators and benefactors of every race... come,

²⁷AA.VV., *Antike Gemmen in Deutschen Sammlungen (AGDS)*, voll. I-IV; U. Pannuti, *Museo archeologico Nazionale di Napoli. Catalogo della collezione glittica*, Roma 1983; H. Philipp, *Mira et Magica. Gemmen in Ägyptischen Museum der Staatlichen Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin - Charlottenburg*, Mainz 1986; E. Zwierlein-Diehl, *Die Antike Gemmen des Kunsthistorisches Museums Wien*, vol. III, München 1991; M. Henig, *Classical Gems*, Cambridge 1994.

²⁸PGM XII, 201-209= Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, p.161.

²⁹Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets*, p. 27 ss. For Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols, passim*, these inscriptions attest an *interpretatio iudaica* of the divine figures.

benevolent for that purpose for which I call you, as benevolent assistants in this rite for my benefit»³⁰.

Then, the magician identifies himself with many deities, according to a magical system, typically Egyptian, which is widely witnessed in the magical papyri: «I am the god whom no one sees or rashly names. I am the sacred bird Phoenix. I am Krates the Holy, called MARMARAUOTH. I am Helios who showed forth light. I am Aphrodite called TYPHI. I am the holy sender of winds. I am Kronos who showed forth light. I am Mother of gods, called Heaven. I am Osiris, called water. I am Isis, called dew. I am ESENEPHIS, called spring. I am the image resembling the true images. I am SOUCHOS (who appears as) a crocodile»³¹.

In the Egyptian magic tradition, in fact, it is very common that the magician pretends to be himself the god;³² he often even menaces the god³³. In this text it is interesting to observe the variety of the Greek - Roman and Egyptian deities with which the magician identifies himself: as frequently attested in the magical spells.

Finally, the magician invokes a god as τὸν προπάτορα θεῶν, ὁ παντοκράτωρ θεός, δέσποτα τῶν ἐν κόσμῳ καλῶν, κύριε, εἷς θεός ἀθάνατος. The names of this god are Ἄγαθος Δαίμων and Αἰών: «Therefore, I beseech you, come as my helper, for I am about to call on the hidden and ineffable name (κρυπτὸν καὶ ἀρρητὸν ὄνομα), the forefather of gods, overseer and lord of all. Come to me, you from the four winds, god, ruler of all, who have breathed spirits into man for life, master of the good things in the world. Hear me, lord, whose hidden name is ineffable. The daimons, hearing it are terrified and of it the sun, of it the earth, hearing rolls over. Hades, hearing, is shaken; rivers, sea, lakes springs hearing, are frozen; rocks, hearing it, are split. Heaven is your head; ether, body; earth, feet; and the water around you, ocean. O Agathos Daimon. You are lord, the begetter and nourisher and increaser of all.....You are the begetter of all and assign souls to all and control all, king of the Aion and lord.....Hear me and complete for me this operation so that I may wear this power in every place, in every time...»³⁴. The magician is powerful because he possess the

³⁰PGM XII, 218-228= Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, pp. 161-162.

³¹PGM XII, 228-236= Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, p.162.

³²Egyptian magic: F. Lexa, *La magie dans l'Égypte antique de l'ancien Empire jusqu'à l'époque copte*, Paris 1925; L. Kàkosy, *La magia nell'antico Egitto*, in *La magia in Egitto ai tempi dei faraoni, Catalogo della Mostra, Milano 1985, Mantova 1985*; Y. Koenig, *Magie et Magiciens dans l'Égypte ancienne*, Paris 1994.

³³S. Sauneron, *Aspects et sort d'un thème magique égyptien: les menaces incluant les dieux*, *Bull.Soc.Franç. Egypt.* 8, 1951, pp. 11-21.

³⁴PGM XII, 237-259= Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, pp. 162-163.

κρυπτόν καὶ ἄρρητον ὄνομα of the god³⁵. The conception of the "words of power" was very old in Egypt, as it was the custom of writing these words on gems, on stones and on papyri³⁶. This conception is attested in the Graeco-Roman context too³⁷. In the magical papyri, however, there is a very important change in understanding of divine names. «The names of deities are to be taken as conduits of divine power, a function can no longer be expected of the older and traditional names».³⁸ The magician stress this power of the *nomina sacra* in the conclusive part of his invocation: «And again I call upon you, according to Egyptians PHNO EAI IABOK, according to Jews, ADONAIE SABAOTH, according to Greeks, "the king of all, ruling alone", according to the high priest "hidden, invisible, overseer of all"; according to Parthians OUERTO, master of all... The name inscribed on the back side of the stone are these: IAO SABAOTH ABRASAX»³⁹.

In the magic context, the use of names of gods belonging to different religious traditions can be interpreted thanks to a specific doctrine known from literary sources. For example, Origen says: «... when these names are pronounced in a particular sequence which is natural to them, they can be employed for certain purposes; and so also with other names in use in Egyptian which invoke certain demons who have power only to do certain particular things and other names in Persian which invoke other powers and so on with each nation »⁴⁰. The divine and angelic names, the same name of Jesus and all spells would be effective only in the native language⁴¹. The same doctrine can be found in the *De Mysteriis* of

³⁵Cfr. *PGM* I, 218-221: «τὸ κρυπτόν ὄνομα» of Aion/Helios; *PGM* IV, 1609-10: «τὰ ἱερὰ καὶ μεγάλα καὶ κρυπτά ὀνόματα» of Helios/Agathos Daimon; *PGM* XII, 237, 240; XII, 763: «τὸ κρυπτόν καὶ ἄρρητον ὄνομα» of Aion; *PGM* XXII, b.20: «τὸ κρυπτόν ὄνομα» of Sabaoth. In *PGM* XII, 265 the formula «κρυπτὲ ἀόπατε πάντας ἐφορῶν» is attributed to Aion himself.

³⁶Koenig, *Magie et Magiciens*, pp. 245-250.

³⁷R. Gordon, *Imagining Greek and Roman Magic*, in Flint-Gordon-Luck-Ogden, *Witchcraft and Magic*, pp. 220-221.

³⁸H. D. Betz, *Secrecy in the Greek Magical Papyri*, in H. G. Kippenberg- G. G. Stroumsa (eds.), *Secrecy and Concealment, Studies in the History of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Religions*, Leiden 1995, p. 161.

³⁹*PGM* XII, 263-269= Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, p. 163.

⁴¹Orig. *CCel.* I, 25 (31-35), ed. Borret, *Origène*, I, pp. 142-143, transl. Chadwick, *Origen*: «Thus it is not the significance of the things which the words describe that has a certain power to do this or that, but it is the qualities and characteristics of the sound (ὅπως οὐ τὰ σημαϊνόμενα κατὰ τῶν πραγμάτων ἀλλ' αἱ τῶν φωνῶν ποιότητες καὶ ἰδιότητες ἔχουσι τὴ δύνατον ἐν αὐταῖς πρὸς τὰδε τινὰ ἢ τὰδε)». Orig. *CCel.* IV, 35, ed. Borret, *Origène*, II, pp. 266, trans. Chadwick, *Origen*, p.209: « Their names are so powerful
’Ilu, Revista de Ciencias de las Religiones 190
2001, número 6, pp. 183-199

Jamblichus: «the translated names do not keep the same sense, but some linguistic characteristics of each people can't be expressed in the language of another people; and if it would be possible to translate these names, the names would never keep the same power (τὴν γὰρ δύναμιν οὐκετι φυλάττει τὴν αὐτήν)»⁴².

This doctrine could explain the presence in the magical texts of a lot of different divine names⁴³. It means that the magician used as more names as possible to have more power.

In the magical gems there is the same association between various pictures of gods belonging to the Graeco-Roman and Egyptian religious traditions and *nomina sacra* like Ἰάω Σαβαώθ Ἀβρασάξ, the names of angels and archangels, patriarchs and prophets of the Jewish tradition. The numerous divine names are engraved on the magical gems with the purpose to give more power to the image of the god represented⁴⁴ perhaps without a link to the specific religious tradition of the same name. However this theory can explain only some aspects of the problem. In fact these associations must be explained in the wider context of a particular kind of syncretism with clear enotheistic tendencies. This phenomenon is witnessed by many literary sources; among them, the most important is Macrobius who examines the gods of the Graeco-Roman pantheon to show that everyone is only a manifestation of the supreme solar god⁴⁵: «Diversae virtutes solis nomina dis dederunt. Unde ἐν τὸ πᾶν sapientium principes prodiderunt»⁴⁶. Apollo/Helios is the Greek god most often invoked in the magical papyri with other astral deities such Selene and many gods who represent the forces of the universe⁴⁷.

when linked with the name of God that the formula "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob" is used not only by members of the Jewish nation in their prayers to God and when they exorcise daemons, but also by almost all those who deal in magic and spells

(ἀλλὰ γὰρ σχεδὸν καὶ πάντας τοὺς τὰ τῶν ἐψωδῶν καὶ μαγειῶν πραγματοποιομένους)»

⁴²Jamblichus, *De Myst.* VII, 257, 10-15; cf. cap. 254, 11-260.

⁴³Cf. H. D. Betz, *Secrecy in the Greek Magical Papyri*, pp. 153-176.

⁴⁴For the magical use of the divine names see: Aune, *Magic in Early Christianity*, pp. 1545-47 (magic use of the name of Jesus); M. Smith, *The Jewish Elements in the Magical Papyri*, in Smith, *Studies in the Cult of Yahweh*, II, pp. 242-256 and Betz, *Secrecy in the Greek Magical Papyri*.

⁴⁵Macrobius, *Sat.* I, 17, 4. For the doctrine, see capp. 17-24.

⁴⁶Macrobius, *Sat.* I, 18, 20: «I tell you the highest god of all is Iao (called) Hades in winter, Zeus when spring begins, Helios in summer and in autumn splendid Iao».

⁴⁷See W. Fauth, *Helios Megistos. Zur synkretistischen Theologie der Spätantike*, Leiden 1995, pp. 34-114 (*Der Sonnengott in den griechischen Zauberpapyri*).

P. Lévêque has named this kind of syncretism "syncretism-henotheism"⁴⁸: it should have come out in Egypt in the Hellenistic period and then developed during the Roman period: various deities take upon themselves characteristics and specific qualities of a lot of different gods⁴⁹. This is the case, for example, of Isis and Sarapis⁵⁰. Henotheism is a term constructed on the acclamation εἰς ὁ θεός "one is (the) god" which can be found in inscriptions, papyri, gems and in literary texts: «it denotes a personal devotion to one god (there is no other god like this god) without involving rejection or neglect of other gods»⁵¹. Another evidence of the henotheistic character of the magical conception is the presence of names like Aion and Agathos Daimon in many papyri: for example the prayer of the PGM IV is addressed to the Aion: «Hail, entire system of the aerial spirit PHOGALOA. Hail, spirit who extends from heaven to earth... Hail spirit who enters into me, and leaves me kindly according to the will of god, IOE ZANOPHIE... Hail, radiance of the universe subordinate to the solar ray, IEO YEO IAE AI EOY OEL... O great, greatest, round, incomprehensible figure of the universe... I glorify you, god of gods, the one who brought order to the universe... The god of the Aions; you are great, lord, god, ruler of the All (μέγας εἶ, κύριε, θεέ, δέσποτα τοῦ πάντος)»⁵². H. Betz notes that «divine epithets such as "incomprehensible figure of the universe" (ἀπεριυόητον σχῆμα κόσμου)⁵³ and "the one who gathered together the abyss at the invisible foundation of its position" (ὁ τὴν ἀβυσσον θησαυρίας ἀοράτῳ θέσεως ἐδράσματι)⁵⁴ suggest a strong

⁴⁸Lévêque, *Essai de typologie des syncrétismes*, pp. 179-187.

⁴⁹F. D. Dunand, *Les syncrétismes dans la religion de l'Égypte romaine*, in F. Dunand - P. Lévêque (eds.), *Les Syncrétismes dans les religions de l'antiquité, Colloque de Besaçon 22-23 Oct. 1973*, Leiden 1975 (EPRO 46) and Dunand, *Syncrétisme ou coexistence*.

⁵⁰Apul. *Met.* XI, 5, 1: Isis is «*Numen unicum multiformi specie*». J.G.Griffiths, *Apuleius of Madaura. The Isis Book*, Leiden 1975 (EPRO 39); see the other studies on the Egyptian cults published in the series EPRO (*Études Préliminaires aux Religions Orientales*) M. J.Vermaseren (ed.), Leiden 1961-1995. For Isis and Sarapis see too: R. Merkelbach, *Isis Regina - Zeus Sarapis*. Stuttgart und Leipzig 1995.

⁵¹H. S. Versnel, *Ter Unus. Isis, Dionysos, Hermes. Three studies in Henotheism*, Leiden 1990, p. 35.

⁵²PGM IV, 1115-66: ἀπόκρυφος στήλη. Cfr. Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, p. 60 n. 157: «The exact meaning of ἀπόκρυφος is uncertain here. LSJ, s.v. II, gives as possible meanings "obscure, recondite, hard to understand". More likely is the meaning "secret"». Cf. PGM XIII, 344, 731, 732, 1057, 1078.

⁵³PGM IV, 1138-39.

⁵⁴PGM IV, 1148-49.

influence of Hellenistic philosophical cosmology»⁵⁵. The prayer in the *PGM IV*, addressed to Aion/Helios seems to be also very influenced by the same philosophical concept: «Stele that is useful for all things. I praise you, the one and blessed of the eons and father of the world, with cosmic prayers... Pay attention, form, spirit, earth and sea to a word from the one who is wise concerning divine necessity, and accept my words as fiery darts, because I am a man, the most beautiful creature of the god in heaven, made out of spirit, dew and earth, heaven be opened; accept my words. Listen, Helios, father of the world. I call upon you with your name... (divine names, vocalic sequences). You are the holy and powerful name considered sacred by all the angels; protect me, so - and - so, from every excess of power and from every violent act. Yes do it lord, god of gods IALDAZAO BLATHAM... creator of the world, creator of the universe, lord, god of gods. I have spoken of your unsurpassable glory, you who created gods, archangels and decans...»⁵⁶.

To the greatest God, who exceeds all powers, is addressed the prayer in *PGM XII*, where is described the making of a little ring for success and favour and victory. Instead of the name Aion the magician invokes a long string of Egyptian and Greek *voces magicae* among which there are the Jewish divine names IAO, SABAOTH ADONAI EILOEIN and then he says: «I have called on you, greatest god and through you on all things, that you may give divine and supreme strength to his image and may make it effective and powerful against all opponents and to be able to call back souls, move spirits, subject legal opponents, strengthen friendships, produce all sorts of profits, bring dreams, give prophecies, cause psychological passions and bodily sufferings and incapacitating illness, and perfect all erotic philtres. Please, lord, bring to fulfilment a complete consecration»⁵⁷.

In the *PGM I* there is a «prayer of deliverance for the first-born and first born god: I call upon you, lord. Hear me, holy god who rest among the holy ones, at whose side the Glorious Ones stand continually. I call upon you, forefather and I beseech you, eternal one, eternal ruler of the sun's rays, eternal ruler of the celestial orb, standing in the seven - part region... you who hold fast the root, who possess the powerful name which has been consecrated by all angels... I call upon you, lord of the universe, in an hour of need... Aye, lord, because I call upon your secret name which reaches from the firmament to the earth (list of names among which there are ABRAM e ISAK), rescue me in an hour of need. Say this to Helios or whenever you are forced to do so»⁵⁸.

So Aion and Agathos Daimon are abstractions describing the nature of the highest deity: «As the highest deity encompasses all the cosmic forces, the vast number of different secret names demonstrates the diversity in which the divine

⁵⁵Betz, *Secrecy in the Greek Magical Papyri*, p.155.

⁵⁶*PGM IV*, 1167-1226= Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, p. 61.

⁵⁷*PGM XII*, 270-350= Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, pp. 163-165.

⁵⁸*PGM I*, 195-222= Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, p.8.

powers are at work in the universe. Consequently, to the magician these secret names provide access to and contact with the divine forces and, indeed, with the deity itself»⁵⁹. For many scholars this conception is influenced by Greek philosophical doctrine on a unique and cosmic deity of solar character⁶⁰. Ritner notes indeed that «on the contrary, the cosmology of the *PGM* usually assumes the existence of a self-created solar deity, ruling the universe from his boat or transformed into heavenly scarab, susceptible to threats and sacred names... These essential propositions are very "Egyptian" and hardly "trappings". The "underlying" motivations of the *PGM*... are not newly spawned by contemporary "philosophie", but derive from unbroken Egyptian traditions far older than Greek philosophy, indeed older than Greek culture itself»⁶¹. The importance of the Egyptian tradition is indisputable but it must be interpreted in a new context. For example, we cannot consider simply "Egyptian" the hymns in *PGM XIII*⁶² where the rising sun is greeted by the sacred animals, each kind making its appropriate noises according a very old Egyptian tradition. In fact the influence of Jewish tradition is very strong too: the title of the text is "the Eighth Book of Moses" and «the songs of the animals are preceded by and partly fused with the songs of the angels, many of whom are Jewish».⁶³ Moreover there are the divine names of Kronos, Zeus, Ares, Helios, Aphrodite, Hermes, Selene. Then the technique of determining which god is ruler of the celestial pole is explained⁶⁴. The prayer is addressed to Aion of Aion, «the greater than all, the creator of all, the self-begotten... I call on you, lord, as do the gods who appeared under your [order?] that they may have power; ECHBYKROM of Helios, whose is the glory, AAA EEE OOO III AAA OOO SABAOTH ARBATHIAO/ ZAGOURE. The god ARATHY ADONAIE. I call on you, lord, in 'birdglyphic': ARAI; in hieroglyphic: LAILAM; in Hebraic: ANOCH BIATHIARBATH BERBIR ECHILATOUR BOUPHROUMTROM; in Egyptian: ALDABAEIM; in 'baboonic': ABRASAX; in 'falconic': CHI CHI CHI CHI CHI CHI CHI TIPH TIPH TIPH; in hieratic: MENEPHOIPHOTH CHA CHA CHA CHA CHA CHA CHA»⁶⁵. The solar god is represented on the boat of sun: «Now he who

⁵⁹Betz, *Secrecy in the Greek Magical Papyri*, p.162.

⁶⁰For Betz, *Secrecy in the Greek Magical Papyri*, p.162 this is the ἀγνωστος θεός of the philosophical doctrine, but the Greek term does not occur in the magical papyri.

⁶¹Ritner, *Egyptian Magical Practices*, p. 3360, note 133.

⁶²M. Smith, *The Eighth Book of Moses and How It Grew* (PLeid. J 395), in *Atti del XVII Congresso internazionale di Papirologia* (Napoli: Centro Internazionale per lo studio di papiri ercolanesi, 1984), pp. 683-93.

⁶³Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, p.174, n.16.

⁶⁴*PGM XIII*, 213- 225= Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*. p. 178.

⁶⁵*PGM XIII*, 77- 88= Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, p. 174.

appears on the boat rising together with you is a clever baboon; he greets you in his own language, saying "You are the number of [the days of] the year, ABRASAX". The falcon on the other end [of the boat] greets you in his own language...»⁶⁶. The final spell is for Helios.

The magical gems can illustrate this scene. In these objects a representation of a child seated in a boat or on a lotus flower springing of the middle of a boat is very common; around him there are animals in groups of three⁶⁷ that, for C. Bonner, would be "in adoration"⁶⁸. The young god is often attended by a cynocephalus or by a cynocephalus and a bird (hawk or ibis) in the attitude of adoration. So-called "the child on the lotus flower", this young god represents the young sun⁶⁹ rising from the primordial sea⁷⁰, according a very ancient Egyptian iconography⁷¹. This god is often named Harpokrates, the son of Isis and Osiris, who was always represented with the finger on his mouth⁷². This «primordial god, the creator of the cosmos, the god of the sky, the sailor who dominates the rudder and controls it, the saviour who protects and cures all bane of wild beasts... (was) a favourable subject for benediction and incantation, to guard people against all evils»⁷³. The solar character of the

⁶⁶PGM XIII, 152- 156= Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, p. 176.

⁶⁷Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets*, nn. 203-210; Delatte-Derchain, *Les Intailles magiques*, pp.116-120, nn.148-154.

⁶⁸Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets*, p.140. For Delatte-Derchain, *Les Intailles magiques*, p. 108, the scene has an apothropaic purpose: the god protects against the dangerous animals. M. Smith, «AJA» 71, 1967, p. 418, notes that the animals arranged around the god haven't any hostile character.

⁶⁹Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets*, p. 140. For the analysis of the subject see Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets*, pp. 140-147, Delatte-Derchain, *Les Intailles magiques*, pp. 104-125 and A. M. El-Khachab, *Some Gem-Amulets depicting Harpokrates seated on a Lotus Flower*, «JEA» 57, 1971, pp. 132-145.

⁷⁰Delatte-Derchain, *Les Intailles magiques*, pp. 106-109.

⁷¹Pyramid Texts (Pyr. 249, ca. 2500 a.C.) and The Book of Deads, cap.15. On a lotus flower are shown, for example, Mandoulis of Kalabcha, Harsomtous of Dendara, Harsaphès d'Herakleopolis and Rê - Harakhty: S. Sauneron Yoyotte, *Naissance du Monde selon l'Égypte ancienne*, in *Naissance du Monde* (Sources Orientales I), 1959, p. 34; S. Morenz- J. Schubert, *Der Gott auf der Blume*, Ascona 1954, pp. 42-50.

⁷²Plut., *De Is. et Os.*, 19; Varro 5.10; Ov., *Met.*, 9, 692. For the iconography of Harpokrates see V. Tran Tam Tinh, *Etat des études iconographiques relatives à Isis, Sérapis et Sunnaoi Theoi*, ANRW II 17. 3, 1984, pp. 1730-1733; Merkelbach, *Isis Regina* pp. 87-93.

⁷³El- Khachab, *Some Gem-Amulets*, p. 143.

subject is very stressed in the magical gems: the young god is often raided, there are astrological symbols (stars and crescent moon), the lotus flower is on a leon or a lencephalus is on the lotus flower. The inscriptions have also this solar character⁷⁴. In the *PGM II* there is a hymn addressed to Greek deities like Apollo, Helios, Zeus; then it is invoked « you who are seated upon the lotus and who light up the whole inhabited world; you who have designated the various living things upon the earth, you who have the sacred bird upon your robe in the eastern parts of the Red Sea, even as you upon the northern parts the figure of an infant child seated upon a lotus. O rising one, O you of many names...»⁷⁵. The solar god is invoked with many names as *Zas*⁷⁶, *Adonai*, *Sabaoth*⁷⁷.

The child on the lotus flower, with his ancient solar symbology, is a good example of the syncretistic henoteism of the Late Antiquity. On a gem there is the formula εἰς Ζεὺς Σάραπις⁷⁸, which is known in literary and epigraphic texts and is frequent on magical gems⁷⁹. Iamblicus explains the symbology of this subject according to the neoplatonic philosophy: the immaterial, incorporeal and unborn god who surpass the physical world and all the cosmic forces (θεός ἀυλος καὶ ἀσώματος καὶ ἀγέννητος...ὑπερῆπλωμένος τῷ κόσμῳ δυνά-μιέων τε καὶ στοιχείων)⁸⁰. Some scholars note that this figure is often associated to *nomina sacra* and formulas belonging to the Jewish religious tradition: the child could represent the Jewish god, *Iao Sabaoth*⁸¹. Actually these names are associated

⁷⁴ Cf. Bonner, *Studies in magical Amulets*, pp. 141-145; Delatte-Derchain, *Les Intailles magiques*, pp. 110-123.

⁷⁵ *PGM II*, 101-107= Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, p. 16. Cf. *PGM XII*, 87 and *LXI*, 32.

⁷⁶ For Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, p. 16, note 33, this is an ancient form of Zeus.

⁷⁷ *PGM II*, 108-121.

⁷⁸ A. Capello, *Prodromus Iconicus sculptilium gemmarum Basilidiani amulectici atque talismani generis*, Venezia 1702, n. 22= *AGDS III*, Kassel, n.148.

⁷⁹ Dunand, *Les syncrétismes*, p. 162 e p. 163, note 44; Tran Tam Tinh, *Etat des études iconographiques*, p. 1721.

⁸⁰ Iambl. *De Myst.* VII, 2. Cf. R. E. Witt, *Isis in the Greco-Roman World*, London 1971, pp. 215-218; El Khachab, *Some Gem-Amulets*, pp. 136-137. Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 11, 355 b and Proclo, VI, 149, 12, propose an explanation of the subject in philosophical key.

⁸¹ See Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, pp. 270-275; M. Smith, *The Image of God. Notes on the Hellenization of Judaism, with especial reference to Goodenough's work on Jewish Symbols*, in Smith, *Studies in the Cult of Jahweh*, I, pp. 147-149, consider the lotus like a symbol of menorah, the tree of life. For El-Khachab, *Some Gem-Amulets*, p. 143: «He 'Ilu, *Revista de Ciencias de las Religiones* 2001, número 6, pp. 183-199

to many other subjects of the magical gems and so it is more likely to be just an example of magical syncretism. On the magical gems there is a concentration of different divine attributes in the same picture. The solar subjects are the most represented, but almost every picture has many astrological and solar symbols too. In fact many types of deities show no connection with magic in themselves but they are applied to magical use either by inscribing them with magical words or formulas or by combining them with solar and cosmic symbols. Furthermore there are some compound figures of deities. The most interesting is the cock-headed god with snake legs, who is a magical creation of obscure derivation⁸². Another complex figure is the so called Pantheos or Bes pantheos who can be considered a specific example of a cosmic deity. He has an Egyptian origin: his precursor has been recognised in a type represented in a class of objects known as magical stele or "Horus Cippi" dating from the late dynastic period into Ptolemaic and Roman times⁸³. This figure dominates the reverse of the "Metternich Stele", the best known stele of the group: it is a compound form with human body, the grotesque mask of Bes and a cap with many heads of different animals; the figure has furnished with a long feathered tail, four arms and two pair of wings⁸⁴. The god is on an *ouroboros* containing animals. Already in the Egyptian conception the figure would be treated like the visualisation of the different forms in which the power of the high and transcendent god is present in the world⁸⁵. In the magical gems the syncretistic and cosmic character of Bes Pantheos is particularly emphasized. He holds different attributes in his hands, he has a human face and the *ouroboros* contains animals, letters, *charakteres* and the lao name⁸⁶. The harmful animals set in the *ouroboros* could have been caught and

(the child on the lotus flower) is the god who was amalgamated with Greek and Roman gods, with the Jewish archangels and Christ; the one who had a very wide popularity...».

⁸²A. Barb, *Abrasax-Studien*, in *Hommages à Waldemar Deonna*, Bruxelles 1957, pp.76-79.; F. Marco Simón, *Abrasax. Magia y religión en la Hispania tardoantigua*, in *Héroos, semidioses y daimones*, Primer Encuentro - Coloquio de ARYS, Jarandilla de la Vera 1989, Madrid 1992, pp. 485-510.

⁸³K.C. Seele, *Horus on the Crocodiles*, «JNES»,5, 1947, pp. 43-52; F.De Salvia, "Horo sui coccodrilli" nella Roma Costantiniana, «Studia Aegyptiaca» XIV, *Intellectual Heritage of Egypt*, Budapest 1992, pp. 509-517.

⁸⁴C. E. Sander-Hansen, *Die texte der Metternichstele*, «Analecta Aegyptiaca» 7, Kobenhaven 1956; L. Kákosy, *Metternichstele*, in *Lexicon der Ägyptologie*, IV, Wiesbaden 1980.

⁸⁵J. Assmann, *Magic and Theology in Ancient Egypt*, in Schäfer-Kippenberg, *Envisioning Magic*, pp.11-14. M. Malaise, *Bes et les croyances solaires*, in S. Israelit-Groll (ed.), *Studies in Egyptology presented to Miriam Lichtheim*, Jerusalem 1990, II, pp. 680-729.

⁸⁶C. Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets*, pp. 156-160, nn. 251-261; Delatte-Derchain, *Les Intailles magiques*, pp. 126-141.

ridden by Bes; but the case in which in the serpent appear the Iao name or letters or *charakteres* it could be interpreted in a cosmological key. If Bes is presented like a panthocratic god, the serpent could be a representation of the universe on which Bes/Aion practices his rule⁸⁷.

The analysis of magical papyri and magical gems shows that the special kind of magic of the Late Antiquity is more than a simple mixture of different elements from the Egyptian, Greek, Roman, and Jewish religious traditions⁸⁸. It could be a very complex example of "syncretism amalgam"⁸⁹, which means a mixture of religions in a whole, different from his components. H.D.Betz notes that «this syncretism is more than a hodgepodge of heterogeneous items. In effect it is a new religion altogether, displaying unified religious attitudes and beliefs»⁹⁰. In effects in the magical texts the divine names (belonging to different religious traditions) are regarded as multiple manifestations of a unique and high divine power. The same is the case of the pictures on the gems: various deities which the papyri referred to are here carved in associations with many different divine names. For the magician seems indifferent to invoke Graeco- Roman, Egyptian or Jewish gods⁹¹. In effect, it is impossible to separate the single components of this kind of syncretism, because they are linked each other, but it doesn't mean that this syncretism is "a new religion"⁹². The phenomenon of magic syncretism must be inserted into the wider context of the Hellenistic religious syncretism which is «the product of a coherent world system»⁹³. Magic shares as religion, philosophy and science a cosmic system of thought and knowledge, but in the magical context the 'use' of this system is peculiar. The magician knows the contemporary cosmological, philosophical and theological theories but he wants to control the cosmic powers for practical purposes: the acquisition of love, wealth, health, fame, knowledge of the future, control over

⁸⁷M. G. Lancellotti, *Il serpente ouroboros nelle gemme magiche*, in *Ellenismo e Gemme Magiche*, Incontro di studio, Verona 22-23 Ottobre 1999 (forthcoming).

⁸⁸Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, p.XLV.

⁸⁹Lévêque, *Essai de typologie*, p. 183.

⁹⁰ Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri* p. XLVI.

⁹¹See, for example PGM XIII= Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, p. 180: «hear me, o Christ, in torments (289)... say the whole name of Helios (293)... appear to me archangel of god (337)...». Cf. Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, p. XLVI: «the gods from the various cults gradually merged and as their natures became blurred, they often changed into completely different deities»

⁹²G. Casadio, *Sincretismo magico ellenistico o nuova religione? A proposito di un recente studio sui testi magici greci*, «Orpheus», n.s. XI, 1990, 1, pp. 118-125.

⁹³L. H. Martin, *Hellenistic Religions, An Introduction*, New York Oxford 1987, p. 157.

other persons and so on. Then the magician, in the exercise of his functions, melts together elements of different religious traditions in order to reach a specific aim. This is the reason why religion and magic result tightly connected without losing their own specific identities.