

The 6th and 7th Books of Moses

The Historical and Sociological Vagaries of a Grimoire

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A manual of magical incantations, which first appeared in Germany nearly 200 years ago, has played an essential role in a tradition of witchcraft belief among Franconian peasants. The use of the grimoire is still wide-spread in Germany today, though its publication was legally disputed in the 1950s. It has even reached the United States, where it is increasingly used in voodoo-like practices.

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Books of magic are an ancient phenomenon and timeless testimony to the human desire to exercise power over adversity and mortality. Western civilization has been impregnated by various strands of magical traditions, including those that are rooted in the ancient cultures of Babylon, Egypt, Persia, Syria, Israel, Greece and Rome. After the invention of printing in Europe, a variety of grimoires started to spread across Western countries, claiming to contain ancient and secret formulas empowering the user to command supernatural forces – good ones as well as evil ones. During the 18th and 19th centuries a number of such books came forth with syncretisms or conglomerations – to some extent perhaps fabrications – of these magical traditions. Examples are *La Poule Noire*, *Le Dragon Rouge*, and *The Petit Albert*, which started to circulate in France, *The Key of Solomon the King*, which is nearly international, *The Book of Cyprianus*, which became well known in Scandinavia, and *Das 6. and 7. Buch Mosis*, which appeared in Germany and to which later were added the *Das 8., 9. und 10. Buch Mosis*. Apparently, written portions of the texts of these putative books of Moses have been found as far back as the 16th century (Peuckert, 1957: 169–170).

E. William Monter offered a summary of the connection of these grimoires with earlier witchcraft beliefs:

“If we examine a best-selling grimoire like the *Marvellous Secrets of Natural and Cabalistic Magic of Little Albert*, we can see that it has many aspects in common with 15th-century witchcraft. Its first eleven recipes deal with types of love magic worthy of the most famous sorceress in Renaissance literature, La Celestina; the twelfth tells how to remedy the charm to make men impotent, the *aiguillette*; and the next one even describes how to make an *aiguillette* ... The *Petit Albert* is full of drawings of magic pentacles; of methods for many kinds of divination: of magical cures for various illnesses; of ways to raise spirits; and even of recipes for making oneself invisible or resisting torture” (1976: 189).

In this report I should like to focus on these alleged Books of Moses, since I am familiar with the peasant culture of the Franconian Jura mountains of central Germany (within the triangle of the cities of Nuremberg, Bamberg, Bayreuth) where this grimoire figured heavily in a system of witchcraft belief that lasted into the 20th century.

Virtually all scholars agree that this book (I am going to use the singular, since among the peasants it was understood as one book and commonly referred to as the “6th Book of Moses”) was neither authored by the Biblical Moses nor represents a true continuation of the first five books of the Old Testament, also

understood as the Torah, and sometimes popularly called the Books of Moses. But scholarly pronouncements have been falling on deaf ears, for tens of thousands of true believers have accepted the grimoire's claim as stated in its foreword: divulging divine magic that Moses presumably received on the Mountain. This simply goes to show that the effectiveness of an article of faith does not depend on the historical authenticity of the article, but on the personal need of the believer. Faith in the "Book of Moses" and the way it was incorporated in witchcraft practices exemplify this sociological principle.

At this time historians are uncertain about the authorship of the grimoire and also reject the notion, alluded to in the foreword, that it is an offshoot of Kabbalah, the ancient mystic philosophy of the Jewish people. In fact, Jewish scholars and rabbis, whom I have shown copies of the grimoire, vehemently object to the idea that the voodoo-like grimoire has anything to do with genuine Kabbalah. They see the manual of magic as a fraud and consider its ascription to Judaic heritage an insult.

Another rejection of sorts came from the Catholic Church in the 18th century, which declared the grimoire a tool for sorcery or witchcraft, the reading or using of it to be heretical, and placed it on the *Index librorum prohibitorum*. A Catholic's reading of a book on this list used to incur the condemnation of the Church and could have meant, among other penalties, excommunication. (This danger no longer exists: the *Index* was inactivated and discontinued in 1966.)

One more word about the speculations concerning the background of the grimoire. Hans Dieter Betz in his recent work, *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation, Including the Demotic Spells* (1986), disclosed a heritage of magical spells whose tenor seems to perfectly harmonize with the spells found in the "Books of Moses," especially in their addenda of the "8th, 9th and 10th Books." Comparison of the Greek papyri with the German grimoire shows similar preoccupations and suggests magical methodologies that are not essentially different from each other. In both media we find spells to secure love, gain riches, restore

health, gain influential friends, become invisible to others, escape miseries of all sorts, achieve longevity, discover treasures, punish enemies, win quarrels, obtain secrets, and so forth.

For example, in the German grimoire we find a spell that promises to fulfill amorous desire: "If thou wishest a woman to follow thee, take thy blood and write her name upon a newly laid egg and say toward her: Rampel" (Gammache, 1967: 97). The Greek papyri match this assistance to the lovelorn and suggest: "Leave a little of the bread you eat; break it up and form it into seven bite-sized pieces. And go where... those who have died a violent death were slain. Say the spell to the pieces of bread and throw them. And pick up some polluted dirt from the place where you perform the ritual and throw it inside the house of the woman whom you desire, go on home and go to sleep" (Betz, p. 64). These directions are followed by a lengthy spell that is to be said exactly as written. Less friendly spells are determined to disturb and annoy neighbors by inflicting insomnia. The papyri suggest: "[Take] a seashell and write: 'IPSAE IAOAI', let her [insert name], daughter of [insert name], lie awake because of me. That night she will lie awake" (Betz, p. 127.) The "Book of Moses" promises that a "certain dream" (more accurately understood as a nightmare) can be imposed on another person: an arcane text is to be written with a solution of myrrh on a "writing tablet." Then: "A cat black all over, and which has been killed" serves as a medium. The text is to be inserted into the mouth of the dead cat" (Gammache, 1967: 102). Where death is to be inflicted, the German grimoire suggests the following spell: "For destroying one's enemy take a laden plate and some of his hair and clothes, and say the 'Sword Prayer' over them and bury them in a deserted house and he will fall down" (Gammache, 1967: 99). The papyri match this destructive magic with spells to cause madness, hatred, rift between spouses or friends, and other evils.

I must, however, stress that harmful spells are in the minority in both the Greek papyri and the German grimoire. Out of approximately 570 spells listed in the papyri, only 40

or 7% are of aggressive nature. Comparable proportionality can be observed in the German grimoire. The vast majority of the spells are of protective nature, including folk-medical remedies and cures, culinary recipes, and prayers to divinities.

But let me revert to the question of the two media's historical relatedness. The conjurations in the papyri call upon deities and spirits that are very definitely figures of Greek and especially – as Janet H. Johnson clarifies in her introduction to Betz's volume – Egyptian religion. On the other side, the German grimoire leans heavily in the direction of Hebrew religion. A simple way to recognize this is by noting the names of the deities and other supernatural beings in the two media: the papyri's spells abound with references to the Greek and the Egyptian pantheons, whereas the grimoire appeals to the supernatural population of Hebrew religion. Among the very few overlaps are found (with slightly different spellings) references to Adonai, Moses, and Eloij. There emerges little else in the comparison that would encourage hypothesizing descendancy – at least in a direct line – of the German grimoire from the sources of the Greek papyri. The heavily Hebrew-oriented tone of the grimoire may indeed point in the direction of the Kabbalah.

The similarities of the goals and aspirations embedded in the spells of the two documents probably reflect universal needs and problems of humanity. Hence it is universality of the human condition and not literary descendancy that accounts for resemblance.

While the historical origin of the grimoire must be left open at this time, we may entertain ourselves by turning to some social-psychological observations. I would like to focus on the concept of “mechanical magic”. The grimoire's magical methodology – whether it pertain to spoken spells, conjurational rituals, or written “seals” (some to be worn on one's person) – insists on one notable rule: the power of magic lies *in* the administration of the formula or ritual, i.e., in their *correct* execution. These instruments supposedly empower a person to summon, as well as dismiss, a vast assortment of spirits – some of them supposedly good and

some supposedly evil. These spiritual entities are believed to serve the person who performs the correct ritual and/or speaks the correct formula. Presumably the effectiveness of the conjuration does not depend on the performing persons' belief in the magical power of the formula – the spirits would respond to the correct word-by-word rendition in any case. This notion of magic can be called “mechanical magic”, since the effectiveness of magic is innate in the formula. In other words, the formula is a tool and works to produce a spell regardless of the attitudes or personal qualifications of the user.

The principle of “mechanical magic” has had a number of significant implications on community life among the Franconian villagers who believed in the potency of the spells. Certain implications were still observable in mid-20th century. (1) In order to practice magic you needed the necessary tool – the grimoire with the formulas and the descriptions of the rituals. (2) The practice of magic had a democratic character, i.e., anyone wishing to do magic could do so, provided he or she had the grimoire. (3) Inexplicable events, unexpected disasters, accidents, or illnesses among humans or farm animals were attributed to spells cast by a hostile or revengeful individual in the community. Charles Mackay in his 1841 book, *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds* – the unsurpassed classic in the social psychology of the witchcraft mania, albeit largely overlooked by present-day students of the genre – described these vexing events as being perceived by the people as “wondrous appearances” (p. 464). (4) Since one could never be certain who had availed him- or herself of the grimoire and was a potential agent of a vengeance spell, the wisest course of behavior was to avoid offending or harming anyone. The history of the almost crimefree village life among the peasants of the Jura mountains may, at least in part, be explained by this social philosophy, which functioned as a legal infrasystem and can be called “justice by magic”.

It is interesting that this system of “justice by magic” is entirely based on the *belief* that people actually performed sorcery, an assumption that might not have been borne out empir-

ically in most of the villages of the Jura area. This means that the existence of the grimoire in the community was merely surmised and was perceived as a threat. This is a striking example of symbolic interaction, for no behavioral implementation may have existed; nonetheless the villagers behaved *on the premise* that the grimoire was in the hands of some individuals in the community who thereby possessed the potential for witchcraft.

While the symbolic interaction theory probably applied to most of the villagers, I have evidence of at least two villages in which certain persons used the grimoire to cast spells with intention to harm neighbors. (See 1978 and 1987 where I discuss details.) These exceptional cases raise interesting questions, particularly when considering the almost monolithic and dominating role the Catholic Church played in the area. How would a Catholic, enmeshed in the tight social structure of a Catholic peasant community, dare to violate Church law and not only read the prohibited book, but even use its formulas and cast spells? This was witchcraft and ipso facto heresy!

On the basis of inside information concerning a few persons who indeed practiced witchcraft I found that these individuals were thoroughly estranged from neighbors and the community at large and had arrived at self-definitions that not merely accepted but actively confirmed their reputations: they saw themselves outside of the circle of Christian believers and perceived themselves allied with demons, if not with Satan himself.

The community had imposed a role on them, and the victims confirmed it with fervor, as if to spite the neighbors and revel in the fear they so visibly could create. To put it another way: the social rejection ironically conferred power of intimidating and frightening the community. Since I am reporting events which took place during the past two to three generations, a time during which neither the Church nor the civil authorities had the power to persecute or prosecute on the basis of witchcraft or the accusation thereof, the community was in fact powerlessly confronting the real or imagined practice of witchcraft. Hence, fear and acquiescence were the only feasible substitutes

for persecution. This is why it was possible, as previously mentioned, that such disreputable individuals could actually revel in their evil reputation – and could do so with impunity.

It would, however, be an incomplete scenario if one would want to explain these deviant members of the community solely on the basis of their seeking social power by accepting and acting out an evil role. There is a more pervasive and universal aspect that must be added. The practice of sorcery or witchcraft had a patently pragmatic slant: it was seen as a means to avoid disaster, misfortune and pain in this world. *Entering in agreement with demons* (which is the essence of witchcraft) or *trying to command them* (which is the essence of sorcery) was seen as a more promising method for survival than submitting to the dictates of a religious hierarchy, which sometimes was recognized as an oppressing and exploiting force. We recognize the Faustian aspiration. Except that, unlike its literary prototype, it emphasized the negative side of life, being more preoccupied with the *avoidance* of pain and misery than the *attainment* of riches and glamor. In order to understand this orientation I must call to mind that the living conditions of the Franconian peasants during previous generations were subject to the abuses of political, military, and ecclesiastical powers, and to the hardships of the natural elements. A description of the history of the incredible poverty and powerlessness of these peasants would deserve a fuller account than is possible to give here.

Suffice it to say that the practice of magic among these peasants cannot be adequately explained by dwelling exclusively on individual traits, but must take into consideration the peasantry's misery and exploitation. Out of this environment grew the temptation to seek a foothold on some Faustian island amidst a sea of deprivation and disaster.

But let me add a few more remarks about the history of *Das 6. and 7. Buch Mosis*. While the ancient origin of the grimoire is nebulous, its more recent history is relatively well known. The book appeared in printed form for the first time in 1797 in Germany (Jacoby, 1931: 31–32). It almost immediately conquered a vast number of believers and practitioners.

While my acquaintance with the book and its aficionados is limited to the peasants of Franconia, I must remind that the grimoire spread across almost all parts of Germany – in fact, its circulation in Germany and other parts of the world, as I will mention later, is presently on the rise.

Das 6. and 7. Buch Mosis and their addenda are far from anachronistic on the European scene. They have been printed and reprinted a number of times in Germany. On account of their age and uncertain authorship there is no copy right that would limit their printing and marketing – at least in western Germany. (Interestingly, reproduction and marketing of the grimoire are prohibited in Communist East Germany.) Each edition has come out with slight alterations in style and contents. Although the changes between one and the next edition may have been slight, these changes have added up to be quite significant over the nearly 200 years of the book's existence. This may explain, among other things, why Jewish scholars, whom I showed the grimoire, right away noticed the imprecise or faked Hebrew characters used to represent certain "seals" and formulas. It is quite possible that erstwhile correct characters may have been distorted in the process of copying, recopying, and reprinting the various editions; it must be remembered that photographic techniques to reproduce books with a high degree of fidelity have not been developed until just recently. Hence the question as to whether the undecipherable Hebrew script in some parts of the grimoire is pure fake or simply the result of deteriorating copying of several generations of editions must be left open.

Changes in contents occurred mostly by adding formulas, recipes, and folk cures. The most notably modified edition in this sense came out in the 1930s by the publishing house Gutenberg in Dresden, emphasizing old German remedies and even alluding to the scientific validity of a number of them. This modification may be seen in the light of the larger national effort at the time to revive ancient Germanic customs and folklore. It is strange, however, that the obvious Semitic script (or imitation thereof) in which many of the "seals" are cast

were left intact, and the question of the grimoire's non-Germanic origin was ignored. After the war a number of reprints came on the market, notably the 1950s edition of the Planet publishing house in Braunschweig, northern Germany. Within a few months it had sold 9000 copies and commenced to print putative sequences of the grimoire, the "8th, 9th and 10th Books of Moses."

It was at this time that an unprecedented legal opposition to the printing and marketing of the book arose. The challenge was initiated by Johann Kruse, a school teacher from Schleswig-Holstein, whose mother had been slandered as a witch in her native village. The slander and communal rejection suffered by the family on account of the reputation had inflicted so much mental anguish on the young Johann that later as an adult he made it his all-consuming effort to fight superstitions of this sort and turned into a self-made ethnologist and founder and director of the Archives for the Investigation of Contemporary Witchcraft Superstition at Hanburg in the Federal Republic of Germany. He combatted the spread of witchcraft with passion and made it his personal vendetta to suppress the grimoire. He saw the book as an instigator of illegal, if not outright murderous, behavior and referred to one of the book's "seals" (not found in subsequent editions) that promised that he who would kill nine persons could expect a large fortune through magical means. Kruse was able to point to a case in the 1920s when a man by the name of Angerstein proceeded with the demonic instruction, and was arrested just before he could carry out his ninth killing. He was convicted on eight counts of murder and sentenced to die. On a less extreme tangent, Kruse held the book, and consequently the publisher, responsible for stimulating the exploitation of superstition for profit, causing antisocial behavior and encouraging the slander of innocent persons as witches. He cited 56 lawsuits that had involved the book since 1945 and police statistics that showed that in the 1950s an estimated 10,000 *Hexenbanner* (witch-doctors or "healers", the equivalent to the old English "cunning man") had been plying their trade in West Germany.

Kruse sued the Planet publisher, trying to achieve a "cease and desist" order against the publishing of the grimoire. A 1956 court hearing exhibited two opposing teams of experts. On one side, Professor Will-Erich Peuckert, renowned ethnologist from the University of Göttingen, testified for the defendant; on the other side, Professor Prokop spoke for Kruse's cause. The court found the publisher guilty of deceit and "harmful publication," prohibited publication, and imposed a fine. However, the appeals court disagreed, granted continued publication, rescinded the fine, and Kruse lost the case. The main credit for the ultimate outcome must probably be given to Professor Peuckert, who employed his well known power of rhetoric to impress the court with the principle of free expression and, more specifically, the value of age-old remedies and folk customs. In any case, Kruse and Peuckert emerged from the controversy to remain irreconcilable opponents, if not personal enemies.

The record shows that Peuckert never forgave Kruse for "intrusion onto his territory" of folklore and ethnology – a territory he had staked out through many years of research, lecturing, and functioning as court-appointed expert in trials involving the practice and criminal consequences of witchcraft. He found fault with literally everything that Kruse had advanced – his ideas, research procedure, terminology, and even spelling (Peuckert, 1960: 123–148). Although Peuckert may have had some logical ground for criticizing Kruse's research methods and theoretical assumptions, I find his criticism arrogant and unduly pedantic – as well as amusing, because Peuckert's own writing style is so convoluted and awkward in grammar that one can often only guess at what he meant to say. More importantly, however, Peuckert found Kruse ignorant of the larger context of magical literature, a genre with an impressive tradition that reaches back into ancient cultures and includes much more than mere "aggressive" spells, but also recipes and the tradition of *magia naturalis*.

The grimoire of the "Books of Moses" is free to continue its journey through the 20th century and most likely will triumphantly enter the 21st century. (One of the more recent re-

publications was the 1979 Karin Kramer edition in West Berlin.) Its temporal advance seems to be matched by a new surge in geographic spread: It has reached the shores of the New World and is selling briskly in the land of the Americans and can be bought for a few dollars in bookstores specializing in the occult. In fact most of my descriptions in this report are based on an American edition, claiming to be a direct translation from the German ("Translated from the German, Word for Word, according to Old Writings," *The Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses*, (title page)). It is noteworthy that this manual of magic and sorcery is becoming particularly popular with black Americans, who believe that the book reveals a type of magic akin to that of their African ancestry. The irony of the grimoire, then, is that it may contribute to the revival of voodoo-like practices, if not outright witchcraft, in the United States.

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