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# What could a Student of Medicine learn from a Demonologist? Some remarks on: Siam Bhayro and Catherine Rider (eds.), *Demons and Illness from Antiquity to the Early-Modern Period*, Brill, 2017, 425 pages.

Wojciech KOSIOR

The reviewed tome, published in the series *Magical and Religious Literature of Late Antiquity*,[1] is a post-conference monograph, featuring selected papers, presented during the *Demons and Illness: Theory and Practice from Antiquity to the Early Modern Period* conference, held at the University of Exeter, on 22–24 April, 2013. The event gathered together specialists of diverse disciplines, including historians, philosophers and semitologists, who deal with a broad range of specific subjects and eras within various cultural and religious traditions. In this particular case, their academic interests converged on the borders of demonology and medicine. The editors themselves aptly note the problems with such an endeavour. Firstly, the book discusses textual materials of different nature, *inter alia* Mesopotamian theoretical handbooks, Jewish amulets and Christian hagiographies. Each group has been composed on the basis of different guidelines, and based on different general assumptions, which makes attempts at comparison more methodologically challenging. Secondly, particular issues differ in how well they had been researched so far, and this is particularly apparent when comparing the scholarship on the Bible and Mesopotamian texts. Thirdly, the technical terminology varies

[1] The series includes such titles as O.-P. Saar, *Jewish Love Magic. From Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages* (2017), D. Levene, *Jewish Aramaic Curse Texts from Late-Antique Mesopotamia* (2013) and S. Shaked, J. N. Ford, S. Bhayro *Aramaic Bowl Spells* (2013) to name just a few of the recent examples which pertain to Jewish Studies. Online: https://brill.com/view/serial/MRLA.

from text to text, and it has to be remembered that, when speaking about "demons", one refers to a variety of supernatural creatures belonging to distant religious milieus.[2]

## 1 Essence and Variety

As we quickly find out, it is exactly this array of academic expertise and the comparative approach to the problem, which is the main focus of the present tome. The editors of *Demons and Illness* have put plenty of effort into unifying the structure of particular chapters and composing them into a seamless and coherent academic work. Although the authors, by necessity, differ in their understanding of the term "demon", each of them provides a clear explanation as to how the word is conceptualised in the textual sources they work with. Thus, Gina Konstantopoulos suggests that, instead of searching for the general nature of demons as independent figures, it is more apt to focus on the roles they play in particular texts.[3] Similarly, Rita Lucarelli notes the lack of a linguistic border between deities and demons in the Egyptian context and suggests that they differ only in so far as the demons do not gain cult status until the late New Kingdom.[4] Finally, Peregrine Horden concludes that, although there is a need for some general dictionary of terms, one has to remember that there are cultures and traditions in which the supernatural entities do not bear specific names.[5] The term "demon" itself has its own origins and semantic history and, as such, does not always fit squarely into the categories emerging from any particular source text. Consequently, one cannot rely on overused qualities such as "liminality" or "supernaturality", which may mean pretty much anything now.[6]

Each contributor devotes some space to an introduction to particular groups of sources, thus helping to understand the broader context of the analysed problems. The chapters, in turn, are organised into thematic clusters, according to chronological progression. Thus, the tome is divided into four

[2] S. Bhayro C. Rider, *Introduction*, in *Demons and Illness from Antiquity to the Early-Modern Period*, eds. S. Bhayro C. Rider, Brill, 2017, pp. 4–5.

[3] G. Konstantopoulos, *Shifting Alignments: The Dichotomy of Benevolent and Malevolent Demons in Mesopotamia*, in *Demons and Illness…*, p. 19–20.

[4] R. Lucarelli, *Illness as Divine Punishment: The Nature and Function of the Disease-Carrier Demons in the Ancient Egyptian Magical Texts*, in *Demons and Illness…*, p. 53.

[5] P. Horden, *Afterword: Pandaemonium*, in *Demons and Illness…*, p. 413–414.

[6] P. Horden, op. cit., p. 414.

parts, covering the following eras: Ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt, Second Temple Judaism and Late Antiquity, Middle Ages and Early Modernity. As a result, it is possible to perceive the themes of demonology as running through periods of time and across religious and cultural traditions.[7] Thanks to this approach, the authors have recognised various criteria with regards to the classification of demons. For instance, Rita Lucarelli proposes what seems to be a relatively universal distinction between stationary guardian-demons and wandering messenger-demons,[8] while Chiara Crosignani acknowledges the criterion of habitation of demons.[9] Others suggest relying on the literary genre of the work featuring particular demons. Thus, Ida Fröhlich divides demonological texts into theoretical works explaining the origins of demons, regular narratives involving demons portrayed as literary figures, and functional texts about, for example, magical spells and apotropaic amulets.[10] A similar solution is offered by Gideon Bohak, who proposes a division into theological works produced by an intellectual elite and amulets made for simple folk.[11] Interestingly, and although the motivation differs to a degree, contemporary academic attempts at classifying demons somewhat resemble the struggles of ancient demonologists.[12]

## 2 Biofeedback and Cognitive Dissonance

While the tome deals specifically with the medical dimension of demonology, the authors agree that demons play numerous functions. Probably the most obvious one, as far as the monotheistic systems are concerned, is that of theodicy. By referring to the existence and malevolent actions of lesser supernatural figures, it was possible to address the ancient question of *unde malu* and thus unburden the deity.[13] No less important is the cognitive function of demons. In this regard, it is important to highlight Gideon Bohak's attempt at metaphorizing demons as "germs", since this grasps numerous

[7] S. Bhayro, C. Rider, op. cit., p. 16.
[8] R. Lucarelli, op. cit., p. 55.
[9] C. Crosignani, *The Influence of Demons on the Human Mind according to Athenagoras and Tatian*, in *Demons and Illness…*, p. 181.
[10] I. Fröhlich, *Demons and Illness in Second Temple Judaism: Theory and Practice*, in *Demons and Illness…*, p. 85.
[11] G. Bohak, *Conceptualizing Demons in Late Antique Judaism*, in *Demons and Illness…*, p. 113.
[12] G. Konstantopoulos, op. cit., p. 19, 26, 29.
[13] S. Bhayro, C. Rider, op. cit., p. 1–2.

similarities between these two phenomena. Both germs and demons are perceived as ever-present and effective, cannot ultimately be annihilated, can play both positive and negative functions and should be treated with appropriate, class-specific means. Bohak also observes that some people possess the skills and means of seeing the demons and germs, which elevates their social and economic status – exactly as is the case with ancient rabbis and contemporary physicians.[14] The authors also note the semantic extension of these theological and cognitive functions of demons which have some serious psychological consequences. Faith in supernatural creatures explains a wide variety of phenomena by pointing to some specific figures, who, in turn, can be blamed and acted upon. Not only does this help to reduce an unpleasant feeling of uncertainty, but also, as one of the authors writes "having someone to blame means we have someone with whom to battle, thus giving the possibility of relief".[15]

One of the recurrent subjects of the book is the deep connection between medical conditions and particular diseases. It seems that, in this regard, anthropomorphization plays a crucial cognitive role. Gina Konstantopoulos notes that demons "served both as vectors of disease and as the actualized embodiment of a particular disease itself".[16] András Bácskay carefully analyses the Mesopotamian medical vocabulary and shows that sickness is never devoid of demonological aspects.[17] Finally, Anne E. Bailey shows that attempts to distinguish between diseases and demons are rather late and provides a table containing the numbers of recognised demons and diseases by each particular medieval saint.[18]

Anthropomorphization sometimes goes even further than that. Thus, Sophie Sawicka-Sykes notes deep connections made by early Christian monks, who connected demons with particular emotions and body parts.[19] Meanwhile, Sophie Lunn-Rockliffe points to those entities responsible for the

[14] G. Bohak, op. cit., p. 119–128. Similar observations, though in relation to a different set of source-texts, are made by L. Saif, *Between Medicine and Magic: Spiritual Aetiology and Therapeutics in Medieval Islam*, in *Demons and Illness…*, p. 313.

[15] S. Bhayro, C. Rider, op. cit., p. 2.

[16] G. Konstantopoulos, op. cit., p. 22.

[17] A. Bácskay, *The Natural and Supernatural Aspects of Fever in Mesopotamian Medical Texts*, in *Demons and Illness…*, pp. 39, 41, 52.

[18] A. E. Bailey, *Miracles and Madness: Dispelling Demons in Twelfth-Century Hagiography*, in *Demons and Illness…*, pp. 235–255.

[19] S. Sawicka-Sykes, *Demonic Anti-Music and Spiritual Disorder in the Life of Antony*, in *Demons and Illness…*, pp. 197–198, 212–213.

specific physiological processes of the humans they encounter.[20] Although neither of the authors advance this suggestion, the book seems to invite the reader to perceive the problem from the perspective of biofeedback, understood as a method of increasing one's awareness and control over physiological processes. Among the techniques of biofeedback, it is not uncommon to engage patients with vivid imaginations in interactions with some anthropomorphic agents. And while the theoretical background is completely different, one could wonder whether a strong belief in demons is not in some way beneficial, in so far as the physical well-being of the patient is concerned.

In addition to this, it might be interesting to examine the issue in the context of Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance, according to which people's beliefs are organised in the network of interconnected assertions. These assertions, in turn, can be either coherent or incoherent and, depending on the level of their (in)congruity, can generate unpleasant feelings of dissonance. From this perspective, theology is just a set of such assertions, with some of the elements being particularly prone to generating dissonance. Thus, for instance, the claim that "God is benevolent" is explicitly at odds with "pious servants of God suffer". The introduction of a third element, stating that "these are the demons who are responsible for pious servants' of god suffering" helps to alleviate this feeling of dissonance. It has to be remembered though, that such cognitive dissonance has a physiological basis and, since there are often strong emotions involved in its experience, the prolonged conflict can prove harmful. If we were to assume that people living in antiquity experienced similar problems with antagonistic beliefs, then it could be speculated that the psychological purpose of demons was also important from the perspective of psychosomatic well-being. What is more, the function of the "demonologist-therapeutist" resembles that of a contemporary physician working in the paradigm of holistic medicine – which, in a sense, serves as a compromise in the conflict between magicians and physicians.[21]

[20] S. Lunn-Rockliffe, *Over-Eating Demoniacs in Late Antique Hagiography*, in *Demons and Illness…*, p. 215–231.

[21] The issue of similarities between the ancient and modern "magical" thinking is touched upon by L. Verderame, *Demons at Work in Ancient Mesopotamia*, in *Demons and Illness…*, p. 77 and P. Horden, op. cit., pp. 413–415.

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I would like to wrap up this short essay with one more personal remark. Recently I have been working on *Elyonim veTachtonim*, the electronic inventory of angels, demons and ghosts in early rabbinic literature. This is an on-line, open-source and open-access database of all literary instances of supernatural entities in various rabbinic works conceived in the first millennium CE. Its main purpose is that of a catalogue, which allows for a quick localisation of all the appearances of a given entity. The inventory is organised according to various criteria, including the literary genre of the passage in question, the class and type of the supernatural entity appearing in the passage concerned, and the thematic tags describing each given entity, such as a visual description, their place of habitation and the nuances of their relationships with humans.[22] The web site was completed on 11 February, 2017, and since then three versions of the inventory have been published: "Azazel", on 11 February, 2017; "Belfegor", on July 5th, 2017; and "Gabriel", on March 2nd, 2018. Meanwhile, *Demons and Illness…* was published on 18 February, 2017, exactly one week after I had revealed the first version of the inventory.[23] I learned about the tome soon after via social media, but, due to other duties, it took me over a year to read the monograph itself – as soon as I had uploaded version 003. This means that none of us (neither the authors of the book nor myself), knew about the others' ongoing research. However, to my surprise and satisfaction, it turned out that there are numerous methodological solutions and conclusions that we do share. Although I would be reluctant to recognize an example of *genius loci* here, I do think we are witnessing a manifestation of the *Zeitgeist*.

[22] Online: http://elyonimvetachtonim.blogspot.com. More on the theoretical and methodological background on the project can be found in: W. Kosior, *Elyonim veTachtonim. Some Methodological Considerations on the Electronic Database of Angels, Demons and Ghosts in Early Rabbinic Literature*, "The Polish Journal of the Arts and Culture. New Series" vol. 5 no. 1/2017, pp. 89–112. W. Kosior, "*Everyone has one thousand on the left and myriads on the right" (Berakhot 6a). Some Initial Remarks on the Rabbinic Imagination and the Demons of the Babylonian Talmud* [in Polish: *"Każdy ma ich tysiąc po lewej i miriady po prawej" (Berachot 6a). Kilka wstępnych uwag o rabinicznej wyobraźni i demonach Talmudu babilońskiego*], "Światło i ciemność" vol. VIII, eds. M. Rzeczycka, A. Świerzowska, I. Trzcińska, Gdańsk, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego 2017, pp. 151–161.

[23] Online: http://elyonimvetachtonim.blogspot.com/2017/02/hello-world.html.

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**Note about the author**

Wojciech Kosior – a graduate of Psychology and Religious Studies, adjunct researcher at the Centre for Comparative Studies of Civilisations at the Jagiellonian University. His research involves the Hebrew Bible and the early Rabbinic Literature. He is currently studying Jewish demonology and angelology as well as the apotropaic dimension of the basic Jewish customs and rituals.
e-mail: wojciech.kosior@uj.edu.pl