

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Journal of Biblical Literature* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_jbl-01.php

JOURNAL OF BIBLICAL LITERATURE.

TWENTY-THIRD YEAR—1904—PART II.

Notes on Jewish Amulets.

HANS H. SPOER, PH.D.

THE fear of the unknown as well as of the known has always disturbed the peace of the human mind. Whether it was the danger from an evilly inclined invisible power, such as ghosts, gins, fairies, or sprites, the malice or envy of one's fellow-men, or maladies of various kinds, or the bite of snakes or scorpions, the effort was made to counteract, or, if possible, to get ahead of, a supposed spell or injury by another and stronger. Amulets¹ served accordingly as prophylactics against known and unknown danger.

They were known to the ancient Hebrews, and were called by them *שׁוֹמֵר*, Isa. 3²⁰. They were used, among other purposes, to charm serpents, Jer. 8¹⁷. It seems from Isa. 3³ Eccl. 10¹¹ that there was a regular profession of enchanters in Judah.

The Talmud calls the amulet *קַמִּיץ*, a word which comes from *קָמַץ*, to bind, and points to the manner in which it was carried, but not to its contents. This fact, in connection with Isa. 3²⁰, seems to throw some light upon several OT. passages. According to Gen. 35⁴ the women of Jacob's household handed to him, upon the command of Yahweh, *אֶת־אֵלֶיהֶן הַנָּזֵר*, Gen. 35², among which were also ear-rings, 35⁴. As these ear-rings cannot very well have been representations of a deity, the presumption is that they were charms or amulets. This again is borne out by the reference in Jud. 8²⁴⁻²⁵. Here Gideon requests the Israelites to bring the ear-rings so that he might make an ephod out of them. The ear-rings are mentioned together with the crescents and chains, v.²⁶, which were around the necks of the camels; both are unquestionably charms; no valuable horse or camel is to-day in the Orient without a chain, generally of blue beads, from which a crescent is often suspended, around its neck. Gideon united the smaller charms or amulets of the indi-

¹ The word "amulet" was first used by Pliny, *NH.* xxix. 4, 19, etc. The etymology of the word is uncertain and has probably nothing to do with the Arabic *hamalet*.

viduals to make a large one, an ephod, which should serve for the entire people to protect it against every kind of calamity and evil.

Amulets were, and are still, worn openly or concealed. A classic illustration is found in 2 Macc. 12⁴⁰: "But they found, under the coats of those that had been slain, things consecrated to the idols of the Jamnites." The amulets were ordinarily worn attached to the arm, as is attested by two passages in the Talmud; in *Sanh.* 22 a, 15, it is said that the king shall carry the Torah on his arm as an amulet, and also *Jer. Sabb.* 16 b, where it is stated that God hangs the storm-wind on his arm like an amulet.

The reason for keeping out of sight the *ḥime* is to be sought in the belief that just because it was not seen and therefore its existence not suspected, it was a stronger protection for the bearer; thus a father gives an amulet hidden in a cane to his son, a kind of a hidden weapon to protect him against the evil eye.²

Amulets were especially in vogue in the Talmudic times, and it is not surprising that, as in certain branches of the Christian church, amulets were valued according to the reputed cure which they had brought about, or the protection which they had offered to their bearer.

Thus the distinction was made between amulets which had cured once, twice, or three times; or three different persons once, or one person three times.³ We hear therefore of proven and non-proven amulets, *i.e.* amulets which have or have not cured and protected their bearers.⁴

The Talmud takes a firm stand against sorcery, in which we must include amulets, *i.e.* amulets which are not of the right kind,⁵ such as the men wore who had been slain in the battle against Gorgias. Nevertheless one of the greatest Palestinian Amoraim, Jochanan, declared that a knowledge of sorcery⁶ was one of the indispensable qualifications of a member of the Sanhedrim.

Sorcery was largely employed in cases of sickness, and here the Talmud makes the concession that whatever serves for healing was not forbidden, though it might be superstitious,⁷ a principle faithfully carried out, even to this day, by the country population of all civilized lands. The Jewish scholars did not make a concession to a lower form of religion by permitting sorcery to be employed in case of disease, but simply shared the views of the age as to the character

² *Leviticus rabba*, c. 25; Blau, *Altjüd. Zauberwesen*, p. 91.

³ Cf. Blau, *op. cit.* p. 92 for Talmudic references. ⁴ Cf. *Sota*, ix; 13.

⁵ Cf. below. ⁶ Cf. Blau, *op. cit.* p. 20. ⁷ *Sabb.* 67 a; *Chullin*, 77 b.

of the maladies. The patient was regarded as being under a spell, possessed of an evil spirit, a belief with which we meet frequently in the Gospels, cf. Mt. 12²² = Lk. 11¹⁴. Mk. 5¹ = Mt. 8²⁸. Luke 8²⁸, and as one spell could be overcome only by another sorcery was employed. This consisted often only in amulets or a spoken word, a command to the spirit to leave the afflicted. The *shema'* served as such, but especially the divine name, as among Christians the name of Jesus. The words of Lev. 13⁹ were used against the spirit of leprosy. This usage of the divine name is doubtless based upon Ex. 15², **אֲנִי יְהוָה רַפְאֵךְ**, for *I am Yahweh thy healer*.

The divine name, in its manifold forms and attributes, was naturally the most powerful charm, and to make an exorcism or talisman effective must never be omitted; as a matter of fact another name would make the charm powerless. That this is so is clearly intimated by the statement 2 Macc. 12⁴⁰. Those talismans lacked the **שֵׁם הַמְפֹרֵשׁ**, and therefore those who carried them were not protected and were slain in battle.

The many citations from the OT. which we find on the amulets are doubtless substitutions for old heathen incantations. In the *šime'* given below we have a combined quotation from Dt. 28²⁵ and 10¹⁷, the entire Ps. 121, one from 1 S. 18¹⁴, Ex. 15¹¹ Ps. 45⁵⁻⁷ and Is. 49²⁵.

Besides the **שֵׁם הַמְפֹרֵשׁ**, which was indispensable, there are other characteristics of a good and effective *šime'*. These are:

The Names of Angels.— On this *šime'* we find the names: Ahabiel, Berachiel, Hānniel, Hesdiel, Tobiel, and Zedeķiel. The angels are called upon because there are occasions and matters in which they may act without special permission from the Deity, and therefore can prevent evil which otherwise might befall the bearer of the amulet. According to this *šime'* they helped Abraham, which deed in itself might have been reason enough to write their names on the *šime'*. But another instance makes these names powerful and that is the fact that they are compounded with the divine name, for with the transference of the divine name to the angels it is believed that the power of the one owning the name is also transferred.⁸

*The Magical Triangle.*⁹— This was formed either by the vowels **אֵהְיוּ** or by the name **יהוה**. The vowels or name were put together in such a way that by repeating them they formed a triangle of either 12, 42, or 72 letters.¹⁰ However, on this *šime'* the magical

⁸ Cf. also Blau, p. 136 sq.

⁹ Cf. *Pesikta*, 108 b.

¹⁰ On the interpretation of this, cf. Blau, *op. cit.* pp. 141-146.

triangle of letters has given place to a triangle of lines in which are written vs.⁵⁻⁷ of Ps. 45.

The Permutation of Letters.— This practice is evidently founded in the belief that the permutation makes the charm more effective. On this *kime'*, we have the letters of the word צלח permuted in the forms: צחל, לחצ, חצל, and לצח, written along the two long sides of the triangle. At times even entire scripture verses were written backward.¹¹ The word צלח is the keynote of the quotation Ps. 45⁵⁻⁷ and expresses, at the same time, that which is desired for the bearer of this *kime'*, viz. that he may be prosperous.

The name of the person in whose favor the *kime'* has been written.

The Name of his Mother.— The father's name is never mentioned. We have here doubtless, as in the prayers addressed to the Jewish saints, a remnant of the ancient matriarchate which is still lingering in certain customs of to-day.¹²

The demon, or what is equivalent to it, the disease (cf. the NT. passages), or, as in this *kime'*, a request for general protection and prosperity.

The often unintelligible abbreviations are another feature which all Jewish written amulets have in common.

There may be minor variations, but a complete, written קמיע will not lack any of the points mentioned.

Description of the Kime'.

This *kime'*, of which a photograph is presented herewith, is upon parchment and written in Rashi. The names of the angels and the OT. citations are in square characters. Its size is 2 $\frac{3}{4}$ " \times 19". The beginning of the first line is illegible. Upon the usual exaltation follow the names of the angels, by reason of which the bearer of the *kime'* shall have success and obtain grace and favor in the eyes of all those who see him. Out of the first letters of the quotation 1 S. 18¹⁴, which is introduced by שכתוב *as it is written*, a name has been made which has mystical significance, and by virtue of this "great and holy name" the man mentioned on this *kime'* shall prosper. Upon this follows in a square 2" \times 7 $\frac{1}{2}$ ", which is divided into 42 squares, 13 in a row, a quotation from Ex. 15¹¹, one letter to a square. These 42 squares with the triangle which is formed upon one of the

¹¹ Cf. Blau, *op. cit.* pp. 85, 117, 148 sq.

¹² Cf. the writer's article: "Dolmens, etc."

narrow sides of the large square are most probably a variant of the magical triangle and of the name of 42 letters.

The *ḳime'* closes with the quotation Isa. 49²³ and the words "to the bearer of this *ḳime'*."

זְבִיטָה] = [עַמִּי עָשׂוּ יָדַי לְרֹאשׁ] = ¹² עוֹרֵי מַעַם יְהוָה עָשׂוּ שְׂמֵם
וּאֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל אֵל יִתֵּן לְמוֹט רִגְלֶךָ אֲלֵיטִים שְׂמִרְךָ] הַגּוֹלֵד מִן לֹאֵה אֲנִי ה' [= יְהוָה]
אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל יֹשֵׁב הַרְבִּיבִים חֵן וְחֶסֶד וְחַמּוּל וְרַחֵם עַל עַבְדְּךָ נִשְׂא קִמְעָא זֹאת
זְכִרְהָ הַגּוֹלֵד מִן לֹאֵה וְתַצְלִיחַ אוֹתוֹ בְּכֹל מַעֲשָׂיו וּבְכֹל אֲשֶׁר יִפְתֶּה יִשְׁכַּל וְיַצְלִח
רַמְצָא חֵן וְחֶסֶד בְּעֵינֵי כָל רֵאשִׁי בִּכְוֹת ¹⁴ אֱלוֹהֵי הַשְּׁמַיִם הַקְּדוּשִׁים וְהַמְּהוֹרִים הָאֲדֻרִים
הַיְהוּדָאִים הָאֲמִצְיָים הַחֻזְקִים וְאֱלוֹהֵי הַמַּבְרָאֵל הַבְּרִיאֵל הַנִּיבֵל הַסְּרִיאֵל הַפְּדִיאֵל הַפְּדִיאֵל
צְדִיקָאֵל

אֲתָן מְלֹאכִיָּא קְרִישִׁיא כְּמוֹ שְׂבִידְכֶם וְתַצְלַחְתֶּם אֶת אַבְרָם אַבְיָי בֶּן חַבְרִי
וְתַצְלַחוּ אֶת נִשְׂא קִמְעָא זֹאת זְכִרְהָ הַגּוֹלֵד מִן לֹאֵה בְּכֹל רִדְכֵי כִדְ נָסוּ] = [ק
יְהוָה רִצֹן נֶגַח סְלֵה וְעוֹד]

שְׁלֵא עֲתָה מִיַּם עֲמִי עָשׂוּ אֵילֵי רֵאִי שְׁהֵלֵי הִי שְׁרִי שְׁרִי שְׁרִי שְׁרִי הִי הִי הִי הִי הִי הִי הִי הִי
צְנֻם וְעַ כִּד נָסוּ] = [בֶּן יְהוָה רִצֹן נֶגַח סְלֵה וְעוֹד]

לְהַצְלִיחַ הַיְהוּדָאִים נָקוּ] = [נִשְׂא קִמְעָא זֹאת] צַפְנֵה בֶּן בְּרוּךְהָ בְּעֵינֵי כָל רֵאשִׁי
וּבְכֹל מַעֲשָׂיו וְרִדְכֵי שֶׁבֶּ] = [שְׂכַחוּב] וְהוּ דוּד בְּכֹל רִדְכֵי מִשְׁכִּיל הוּ] = [וְיְהוָה]
עַמִּי וְיְדָבְרֵךְ מִן לְנֶקֶד] לְנִשְׂא קִמְעָא זֹאת]

בִּכְוֹת הוּ הַשֵּׁם הַגְּדוֹל הַקְּדוּשׁ יַצְלִיחַ זְכִרְהָ בֶּן לֹאֵה בְּכֹל ¹⁵ עֻקְדֵי כִד] = [בֶּן יְהוָה]

מִי כְּמִכָּה בְּאֵלִים יְהוָה מִי כְּמִכָּה נֹאדֵר בְּקִרְשׁ נֹרֵא תְהִלַּת עָשָׂה סְלֵא
יְהוָה רִצֹן מְלִפְנֵיךָ ה' [= יְהוָה] אֱלֹהֵי וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתַי הוּ הַשֵּׁם הַמְּפֹרֵשׁ הַקְּדוּשׁ
וְהַמְּהוֹרֵד הָאֲדֻרִי וְהַגּוֹרֵא הַמְּכֹר לְמַעְלָה שְׂתַצְלִיחַ אֶת עַבְדְּךָ מִן] = [נִשְׂא קִמְעָא
זֹאת] זְכִרְהָ הַגּוֹלֵד מִן לֹאֵה בְּכֹל מַעֲשָׂיו וּבְכֹל אֲשֶׁר יִפְתֶּה יִשְׁכַּל וְיַצְלַח כְּמוֹ
שְׂתַצְלִיחַ דוּד הַמֶּלֶךְ עֲלֵיו הַשְּׁלוֹם כִּד] = [בֶּן יְהוָה רִצֹן] בְּרִדְךָ אֲתָה ה' [= יְהוָה]
שׁוֹמֵעַ תְּפִלָּה כִּד] = [בֶּן יְהוָה רִצֹן] נָסוּ] = [נֶגַח סְלֵה וְעוֹד] אֶלְכֵי] = [אֶלְכֵי קוֹט יְהוָה]
תְּגִי שִׂיא חֲנֻי נִחַ שְׁעִתִּי בְּאֵה בְּאֵסִי שְׂמִשְׁסִי לְנֶקֶד] = [לְנִשְׂא קִמְעָא זֹאת]
צַלַח צַלַח תַּצְלַח חֲצַל צַחֵל נָסוּ] = [נֶגַח סְלֵה וְעוֹד]

וְהוּ מַלְכִים אֲמִנְדֵּךְ וְשִׁרְוִתֵּם מ(י) נִיִּלְחֵד אֲבִים אֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל לְךָ וְדַעַת כִּי אֲנִי
ה' [= יְהוָה] צְבֹאוֹת אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִבְשׁוּ ק(י) לְנֶקֶד] לְנִשְׂא קִמְעָא זֹאת]

¹² The reading in the brackets is added by me. ¹⁴ Rabbinical for אֱלֹהֵי.

¹⁵ The word is not clear on the MS. It may be עֲמִלִּי.

TRANSLATION.

. . . my help is from Yahweh who made the heavens and the earth. May Yahweh not let thy foot slip, may thy keeper not sleep,¹⁶ O child born of Leah.¹⁷ I pray thee, O Yahweh, God of Israel, who dwellest above the cherubim, show grace and compassion and pity and mercy to thy servant who wears this amulet, Zacharyah, the child born of Leah. And cause him to prosper in all his works, and whithersoever he turns may he act wisely and prosper and find grace and favor in the eyes of all who see him by reason of these, the holy, pure, noble, terrible, mighty, and powerful names.¹⁸ And they are these:

Ahabiel, Berachiel, H̄anniel, H̄esdiel, Tobiel, Zedeḳiel.

Ye holy angels, as ye have blessed and given success to Abraham our father so bless and give success to the bearer of this amulet, Zacharyah, the child born of Leah, in all his ways; thus shall be the good will, lasting, ever and ever.

[Here follows Ps. 121.]

To the success and ease of him who is bearing this amulet, Zephanyah, the son of Beruryah, in the eyes of all who see him and in all his works and his paths, as it is written:¹⁹ "And David was prosperous in all his ways, for Yahweh was with him."

יְדִבְרֵי לִי אֵלֶיךָ יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ
 By virtue of this the great and holy name, Zecharyah, the son of Leah, shall prosper in all his works; thus shall be the good will.

Who is like thee among the gods, O Yahweh?
 Who is like thee, glorious in holiness,
 Fearful in praises, doing wonder?²⁰

And shall be the good will before thee, Yahweh, my god and the god of my fathers. This is the name, the wonderful, the holy and the pure, the mighty and the terrible, the one mentioned above which thou shalt cause to prosper thy servant, who is wearing this amulet, Zacharyah, the

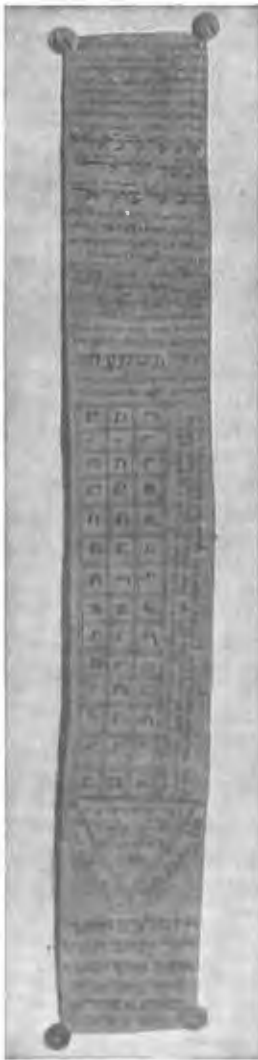
¹⁶ Ps. 121²⁻³.

¹⁷ This rendering was suggested to me by Professor H. G. Mitchell, to whom I am also indebted for several other suggestions in connection with the translation.

¹⁸ Dt. 28²⁶ and 10¹⁷.

¹⁹ 1 S. 18¹⁴.

²⁰ Ex. 15¹¹.



son of Leah, in all his works and in all whereto he turns his face may he be successful. And may he prosper as thou didst cause David the king to prosper on whom be peace; thus shall be the good will. Blessed be thou Yahweh, hearer of prayer; thus shall be the good will for ever and ever and ever, to thee do we hope, O Yahweh.

"And in thy majesty ride on prosperously, because of truth and meekness and righteousness. And thy right hand shall teach thee terrible things. Thine arrows are sharp; the peoples fall under thee; they are in the heart of the king's enemies. Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever: a sceptre of equity is the sceptre of thy kingdom" (R.V.).²¹ For the wearer of this amulet.

"And kings shall be thy nursing fathers and their queens thy nursing mothers. They shall bow down to thee with their faces toward the earth. And thou shalt know that I am Yahweh Zebaoth; those who wait for him shall not come to shame."²² For the wearer of this amulet.

A Modern Metal Amulet.

Metal, especially iron, plays an important part in Jewish sorcery, and therefore talismans are often made of this material. It is considered necessary that such a charm be entirely of metal, as otherwise the magical power is lost. Thus the knife with which incisions in the tree are made for magical purposes must be entirely of iron, even the handle being made of no other material. A metal cup is especially valuable for protection to drink from at night, as it is very dangerous to drink water out of rivers, brooks, or pools at that time on account of the demons, against whom the metal of the cup is a strong charm. This inherent quality made such a talisman especially valuable.

The little talisman in my possession is a product of a Sephardi, *i.e.* a Spanish Jew. The Sephardim are more fond of amulets and given to superstitions than the Aškenazian Jews. The amulet is against the evil eye.

The evil eye is not unknown to ancient Jewish life. The passage Is. 3¹⁶ משקרות עינים *wanton eyes* (R.V.) refers rather to eyes which may bring about evil. This interpretation seems to be borne out by the fact that in this chapter we have several references to charmers or sorcerers, cf. v.². The reference in v.¹³, *women rule over them*, must also be interpreted in this light, viz. that the people were so completely given to the practice of sorcery that they literally became subject to its practitioners, who were mostly women, as no women ever ruled over Israel.²³ For the earliest times we have this illustrated by the woman at En-dor, 1 S. 28, and for Talmudic times by the frequent references to women sorcerers. Thus we read: "when she

²¹ Ps. 45⁵⁻⁷.

²² Is. 49²⁸.

²³ Compare, however, Athaliah.

(viz. the daughter) becomes old she will perhaps practise sorceries ;”²⁴ or the still more sweeping condemnation: “ the most pious of women is a sorceress.”²⁵ This refers, according to a Jewish scholar,²⁶ not to the Christian or heathen women of the second century, but only to the Jewish women.

A full description of the evil eye we find in *Jes. Sir.* xiv. 8–10.

The envious man hath a wicked eye, he turneth away his face, and despiseth men.

A covetous man’s eye is not satisfied with his portion, and the iniquity of the wicked drieth up his soul.

A wicked eye is envious [even] at the bread, and he is a niggard at his table.

We may perhaps see a reference to the evil eye also in Ps. 35¹⁹. It is also referred to in the NT. *ὀφθαλμὸς πονηρός* Mk. 7²². It was at all times considered a factor with which one had to reckon seriously.

To the bane of the evil eye were exposed especially men and beasts who were distinguished before others by their beauty and excellency, and therefore the people are counselled in *Baba Bathra*, 1, 18 a, to guard themselves against it. However, the tribe of Joseph was immune from it,²⁷ so that a man belonging to it could provoke it with impunity. This belief in the immunity is doubtless due to a cabalistic interpretation of Gen. 49²² by a play upon the word עֵין, which, as a matter of fact, appears on this amulet in this sense. עֵינֵי עֵינֵי is rendered *sprout over the eye*,²⁸ taking עֵי as Imp. of עֵלָה.

In the centre of the obverse of this talisman, which is round, having a diameter of one inch, is a large ה about half of the size of the amulet. This ה stands for the *sem hammefōraš* יהוה an invincible charm. In the middle of the ה are two hands raised as in blessing. This is doubtless a symbolical representation of Num. 6²⁴⁻²⁶, the priestly blessing, which was considered as protecting Israel against the evil eye. That this is the meaning of these two symbols is attested by the words which stand to the right and left of ה, which are : יברכך and [י]שמך, the pronominal suffix ך was omitted in the case of the second word because of lack of space. These two words with the ה divide the amulet into halves. Along the edge of the upper half-circle are the words: בן פרת יוסף בן פרת ע ע

²⁴ *Sanh.* 100 b. 21; cf. also 67 b.

²⁶ Blau, *op. cit.* p. 24.

²⁵ *Soferim*, 15, 10.

²⁷ *Berachoth*, 20 a (= *B. Mesia*, 84 a).

²⁸ For the Talmudic discussions on this point, cf. Blau, *op. cit.* p. 155, note 1.

[על-עץ] = *a fruitful bough is Joseph, a fruitful bough by a fountain*. The last two words, as we have seen, have given rise to the belief that the tribe of Joseph was immune from the evil eye. It may have been that by writing this verse on the talisman, the special virtue of which the descendants of Joseph boasted was thus transferred to the bearer, whoever he might be.

The lower half-circle is inscribed with the following letters: to the left 'ב' 'י' 'ל' 'ו' and to the right 'ר' 'א' 'ר' 'ל'. What this legend is I cannot make out, nor could several Sephardim Jews and rabbis to whom it has been submitted.

Under the ה we have in large characters ירושלים and below that 'ב' [עיר הקדש תבנה במהרה בימינו] = *the holy city shall be built quickly in our days*.

The reverse has, in the middle, the Tomb of Rachel with the legend underneath קבר רחל. The idea is that the saint will intercede in behalf of the person, a conception repudiated by the Jewish rabbis.²⁹ The legend on this side is: ירמלאו = [יהי רצון מלפניך יהוה: אלהינו ואבותנו] שתשמר הילד הזה מעין הרע וכל מחלה ופיר [מעתה ועלם] = *And shall be before thee the will of Yahweh our God and of our fathers; that thou mayest protect this child from the evil eye and from every disease and every evil accident from now to eternity*.³⁰

JERUSALEM, April, 1904.

²⁹ The tomb is still visited by crowds of Jews, Moslems, and Christians, for other purposes as well as the one mentioned above. For instance, woollen threads brought into contact with the tomb obtain a special healing quality.

³⁰ I acknowledge my indebtedness to Dr. L. Grünhut and M. Ben Jehuda of Jerusalem, from whom I have received much information about Jewish folk-lore, such as is presented above.