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ARTICLE

Material Encounters: The Agency of Objects in Otherworldly Experiences

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Abstract
Against the notion that otherworldly experiences are entirely ethereal, this article argues that physical objects crucially mediate such experiences. I do so by comparing sacred artifacts from two ancient contexts: the early Christian *Testament of Solomon* and a first-century (BCE) amulet dedicated to Helios. I discuss both resonances and dissonances between their respective depictions of materiality's critical role in facilitating otherworldly encounters and then apply this comparative analysis to contemporary conversations in neo-materialist philosophy.

Keywords
Testament of Solomon, amulet, ring, neo-materialism, names

Visions, dreams, mystical encounters: we tend to think of such experiences in highly ephemeral, immaterial terms, so much so that such experiences are often associated with being "out-of-the-body," removed from physical reality, divorced from "base" materiality which, it is assumed, may impede one's lofty, otherworldly quest. But in our efforts to preserve a pure pathway up to supernatural realms, how have we overlooked the potential for objects themselves to facilitate this journey? How have we endorsed the false dichotomy of mind versus body, and more generally the spiritual versus the physical—false binaries which foster a certain myopia towards the otherworldly power of seemingly mundane, physical objects? This

article will offer a corrective to this false dichotomy by comparing two texts which prominently feature particular physical materials connecting humans with superhuman beings, like demons and deities. In so doing, the article will show how specific objects enable "visionary experiences," a phrase I interpret in a general sense to mean vision-expanding encounters with typically invisible beings.

More specifically, I will first discuss how the early-Christian text, *The Testament of Solomon*, portrays a particular ring, inscribed with the omnipotent name of YHWH, which enables King Solomon to summon, interrogate, and compel behavior from certain demons. This text then will be compared with a first-century amulet from the Black Sea region—an amulet which promises, through its materially inscribed invocations, to unite the amulet's wearer with the sun god (Helios) himself, granting the wearer both a transformative ontological experience and an otherworldly power beyond one's wildest dreams. Finally, in my conclusion, after discussing how these two textual objects—the ring and the amulet—echo and contrast each other, I will finish by highlighting areas of mutual relevance between these ancient artifacts and contemporary neo-materialist voices around questions of the agency of materiality and the ability of objects to "do things" in our world. More specifically, I will show how the artifacts examined below both enhance and challenge the core contentions of neo-materialist philosophers. Jane Bennett, for example, has cogently argued that nonbiological matter functions just as agentively upon its environment as do the biological forces—plants, humans—which are more commonly recognized as agents.[1] This article will support this view by demonstrating the agency of ancient nonbiological objects, but it will also challenge and nuance neo-materialist arguments by showing how the artifacts discussed below act agentively not through materiality alone but by pairing the material with the linguistic, and the physical with the ontological. That is, the objects analyzed in this article will be shown, à la Bennett, to be material agents, but moving beyond Bennett, their agency will be demonstrated to flow at least in part through the linguistic and ontological dimensions of divine names.[2]

1 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

2 Thus, the argument I aim to make in this article overlaps with Jeffrey J. Kripal's work on the "superhumanities," particularly in how the possession and use of an empowered object enables humans to transcend the limits of their humanity. While my focus is primarily upon the artifacts' capacities to access otherworldly, "divine" power, the examples surveyed below present human beings attaining this superior power in order to overcome the limits of human power and ontology. See, Jeffrey J. Kripal, *The Superhumanities: Historical Precedents, Moral Objections, New Realities*

The Testament of Solomon

The Testament of Solomon, a Christian text whose earliest elements date from the first to fourth centuries CE, offers a poignant example of a vision-expanding object through its depiction of a very special ring acquired by King Solomon early in the narrative.[3] According to the story told in this *Testament*, a young boy working for Solomon in the construction of the Temple is harassed each night by a demon named Ornias. The demonic affliction causes the boy to grow thinner and thinner until finally his emaciated state catches Solomon's eye, and the king asks the boy the reason for his suffering. Upon hearing of the boy's demonic oppression at the hands of Ornias, Solomon turns to God in prayer, imploring God to grant Solomon power over the demon so that he may alleviate the young boy's suffering. Finally, after many petitions, the archangel Michael appears to Solomon, bearing "a ring, having a seal consisting of an engraved stone."[4] Michael then tells Solomon, "Take this gift which the Lord God … has sent to you, [and] when you bear [that is, wear] this seal of God, you shall imprison all the demons, both female and male, and with their help you shall build Jerusalem [that is, the Jerusalem Temple]."[5]

Solomon then gives this divine ring to the afflicted boy and instructs him in the following manner: "Then I [Solomon] said to him [the boy]: At the moment the demon appears to you, fling this ring into his chest, and say to

(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022.)

3 The provenance and dating of this work are notoriously complex and unresolved. While some scholars contend that a single, complete version emerged within the first few centuries of the Jesus movement, others argue that this text is a mishmash of components whose respective dates range from antiquity into the medieval era. For the former view, see C. C. McCown, *The Testament of Solomon* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1922); Todd Klutz, *Rewriting the* Testament of Solomon*: Tradition, Conflict and Identity in a Late Antique Pseudepigraphon* (London: T&T Clark International, 2005). By contrast, the latter position is expressed in Sarah L. Schwarz, "Reconsidering the *Testament of Solomon*," *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 16 (3) (2007): 203–37. The standard critical edition of the *Testament of Solomon* (*TSol*) is the one established and edited by McCown based on fourteen Greek manuscripts. McCown's critical edition served as the basis for the influential translation by D. C. Duling featured in James Charlesworth's edited collection of "Old Testament Pseudepigrapha." Duling's translation is the source of the references in this article. See D. C. Duling, "Testament of Solomon," in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, Volume One: Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Academic, 2010), 935–87.

4 Duling, "Testament of Solomon," 962.

5 Duling, 962.

him, 'Come, Solomon summons you!'…" The boy then takes the ring and does as he is told, and thereby immediately gains power over the previously oppressive demon. As the text reads, once the boy shoves the inscribed ring from God into the demon's chest, "the demon screamed and said to the little boy, 'Why have you done this? Remove the ring and give it back to Solomon, and I shall give you all the silver and gold of the earth.'"[6] The boy refuses to be bought off, however, and through the power of the ring, he forces Ornias the demon to appear before Solomon. Solomon, in turn, then utilizes the ring to compel Ornias to summon other demons, like Beelzeboul. Coerced to appear before Solomon, Beelzeboul is then forced—ultimately, again, under the power of the ring—to submit to an interrogation in which Beelzeboul must reveal its particular demonic activities and which specific angel has the ability to thwart its demonic power. After disclosing this secret and valuable information, Beelzeboul is then conscripted to assist in the Temple's construction by cutting massive marble stones.[7]

By linking this "magic" ring with King Solomon, the *Testament* taps into a deep reservoir of traditions celebrating the otherworldly power of this exalted Israelite monarch. These traditions ultimately stemmed from Solomon's biblical association with profound wisdom (1 Kings 4:29–34). But while the biblical account centers upon Solomon's mastery of earthly matters (for example, his knowledge of plants and animals), this worldly wisdom was expanded—beginning in the Second Temple Period but stretching well into late antiquity and beyond—to include esoteric, "magical" knowledge.[8]

6 Duling, "Testament of Solomon," 962.

7 While beyond the scope of this article, such compelled revelation of personal, compromising information has important links both to early Christian exorcistic pericopæ (for example, Mark 5:1–13) and to Louis Althusser's theory of *interpellation*. For scholarly analyses of these resonant phenomena, see Joseph Kimmel, "Demons Seeking Identity?: The Psychic Life of New Testament Exorcisms," *JBL* 143 (1) (2024): 85–104; Kimmel, "'What is Your Name?': Names Comparatively Compelled in Christian and Buddhist Texts," *JIRS* 40 (December 2023): 65–71; Kimmel, "Coercive Names: Interpreting Mark 5:1–13 with Althusser's 'Interpellation,'" *Biblical Interpretation* 31 (2023): 356–73.

8 Solomon's association with esoteric knowledge and so-called "magical" power is evident both in ancient Jewish texts, like Josephus' *Antiquities* (see 8.2.5), as well as Greco-Egyptian ritual papyri (see, for example, PGM IV.859, IV.3039, and XCII.5). The *Testament of Solomon* built upon, and advanced, this body of Solomonic traditions, which continued to expand throughout antiquity in Jewish and Christian communities, eventually appearing in Islamic ones as well. This interreligious attraction to Solomon as a purveyor of otherworldly power also appears prominently in the medieval period, with numerous "magical" works, apocryphally ascribed to Solomon, composed in Greek, Latin, Hebrew, and Arabic (Duling,

Here Solomon's use of superhuman power is depicted within a retelling of the famous story of his construction of the Jerusalem Temple (1 Kings 6). But in so doing, the *Testament* also communicates an array of intertwined ideas concerning demons and angels, sickness and health, and the powers of otherworldly forces—including onomastic and astrological ones—which may be harnessed by humans with divine help.[9]

But even more to the point of this article, in the *Testament of Solomon* we also see an explicit example of an object which bears the capacity to transform. Through the power of the supernatural ring, given specially to Solomon by God via the archangel Michael, Solomon gains access into the demonic world and, moreover, receives power over demons such that he can compel them to appear before his throne, divulge sensitive and compromising information about themselves, and serve—apparently against their will—in the building of the Jerusalem Temple.[10] Moreover, the *Testament* strongly suggests that crucial to the ring's transformative power is the engraved stone at its heart, as evidenced by the archangel Michael's comment that by means of the "seal of God," Solomon would be able to imprison and compel all demons. Through this allusion to God's "seal," the *Testament* employs royal imagery in order to make its point, viz., just as a monarch's power over his or her realm is conveyed by the royal seal, through which objects (for example, letters, correspondence) are stamped in order to imbue them with royal authority, so too is the ring of God stamped with God's own seal in order to imbue it with God's almighty power. Admittedly, there is no scholarly consensus over what exactly this seal looked like. While some manuscripts assert that the seal is a pentagram (a belief which gave rise to the pentagram's association with magical, and even occult, power, starting

"Testament of Solomon," 956).

9 Schwarz, in fact, argues that one of the earliest strands of this work is these very spells, which were traditionally associated with Solomon's otherworldly power and used, in part, to ward off demonic attacks. Moreover, Schwarz contends that as the *Testament* was emended over the centuries, the spellbook core eventually came to be set within the narrative framework of the Temple's construction story, thereby advancing the text towards its final version (Schwarz, "Reconsidering," 208).

10 The use of rings to channel otherworldly power was not limited in antiquity just to this particular narrative. Numerous examples of actual ancient rings, inscribed with divine names and other empowered features, indicate that Solomon's ring in the *Testament* is by no means an isolated phenomenon or a merely imaginative literary flourish. A substantive overview of the ancient gemstones inscribed and then set in rings can be found in Véronique Dasen and Árpád M. Nagy, "Gems," in *Guide to the Study of Ancient Magic*, ed. David Frankfurter (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 416–55.

especially in the medieval period), some of the *Testament*'s earliest versions suggest that the "seal of God" refers to the Divine Name.[11] This reading, moreover, is supported by Talmudic traditions in which Solomon's special ring is explicitly described as having the Name of God engraved upon it.[12]

Names Inscribed for Protection: A First-Century BCE/CE Amulet from Pontus

This association between a particular name and otherworldly power is also evident on Hellenistic amulets found widely throughout the ancient Mediterranean, including amulets specifically focused on providing protection for their wearers through the inscription of specific divine names.[13] An example of this kind of "name-based" protective amulet

11 Duling, "Testament of Solomon," 962 fn. k.

12 See *Tractate Gittin*, folio 68a: "Solomon thereupon sent thither Benaiahu son of Jehoiada, giving him a chain on which was graven the [Divine] Name and a ring on which was graven the Name and fleeces of wool and bottles of wine." Solomon's enduring appearance across both Jewish and Christian texts (and other artifacts, like amulets) featuring otherworldly power, as well as the references to Solomon in the ritual papyri (see fn. 8), points to the "shared magical culture of late antiquity," as described by scholars like Joseph Sanzo and Ra'anan Boustan. Their excellent, co-written article stresses "the fluctuating nature of religious idioms and communal boundaries" (219) in late antique contexts where individuals were often more interested in ritual efficacy than sectarian borders. That is, the effectiveness of a given technique, such as invoking Solomon's name, often was valued much more highly than policing the theological boundaries around which tradition "owned" a particular technique. See Ra'anan Boustan and Joseph E. Sanzo, "Christian Magicians, Jewish Magical Idioms, and the Shared Magical Culture of Late Antiquity," *HTR* 110 (2) (2017): 217–40.

13 This phenomenon of written names used specifically for protection, that is, protection via onomastic "power," appears ubiquitously in antiquity on other objects as well. In addition to amulets, this use of written names is seen, for example, on certain Aramaic incantation bowls, which were inscribed with a spell to protect against demonic attack and placed beneath one's home. The belief that such protection was secured because of the power of a particular name in the bowl's incantation is evident, for example, on the 5th bowl analyzed by Joseph Naveh and Shaul Shaked in their *Amulets and Magic Bowls: Aramaic Incantations of Late Antiquity* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press of Hebrew University, 1985), 158–63. Using the language of divorce documents and "ban formulas" to remove any harmful spirits from a household (as well as denying them entry), the bowl also incorporates an *historiola* about a particular rabbi (Rabbi Yehoshua' bar Perahya) who successfully overcame a certain "lilith" infamous for strangling humans. The bowl recounts that while the lilith initially refused to submit because Rabbi Yehoshua' "did not

can be seen on a silver *lamella* of twenty lines discovered rolled-up, having been placed in a bronze tube and deposited in a grave in the Pontic city of Amisos, near the southern coast of the Black Sea.[14] Although its discovery in a grave is reminiscent of a primary delivery method for curse tablets, both John Gager and Roy Kotansky identify this artifact as an amulet—a conclusion supported by its bronze tube (for ease of wearing) and its emphasis on protection rather than cursing.[15] Paleographical analysis identifies the amulet's script as "round, somewhat cursive," and based on comparisons with the scripts of Egyptian papyri, dates this artifact between the first century BCE and first century CE.[16]

The text of this amulet runs from left to right in straight lines across the piece as seen in the following image:[17]

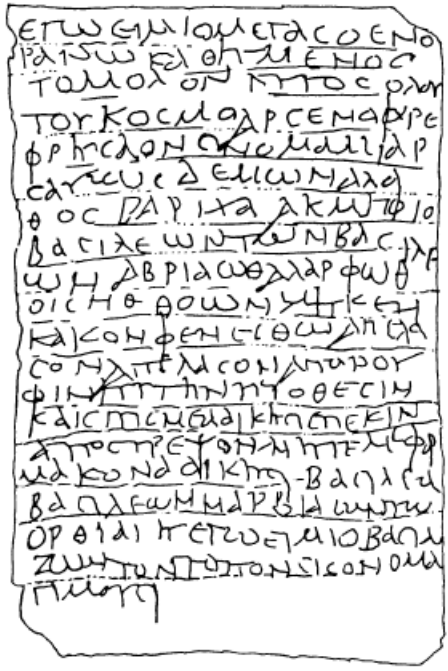
know her name," the rabbi eventually secured control over her by writing her name into a ritual "deed of divorce." By thus retelling this story, this apotropaic bowl both underscores the importance of names for channeling protective power against liliths specifically, while also attempting to access this power for the bowl's own protective purposes through the recounting of this particular *historiola*. In conjunction with the bowl's own repeated invocations to particular angelic and divine names (for example, "name of Gabriel," "name of Yeho'el," "Yah," "Sabaoth"), its inclusion of this *historiola* points to an attempt to activate the power of Rabbi Yehoshua'—secured via his writing of a lilith's name on a divorce decree—and to apply this power to the bowl's apotropaic purpose within its particular context. On the ritual functions of *historiolae*, see David Frankfurter, "Narrating Power: The Theory and Practice of the Magical *Historiola* in Ritual Spells," in: *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power,* ed. Marvin Meyer and Paul Mirecki (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 455–76. On this particular bowl, in addition to Naveh and Shaked's text, see also, John G. Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 229–31.

14 For previous scholarship on this artifact, in addition to the texts by Gager and Kotansky cited below, see, Sophrone Pétridès, "Amulette judéo-grecque," *Echos d'Orient* 8 (51) (1905): 88–90; Richard Wünsch, "Deisidaimoniaka," *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft* 12 (1909): 24–32; Karl Preisendanz, "Die griechischen und lateinischen Zaubertfeln," *Archiv für Papyrusforschung* 9 (1928), 132; John Gager, *Moses in Greco-Roman Paganism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1972), 157–59. Please note that this article's analysis of this artifact draws directly upon part of the fourth chapter of my dissertation: Joseph L. Kimmel, "Power in the Name: Towards a Theological Posthumanism" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2023); see also: Kimmel, *Power in the Name: A Comparative Analysis of Onomastic Invocations* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2025).

15 Gager, *Curse Tablets,* 225–26; Roy D. Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets: The Inscribed Gold, Silver, Copper, and Bronze Lamellae, Part I: Published Texts of Known Provenance* (Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien, 1994), 181–82.

16 Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets*, 182.

17 Kotansky, 184.



The text reads as follows: "I am the Great One who sits in heaven [upon] the moving vault of the whole cosmos, *Arsenophris*, [whose] sure name [is] *Miarsau*, like the good *daimon*, *Barichaa Kmeph*, the one who rules over kings. *Abriaoth*, *Alarphoth*, *oi Seth*, the one who is. Let harm appear no longer! Drive away, drive away the lawsuit [or, "curse"] from Rufina![18] And if anyone shall injure me henceforth, turn [that one] away![19] And may no poison harm me, the King of Kings, *Narbiaon to orthiare.* I truly am the one acting as king in the region, in the name of Mousa."[20] While the numerous divine names,

18 See John Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 225.

19 Or, following Gager, "revert [it, i.e. the curse] back to him/her;" see John Gager, 226. But compare Kotansky's rebuttal of this reading in favor of a rendering that focuses not on a past curse but rather on any injury directed henceforth toward the wearer of the amulet; see Roy D. Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets*, 190.

20 Εγω ειμι ο μεγας ο εν ου- / ρανω καθημενος / το μολον κυτος ολου / του κοσμου Αρσενοφρε- / φρης σαον ονομα Μιαρ- / σαυ ως δεμων αγα- / θος Βαριχαα Κμηφι ο / βασιλε[υ]ων των βασιλε- / ων Αβριαωθ Αλαρφωθ / οι Σηθθ ο ων μηκετι / κακον φενεσθω απελα- / σον απελασον απο Ρου- / φινης την υποθεσιν / και ει τις με αδικησι επεκινα / αποστρεφον μητε με φαρ- / μακον αδικησι βασιλεα / βασιλεων Ναρβιαων τω / ορθιαρη εγω ειμι ο βασιλι- / ζων τον τοπον

clauses, and injunctions packed tightly onto the surface of this amulet are individually fascinating and collectively important for the artifact's intended effect, my focus will center specifically on the text's first reference to "ονομα" (line 5) in the explicit linking of this term with ritual power.

The amulet's opening gambit makes a play far beyond the realm of mortals, as the text pronounces its wearer to be the "the Great One who sits in heaven [upon] the moving vault of the whole cosmos" (lines 1–4). Thus equating the wearer with the sun god, the text subsequently remains at this lofty, divine level for roughly its first half (until the μηκετι of line 10), before rapidly descending back to Earth in its description of the mundane threats feared by Rufina, the amulet's owner (lines 10–16). It then concludes by raising Rufina's status up yet again, not quite as high as heaven but still to the level of an almighty monarch ("King of Kings"), empowered "in the name" of Mousa, an actual queen of the Pontic city of Kios (lines 16-–20).

More specifically, the amulet's opening lines assert an astounding set of claims about Rufina, the object's wearer. Through a series of appositional phrases, the "I" which opens the amulet's text is identified as the sun god himself. This equation is accomplished through a series of heliocentric allusions, including the activity of sitting in heaven on the "moving vault" (το μολον κυτος [line 3]) of the cosmos, along with the divine names of Arsenophris, Miarsau, and Kmeph. Kotansky's analysis of this amulet elucidates that all three of these names essentially refer to a single solar deity, the divine figure whom Rufina ritually becomes by wearing this particular amulet inscribed with its specific set of names and claims. More precisely, the description of the "great one who sits in heaven" is a reference attested in the ritual papyri to Helios.[21] This solar deity, whose Egyptian equivalent is Re, is again referenced by the name "Αρσενοφρεφρης" (Arsenophrephreis, lines 4–5), an elongated version of the divine name "Arsenophre" (alternatively, Arsenouphis), which translates to "the good watcher, Re."[22] This solar reference is further echoed two lines later as the text associates the amulet's wearer with "Kmeph," a deity whose description as a "good *daimon*" (δεμων

εις ονομα- / τι Μουσι (Please note that since the text of this amulet is unaccented, I have chosen not to insert accents of my own when quoting from this artifact in order to preserve its original appearance.)

21 See, for example, PGM IV.1622, where Helios is described as "the great one in heaven" (τὸν μέγαν ἐν οὐρανῷ).

22 Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets*, 185–86. This divine name also appears in ritual papyri in reference to a god who provides "favor" (χαριτήσιον): see, for example, PGM XII.182–83: "Κύριε, χαῖρε, τὸ χαριστήσιον τοῦ κόσμου καὶ τῆς οἰκ[ουμένη]ς· οὐρανὸς ἐγένετο κωμαστήριον Ἀρσενοφη, ὁ βασιλεὺς τῶν οὐρανί[ων θεῶν...]"

αγαθος) is paralleled in other ritual texts that invoke the sun god.[23] Moreover, Kmeph himself is directly related to the solar deity in texts like PGM III.142, on gemstones, and later by Neoplatonists like Iamblichus.[24] Finally, this Kmeph is associated with the "Miarsau" of lines 4–5 by Philo of Byblos, who mentions a Phoenician deity of a similar name (M[ε]ισωρ or Μεισωρα) as being related to Kmeph.[25] Thus, through these multiple allusions to the sun god, the amulet asserts that its wearer (the "εγω" of line 1) is this all-powerful deity.[26]

Most important for our concerns, however, is that this identification between the solar deity and Rufina occurs not only through an equation of beings (for example, via the "εγω ειμι" clause in line 1), but also via the adoption of another's "name." This renaming of Rufina—Rufina assuming the "sure name of Miarsau"—is accomplished ritually as Rufina wears this amulet on which "ονομα Μιαρσαυ" has been written. Through the writing and wearing of this divine name, Rufina comes to assume this name and thereby the identity (and authority) associated inextricably with it. The

23 See, for example, PGM IV.1705–12: "ναί, κύριε Κμήφ ... ὁρκίζω γῆν καὶ οὐρανὸν καὶ φῶς καὶ σκότος καὶ τὸν πάντα κτίσαντα θεὸν μέγαν Σαρουσιν, σέ, τὸ παρεστὸς Ἀγαθὸν Δαιμόνιον, πάντα μοι τελέσαι διὰ τῆς χρείας τοῦ δακτυλίου τούτου ἢ [λίθ]ου."

24 PGM III.142: "ὁ ἄγγελος τοῦ ἁγίου φέγ[γ]ους, ὁ κ[ύ]κλος ὁ π[υ]ροειδὴς...Κμηφ, ὁ ἔκλαμπρος Ἥλι[ος]." Regarding gems, Kmeph is typically depicted in the lion-headed serpent form of Chnoubis with the rays of the sun (that is, Helios; Amun-Re) glowing around his head. See discussion and accompanying images of this figure in: Dasen and Nagy, "Gems," 428. Regarding Iamblichus, see, for example, Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis* VIII, 3, 263. For a recent scholarly edition of this text, see: Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis*, trans. Emma C. Clarke, John M. Dillon, and Jackson P. Hershbell (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2013). See also: Dennis C. Clark, "Iamblichus' Egyptian Neoplatonic Theology in *De Mysteriis*," *The International Journal of the Platonic Tradition* 2 (2) (2008): 164–205.

25 See discussion in Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets*, 186.

26 One way to conceptualize Rufina's ontological change is via the ritual "subjunctive" ("as if") framework advanced by Seligman, Weller, Puett, and Simon in their landmark study of ritual, in which they posit that rituals (such as wearing an amulet with divine inscriptions) enable practitioners to create "as-if" worlds—alternate realities which one may inhabit with different personas and which offer one different sets of possibilities. It could, in theory, be the case that the amulet literally changes Rufina's ontology such that by wearing it Rufina transforms into the sun god in a this-worldly (that is, literal) sense. I suspect, though, that her ontological change is more so in the ritual realm of the subjunctive, as described and analyzed by Seligman and his colleagues. See Adam B. Seligman, et al, *Ritual and Its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

inscription of "ονομα Μιαρσαυ" (lines 5-6)—rather than just "Μιαρσαυ"—makes explicit that the wearer is assuming the "name" of a deity, a "name" described as "sure" (that is, certain, reliable). This description strongly suggests that the wearer believes certain qualities to inhere within this specific name, and moreover that by writing and then wearing "the name" (presumably also with the deity's other names inscribed on the amulet), one adopts the name for oneself. Becoming thereby the deity to whom the name refers, Rufina simultaneously acquires access to that deity's qualities and immense array of powers.

Moreover, the ritual transformation enacted in the amulet's first half, in which beleaguered Rufina becomes the sun god with the name (and associated attributes and powers) of Miarsau (that is, Kmeph; that is, Arsenophris) via the writing and wearing of this divine identification, is echoed in a counterpart ritual in the amulet's closing lines. There the εγω ειμι ("I am") of the artifact's opening line is restated, harkening back to that initial transformation of Rufina before enacting a different, complementary one. As with the first transformation, this closing metamorphosis occurs through the writing and wearing of a new identity. But whereas the first change happens via the power of an asserted, written equation between Rufina and a deity—albeit one that occasions the adoption of a new (divine) name (that is, Miarsau)—the closing transformation occurs squarely and explicitly because of the authority inherent to a particular *human* name.

In the amulet's final lines, Rufina again asserts her authority in her attempt to rebuff the attacks against her. This time, however, she does not identify herself as Miarsau, but instead as the "King of Kings" (βασιλεα βασιλεων) who "acts as king in the region" (ο βασιλιζων τον τοπον). On what basis does she claim this powerful identity? Rather than grounding her claim solely in another "εγω ειμι" assertion (as in the opening lines), here the text supplements such an appeal via the explicit reference to the "name" of another, invoking the "name of Mousa" (ονοματι Μουσι) in order to assert the legitimacy of Rufina's claim to royal authority.[27] This

27 Kotansky identifies this "Mousa" as the daughter of Mithridates VI (135–63 BCE), king of Pontus and powerful antagonist of the Roman imperial forces in Asia Minor until his death (likely by suicide) following the rebellion of his armies at the behest of his son, Pharnaces II. In regard to Mousa, Kotansky notes that she "was apparently a powerful enough ruler in her own right to issue coinage carrying her own portrait and legend: ΒΑΣΙΛΙΣΣΗΣ ΜΟΥΣΗΣ ΟΡΣΟΒΑΡΙΟΣ" (see Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets*, 195; also: Thomas Corsten, *Die Inschriften Von Kïos* [Inschriften Griechischer Städte Aus Kleinasien Bd. 29; Bonn: Habelt, 1985], 42). A significantly different interpretation of this name, however, is offered by Gager,

remarkable assertion illuminates the intimate imbrication of names and power in Rufina's context: specifically, that while in point of historical fact, Rufina never literally was granted the authority to "act as king in the region" by Queen Mousa, nevertheless through the ritual invocation of Mousa's name as the basis for her claim to royal authority, Rufina understands herself to have accessed a power inherent to the "name" which is useful in repelling lawsuits and poison. That is, regardless of any (lack of) historical connection between Rufina and Queen Mousa, the fact that Rufina went to the trouble of purchasing an amulet which claims almighty authority for her "in the name of Mousa" speaks volumes to Rufina's perception of the link between names and power. As seen on other ancient artifacts, where divine names are written and worn in order to attain powerful benefits, here too the ritual writing and subsequent wearing of an "ονομα" (specifically that of "Mousa") invokes a notable figure's authority in order to gain protective power against life-threatening dangers.[28] In sum, this amulet features the writing and wearing of powerful, even divine, names in order to enable their wearer not only to access the authority of the names' referents, but even to effect an ontological change of identity whereby Rufina ritually becomes a much more powerful figure. No longer a vulnerable victim of lawsuits and potential poison attacks, Rufina ritually utilizes the authority of inscribed names (first of Miarsau and then of Mousa) to become the sun god and the "King of Kings," identities imbued with almighty power to vanquish any and all threats.

who reads "Μουσι" as a reference to Moses (see Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 225). While Moses' name is occasionally invoked in ritual papyri (see, for example, PGM V.110; VII.619; XIII.1ff [the famous "Eighth Book of Moses"]), it is unlikely to be the referent of "Μουσι" in this amulet. Among other reasons, it makes far more sense that an amulet found in Pontus would invoke, for the purposes of ritual authority, the name of an actual Pontic ruler, rather than that of a famous figure from ancient Israel. For further analysis of this name and a lengthy rebuttal of Gager's position, see Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets*, 194–95. On Moses celebrated as a powerful wonderworker, see: Gager, *Moses in Greco-Roman Paganism*, esp. 134–61. See also Pliny's association of Moses with a particular "branch of magic" (*magices factio*) (*Naturalis Historia* XXX.11).

28 See, for example, the array of amulets presented in Roy D. Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets.* For a specific example featuring Aphrodite's name invoked on an amulet to grant "favor and success" to the amulet's wearer, see Kotansky, 216; also, Kimmel, "Power in the Name," 142–50.

Comparative Considerations and Contemporary Conversations

Considered alongside each other, the Helio-centric amulet and Solomon's divine ring both echo and contrast each other with respect to materiality's facilitation of visionary (and more generally, otherworldly) experiences. On the one hand, both objects suggest in common that specially-inscribed materials—particularly ones which feature specific, empowered names—channel access into transcendent experiences for their human wearers. In the *Testament of Solomon*, this access is facilitated (in at least some traditions) by the almighty name of YHWH inscribed on Solomon's special ring, and it enables Solomon to summon demons, interrogate them, discover valuable and secret information about them (that is, their names), which then, finally, can be used to compel the demons to perform certain actions, including the construction of the Jerusalem Temple. Similarly, in the case of the first-century (BCE) amulet, again it is the wearing of specific, divine names that garners superhuman power and transcendent experiences for the amulet's owner. While the divine name in this case is not YHWH but various references to Helios, nevertheless their presence on the seemingly mundane object enables a supernatural experience: not the summoning and manipulating of demons but rather than transformation of the female amulet-wearer herself (Rufina) into the male sun god (Helios), complete with all his attendant power.

Finally, how might these powerful and empowering objects converse with contemporary neo-materialist thinkers in accounting for why and how things happen? Jane Bennett, for instance, has insightfully drawn attention to the distributed agency of nonbiological matter (for example, rocks) in its assemblaged relationships with both human and other nonhuman actors. Through the framework of "thing-power," Bennett argues that material objects "exceed their status as objects and…manifest traces of independence or aliveness." Moreover, they can "become vibrant things with a certain effectivity of their own."[29] Further explicating her "thing-power" theory, Bennett explains how things—incorrectly relegated to the category of merely inert objects—actually act upon their environments, doing so not as isolated actors but always in assemblage with other inanimate agents, as well as animate ones (for example, plants, people).

In a similar manner, the Helio-centric amulet can be understood to be much more than a mere "object." According to Bennett's theory of "thing-power," the amulet acts through its very materiality upon its surroundings

29 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xvi.

in a vast array of possible ways. When the light hits it at a certain angle, for example, the amulet's gold gleams, catching the eye of a passerby, who turns her head and decides she too would like to own such an attractive item. But on certain hot days the amulet's metal prickles against its owner's skin; the heat, gold, and skin interact with other agents (for example, the owner's stress at having a rough day at work, the cries of her infant child) which collectively cause the amulet owner to feel overwhelmed and weary. In all these possible ways, and many others, the materiality of this amulet affects its environment.

But these material and environmental effects are not the only ways the amulet acts. In addition to these, this amulet acts by means of the names with which it is inscribed. As with Solomon's ring, it is the onomastic features—etched into the Pontic amulet—which, at least allegedly, are key to the object's supernatural effects. Through these material names, the amulet bears a power capable of altering the very ontology (including the gender) of its wearer, transforming her from a mere mortal into the god whom the amulet names and, in turn, supplying her with access to superhuman abilities. Thus, while neo-materialists like Bennett are right to emphasize the agency of overlooked objects, like rocks, their agentive contentions would benefit from attention to ancient artifacts—like amulets and rings—whose divine names utilize a material force which is also linguistic and ontological in order to summon, compel, protect, and transform.

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