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IN A TYPICALLY BIZARRE ACCOUNT of creation in the magical papyri, we hear of the god who laughed seven times and thereby created seven gods (PGM XIII.473 ff.).¹ After the first act of creation, the customary magical gibberish appears. Here it goes as follows: βεσεν βερειθεν βεριο.² Occasionally one can actually detect some real and even appropriate words lurking under the nonsensical abracadabra of these papyri.³ This text may be such a case. Although I do not know what βεσεν is,⁴ βερειθεν βεριο looks very much as if it could be a slightly garbled version of the opening words of the Bible, that is, of the first words of the account of God's creation, *b(e)re' shith*⁵ *bara*⁶ ("in the beginning He [God] created"). It is well known that in Jewish (and Jewish-influenced) magical spells, it was commonplace to quote Biblical verses or phrases that were felt to be pertinent.⁷ What could be more pertinent in a text on creation purporting to be the work of Moses (see line 345) than the opening words of Genesis?⁸

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¹Another version of this account occurs earlier in the papyrus, at 162 ff.

²In the earlier account, the spelling is slightly different: βεσσυν βερειθεν βεριο (166–167). Magical words that look and sound similar occur occasionally; e.g., βαρβαριθαμ at PMich 757.16 (D. G. Martinez, *P. Michigan XVI: a Greek Love Charm from Egypt* (P. Mich. 757 [Atlanta 1991], with commentary at 76 f.), βερια/μβωβερβ/εριωθ at A. Delatte and Ph. Derchain, *Les Intailles magiques gréco-égyptiennes* (Paris 1964) no. 194, pp. 149 f.

³See, e.g., C. Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets, Chiefly Graeco-Egyptian* (Ann Arbor 1950) 32: "Here and there in the long strings of magical words that appear in the papyri some Hebrew words have been recognized," with a number of examples provided on page 187.

⁴E. Riess, "Notes, Critical and Explanatory, on the Greek Magical Papyri," *JEA* 26 (1940) 51–56, at 55, thought it might be Hebrew *bashem* ("in the name"). Independently, I think, G. Alon, *Jews, Judaism and the Classical World* (Jerusalem 1977) 240, made the same suggestion. The two, however, interpret the word differently.

⁵For the Hebrew letter *shin* becoming *theta*, cf., e.g., Septuagintal transliterations of names like *Shaalbim* (Jud. 1.35: Θαλαβιν) and *Shuthelah* (Num. 26.36[40]: Θουσθαλα).

⁶That this root is present here was noted by Obermann (private communication mentioned by Riess, 55, n. 1).

⁷Thus, an injured person was wont to quote Exodus 15.26: "I will not bring . . . diseases upon you, for I the Lord am your healer" (Mishna Sanhedrin 10.1), while an individual who dreamed about a mountain and wanted to ward off any potential ill effects was instructed to recite Isaiah 52.7, "how pleasant on the mountains are the footsteps of the herald proclaiming peace" (Bab. Talmud Berakhot 56b).

⁸It may also be worth noting that this papyrus contains other words that are almost unquestionably Hebrew, e.g., *shemesh* just a few lines below (491) and *b(e)shem* (147).

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