RELATING TO THE SUPERNATURAL
A CASE STUDY OF FOURTH-CENTURY SYRIA AND PALESTINE

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ABSTRACT

The thesis is an investigation of practices involving the supernatural in Syria and Palestine in the fourth century of the common era. The study involves an examination of the extant evidence from both regions, and this consequently directs the discussion towards consideration of curses, spells, amulets, and accusations related to chariot races, love, livelihood and career, as well as methods involved in protection, healing, possession, and exorcism. Some miscellaneous material is also presented, as well as evidence deemed ambiguous, through dating or provenance, although often associated with Syria and/or Palestine in the fourth century, such as Aramaic bowls, and divination.

In addition to presenting the various forms of evidence available for the fourth-century practices in both regions, these activities involving the supernatural are also discussed with an aim for understanding their place within their social context. Hence the delineation of the restricted geographical area and time period provides the study with a framework within which to examine the practices with due consideration for the economic, political, religious, and social factors that can be seen to frame and influence their use. Various concepts offered by sociological and anthropological studies, such as ideas of envy, limited good, honour, and shame, are also applied to the material in order to gain greater insight into the social constructs that may have shaped beliefs and behaviours related to practices involving the supernatural.

As a result of the investigation it is proposed that the supernatural, and its related deities, angels and divinities, formed an integral part of the fourth-century world-view in both Syria and Palestine. This involvement, however, did not simply include the incorporation of the supernatural into the terrestrial realm, but rather penetrated the concepts and context that framed social reality. Thus, for instance, constructs of envy and limited good and their close, almost inseparable, association with the supernatural, can be seen to exemplify the intricate intertwining of the supernatural with the tangible world within contemporary understanding, readily manifested in the manipulation of the social system in order to assuage envy, gain the inappropriate or inaccessible, or affect behaviour.