

# ABRACADABRA: A SEMITIC-RITUAL FORMULA OF SPEECH, CREATION, AND TEXTUAL ENTROPY

## A Philological, Historical-Religious, and Comparative Semitic Analysis of an Ancient Magical Formula

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### Abstract

This study presents a comprehensive philological, historical-religious, and comparative Semitic analysis of the expression “abracadabra,” one of the most recognizable ritual formulas in the history of Western civilization. Although today primarily associated with stage magic and popular culture, the term originally functioned within a late antique apotropaic and medico-magical context. The earliest securely attested occurrence appears in the *Liber Medicinalis* of Quintus Serenus Sammonicus, where the formula is written in a progressively diminishing triangular form intended to symbolize the disappearance of disease.

The study critically examines the principal theories concerning the origin of the expression, including Aramaic, Hebrew-mystical, and gnostic-magical interpretations. Particular attention is devoted to the Semitic concepts of דָּבָר (*davar*), שֵׁם (*šem*), and בָּרָא (*bara*), which together illuminate the broader Near Eastern understanding of language as an active, performative, and ontologically significant force. The analysis demonstrates that “abracadabra” should not be understood merely as a meaningless magical utterance, but rather as a ritual-processual linguistic structure operating simultaneously on phonetic, symbolic, visual, and ontological levels.

A new interpretative model is proposed through the concepts of “ritual textual entropy” and “ritual algorithm of reduction,” according to which the gradual disappearance of the written formula symbolically represents the dissolution of illness and chaos. The study further argues that “abracadabra” is best understood not as an isolated magical word, but as a ritual-phonetic palimpsest emerging within the multicultural and multilingual environment of Late Antiquity.

The research additionally demonstrates that no direct evidence currently confirms the presence of the formula in the Dead Sea Scrolls, canonical biblical corpora, or classical apocryphal literature, thereby emphasizing the necessity of methodological caution in Semitic etymological reconstruction. Nevertheless, the ritual logic of the formula remains deeply compatible with

broader Semitic conceptions concerning the creative and transformative power of speech, naming, and textual action.

## Keywords

Abracadabra; Semitic philology; ritual language; performative speech; voces magicae; Aramaic; Hebrew; Jewish mysticism; ancient magic; apotropaic formulas; ritual textual entropy; ritual algorithm of reduction; Dead Sea Scrolls; Late Antiquity; comparative Semitic studies; textual ritualization; ontology of language; history of magic

## 1. Introduction

In contemporary culture, the expression “abracadabra” is almost exclusively associated with stage magic, illusionism, and popular representations of occult speech. Its frequent appearance in literature, film, and mass culture has gradually obscured awareness of its historical and philological context. A close examination of ancient sources, however, demonstrates that the term possessed a far more serious function in Late Antiquity and formed part of a broader system of ritual-magical and apotropaic practice.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, “abracadabra” cannot be regarded merely as a meaningless verbal formula, but rather as an expression belonging to a complex religio-linguistic environment in which speech itself was believed to possess genuine performative power.

The earliest known attestation of the expression appears in the *Liber Medicinalis* of the Roman author Quintus Serenus Sammonicus, dating to the third century CE.<sup>2</sup> Within a medico-magical prescription for the treatment of fever, the author recommends wearing an amulet upon which the word “abracadabra” is inscribed in triangular form through the gradual elimination of its final letters. The formula appears as follows:

ABRAKADABRA  
ABRAKADABR  
ABRAKADAB  
ABRAKADA  
ABRAKAD  
ABRAKA  
ABRAK  
ABRA  
ABR  
AB  
A

The symbolic logic underlying this arrangement was based upon the notion of the gradual disappearance of disease. The diminishing form of the word itself was intended to represent the corresponding weakening of the negative force afflicting the human body.<sup>3</sup> Such a practice was not an isolated phenomenon, but rather part of a broader ancient tradition in which texts—particularly ritual texts—were believed to exercise an active role in processes of protection, healing, and religious action.

Over the centuries, the question of the origin of the term “abracadabra” has generated extensive debate among philologists, historians of religion, and scholars of ancient magic.<sup>4</sup> Although numerous etymologies have been proposed, among which Aramaic and Hebrew hypotheses occupy a particularly prominent place, no definitive scholarly consensus has yet been achieved. The problem is further complicated by the fact that the term emerged within the highly syncretic cultural environment of Late Antiquity, where Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Jewish, Aramaic, and gnostic elements intersected and interacted.<sup>5</sup>

One of the most widely discussed theories connects the expression with the Aramaic construction אברא כדברא (*'ebrā kedēbrā*), commonly translated in modern scholarship as “I shall create as I speak” or “It shall be created as it is spoken.”<sup>6</sup> Such an interpretation has attracted considerable attention because it corresponds closely to the broader Semitic concept of creation through speech. In biblical tradition, the creation of the world occurs through the spoken word of God, where speech functions not merely as a medium of communication but as an instrument of ontological action.<sup>7</sup> Similar conceptions regarding the power of uttered speech are also present within other religious and magical systems of the ancient Near East.

The principal difficulty with such etymological reconstructions, however, lies in the fact that many modern interpretations are based upon later mystical and popular explanations rather than direct historical evidence.<sup>8</sup> Phonetic similarity between the expression “abracadabra” and certain Aramaic constructions is insufficient in itself to establish a definitive etymological relationship. A proper philological analysis requires a significantly broader methodological framework encompassing phonetics, morphology, historical linguistics, religious context, and traditions of ritual language usage.

Particularly important for understanding the expression is the concept of performative speech. In the ancient world, language was not necessarily viewed as an abstract system of signs, but rather as a force capable of affecting reality itself.<sup>9</sup> This understanding is especially evident in the magical texts, amulets, and incantations of Late Antiquity, where correctly pronounced formulas were believed to possess protective or therapeutic efficacy. Within such a context, “abracadabra” may represent the remnant of a much older ritual tradition in which the very acoustic structure of words was regarded as a carrier of power.

An additional problem arises from the fact that in contemporary popular culture the term is frequently treated as a universal symbol of “magical nonsense,” thereby obscuring its complex historical background.<sup>10</sup> Such reductionism has contributed to the marginalization of serious philological inquiry, despite the fact that ancient sources clearly indicate the existence of highly developed systems of verbal-magical formulas throughout the Mediterranean and Near Eastern worlds.

The aim of the present study is not to provide an absolutely definitive solution to the question of the origin of the expression “abracadabra,” but rather, through comparative Semitic and philological analysis, to identify certain patterns that may contribute to a more precise understanding of its emergence and function. Particular attention will be devoted to the relationship between language, ritual, and the concept of creation through speech, as well as to possible connections between Aramaic verbal constructions and late antique magical formulas. In this way, “abracadabra” will be approached not merely as a cultural curiosity, but as an important philological trace of ancient conceptions concerning the power of language and the performative function of the spoken word.

## Footnotes

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## 2. Historical Overview of Previous Theories

The question of the origin of the expression “abracadabra” constitutes one of the most intriguing problems in the history of magical formulas, ritual language, and Semitic philology. Despite the fact that the term is now almost universally recognized, its etymology has remained the subject of prolonged scholarly debate for several centuries.<sup>11</sup> The problem is further complicated by the circumstance that the expression emerged within the highly syncretic cultural environment of Late Antiquity, in which elements of Greco-Roman religion, Egyptian magical tradition, Jewish mysticism, the Aramaic-speaking world, and various gnostic systems continuously intersected and interacted.<sup>12</sup>

For this reason, no single theory has succeeded in providing a universally accepted solution. Instead, the history of scholarship reveals the existence of multiple parallel interpretative approaches, each attempting to explain the expression through a different linguistic, cultural, or

religious framework. The most influential theories may generally be divided into Aramaic, Hebrew-mystical, and gnostic-magical interpretations.

## 2.1. The Aramaic Hypothesis

Among contemporary scholars, the theory most frequently discussed is the hypothesis that the expression “abracadabra” originated within the Aramaic linguistic sphere.<sup>13</sup> This interpretation became particularly influential during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when research into Semitic languages and late antique magical texts intensified significantly.

The most commonly cited reconstruction is:

אברא כדברא  
*'ebrā kedēbrā*

This expression is usually translated in scholarly literature as:

“I shall create as I speak”

or

“It shall be created as it is spoken.”

The attractiveness of this theory derives primarily from its semantic connection with the ancient concept of creation through speech.<sup>14</sup> Within the Aramaic and Hebrew cultural world, speech did not possess merely a communicative function; rather, it was frequently regarded as a force capable of transforming reality itself. In this context, the spoken word was not simply a symbol or sign, but an active performative act.

Particularly important is the fact that in Semitic languages the boundary between “word,” “event,” and “reality” often appears significantly more fluid than in modern European languages.<sup>15</sup> Such a linguistic structure facilitated the development of religious and magical conceptions according to which a properly pronounced formula possessed genuine ontological power.

Despite its popularity, however, the Aramaic hypothesis faces several serious philological difficulties.<sup>16</sup> First and foremost, no direct historical document from antiquity confirms that the expression “abracadabra” actually derived from the proposed Aramaic construction. Most modern reconstructions are based upon retrospective associations between phonetically similar forms rather than upon explicit textual testimony.

In addition, several scholars have pointed out that the grammatical structure of the reconstructed formula itself is not entirely stable, and that different authors offer varying transliterations and translations.<sup>17</sup> Some interpretations emphasize the verbal aspect of “creation,” whereas others focus more strongly upon the performative dimension of speech. Such inconsistency demonstrates that the issue cannot yet be regarded as philologically settled.

Nevertheless, irrespective of these difficulties, the Aramaic theory remains highly significant because of its broader historical context. Late Antiquity represented a period of extensive Aramaic linguistic dominance throughout large regions of the Near East, especially within religious, administrative, and magical practices.<sup>18</sup> A substantial number of amulets, incantation bowls, and protective formulas from this period were composed in various forms of Aramaic.

Of particular importance are the so-called Aramaic incantation bowls from Mesopotamia, which contain complex ritual formulas intended to provide protection against disease, demons, and negative supernatural forces.<sup>19</sup> In these texts, speech is consistently treated as a direct means of influencing spiritual and physical reality. For this reason, many scholars argue that “abracadabra” should be understood within a much broader tradition of verbal-magical formulas circulating between the Semitic and Hellenistic worlds.

It is important to emphasize that ancient magical formulas were often based not solely upon rational grammar, but also upon the acoustic, rhythmic, and symbolic dimensions of language.<sup>20</sup> In many instances, the phonetic structure of the formula itself was regarded as the primary carrier of power, independently of its literal translation. This further complicates modern philological attempts to reconstruct the “original meaning” of the expression with precision.

## 2.2. Hebrew-Mystical Interpretations

Alongside the Aramaic hypothesis, a significant number of scholars have attempted to associate the expression “abracadabra” with the Hebrew language and Jewish mystical tradition.<sup>21</sup> Such interpretations became especially influential within studies of Kabbalah, Jewish magic, and the mystical symbolism of language.

Attention has most frequently focused upon two central Hebrew roots:

ברא (*bara*) — “to create”

דבר (*davar*) — “word,” “speech,” “thing,” “event”

Particularly significant is the concept of *davar*, whose semantic multidimensionality represents one of the characteristic features of Biblical Hebrew.<sup>22</sup> Unlike the modern understanding of a “word” as an abstract sign, the Hebrew term *davar* may simultaneously denote:

- a word,
- an event,
- an act,
- a thing,
- or historical reality itself.

Such semantic polyvalence profoundly influenced the development of Jewish religious thought. In numerous biblical passages, the “word” is not merely information, but an active force producing concrete consequences.<sup>23</sup> Divine speech within the Hebrew Bible frequently possesses creative and transformative power. For this reason, several scholars have argued that

the concept of performative speech played an important role in the development of later magical formulas as well.

Additional support for these theories emerged from the kabbalistic tradition, within which Hebrew letters and words acquired cosmological and mystical significance.<sup>24</sup> In certain medieval mystical systems, it was believed that the proper combination of letters and sounds could influence both spiritual and material reality. Such ideas contributed substantially to later associations between the expression “abracadabra” and Hebrew mysticism, even though direct historical evidence for such a connection remains limited.

Some authors attempted to develop these interpretations further through numerological and symbolic analyses of Hebrew letters.<sup>25</sup> However, much of this approach is now regarded as methodologically problematic, especially when it crosses the boundary between philological analysis and speculative mysticism.

It should therefore be emphasized that serious contemporary Hebraic scholarship generally approaches these theories with considerable caution.<sup>26</sup> Although conceptual parallels undoubtedly exist between the expression “abracadabra” and Semitic notions concerning the power of speech, direct derivation of the formula from a specific Hebrew expression remains insufficiently demonstrated.

Nevertheless, Hebrew-mystical interpretations remain important for understanding the cultural environment in which the expression was later interpreted. Throughout the Middle Ages and the early modern period, many European intellectuals regarded Hebrew as the “primordial” or “sacred” language of humanity.<sup>27</sup> Such perceptions further encouraged the association of various magical formulas with Hebrew, even in cases where philological evidence remained weak.

### **2.3. Gnostic and Magical Theories**

A third major interpretative direction associates the expression “abracadabra” with gnostic, hermetic, and broader magical traditions of Late Antiquity.<sup>28</sup> Particular attention within this framework has been devoted to the term “Abraxas,” which appears in numerous gnostic texts and magical amulets.

The name “Abraxas” was especially prominent within the Basilidian gnostic tradition, where it was connected with cosmic powers and mystical numerology.<sup>29</sup> On numerous ancient amulets, the term appears together with serpent imagery, solar motifs, and protective figures, indicating its clearly apotropaic function.

Because of the phonetic similarity between “abracadabra” and “abraxas,” several scholars have proposed the existence of either a common origin or, at the very least, a shared cultural environment.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, a direct etymological relationship between the two expressions has never been definitively established.

It remains important, however, to recognize that both terms belong to a remarkably similar religio-magical world of Late Antiquity. Within that world, the boundaries separating religion, medicine, astrology, magic, and philosophy were considerably more fluid than in modern society.<sup>31</sup> Ritual formulas, sacred names, and symbolic combinations of letters were employed as instruments of protection, healing, and communication with supernatural powers.

Particularly significant in this regard are the Greek Magical Papyri, collections of texts containing numerous incantations and ritual formulas from the Hellenistic and Roman periods.<sup>32</sup> Within these documents there frequently appear the so-called *voces magicae*—series of words or syllables whose meaning is not always fully comprehensible, but to which special ritual power was nevertheless attributed. Some scholars argue that “abracadabra” should likewise be understood within this broader category.

Such formulas often combine:

- Semitic elements,
- Greek expressions,
- Egyptian divine names,
- and phonetically stylized syllabic sequences.

This demonstrates that ancient magical language constituted a profoundly hybrid and transcultural phenomenon.<sup>33</sup> For this reason, attempts to explain “abracadabra” exclusively through a single language or tradition may ultimately prove methodologically insufficient.

Contemporary scholarship increasingly emphasizes the necessity of an interdisciplinary approach incorporating:

- Semitic philology,
- history of religions,
- paleography,
- history of medicine,
- and the study of ancient magic.<sup>34</sup>

Only within such a broader methodological framework is it possible to understand why the expression “abracadabra” succeeded in surviving for nearly two millennia and became one of the most recognizable verbal symbols in the history of Western civilization.

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### 3. A New Philological Analysis

Contemporary research on the expression “abracadabra” demonstrates that previous theories, despite the considerable number of studies and interpretations devoted to the subject, have still failed to provide a fully satisfactory philological explanation of its origin and original function.<sup>35</sup> Most earlier approaches have generally oscillated between two extremes. On the one hand stand popular and often oversimplified interpretations that derive the expression directly from the alleged Aramaic formula “I shall create as I speak,” while on the other hand highly skeptical positions reduce the entire problem either to phonetic coincidence or to ritual nonsense lacking stable semantic content.<sup>36</sup> A closer examination of the religio-linguistic environment of Late Antiquity, however, suggests that the issue is considerably more complex and that the expression “abracadabra” most likely emerged through a multilayered cultural and linguistic process.

One of the fundamental problems in previous scholarship has been the tendency to examine the expression in isolation, without sufficiently broad consideration of the history of ritual language

in Late Antiquity.<sup>37</sup> In the ancient world, the boundary between religious, medical, and magical speech was highly fluid. Words, especially within ritual contexts, did not possess merely descriptive functions, but were frequently understood as active forces capable of influencing both physical and spiritual reality. For precisely this reason, the analysis of the expression “abracadabra” requires an interdisciplinary approach incorporating Semitic philology, the history of religions, the pragmatics of ritual language, and the history of ancient medicine.

Particularly significant is the fact that in numerous Semitic traditions speech itself was understood as an act of creation. In Biblical Hebrew, the term דָּבָר (*davar*) simultaneously denotes “word,” “speech,” “thing,” “event,” and “act,” thereby indicating a profound ontological connection between language and reality.<sup>38</sup> Such semantic multidimensionality is not a random linguistic phenomenon, but rather reflects a broader Semitic understanding of speech as an instrument of action. In this sense, the word is not merely a symbolic sign, but a bearer of genuine power.

A similar conception appears in other Semitic languages as well. In late antique Aramaic incantation texts, a properly pronounced formula was believed to possess protective and therapeutic efficacy.<sup>39</sup> In Akkadian magical traditions, ritual speech had the capacity to repel demons, diseases, and negative supernatural forces. Egyptian religious texts likewise contain the concept of “creation through speech,” especially within cosmological hymns and temple rituals.<sup>40</sup> All of this demonstrates that the idea of the performative power of language developed within a much broader Near Eastern cultural environment.

It is precisely within this context that the popular Aramaic reconstruction of the expression must be understood:

אברא כדברא  
*’ebrā kedēbrā*

Contemporary scholarship generally translates this construction as “I shall create as I speak” or “It shall be created as it is spoken.”<sup>41</sup> Although this interpretation has achieved considerable popularity, philological analysis demonstrates that the problem cannot be resolved through literal translation alone. Far more important is an understanding of the function of the formula itself within ancient ritual thought.

Ancient magical formulas were often not constructed according to the rules of ordinary language.<sup>42</sup> Their power did not depend exclusively upon rationally intelligible meaning, but also upon rhythm, acoustic structure, syllabic repetition, and the symbolic organization of the text. In many instances, the phonetic configuration of the formula itself was regarded as the bearer of special efficacy.

The expression “abracadabra” possesses a remarkably rhythmic and circular structure:

A-BRA-KA-DA-BRA

The repetition of the syllable “bra” and the central organization of sounds produce an almost hypnotic pattern characteristic of ritual speech.<sup>43</sup> Such phonetic organization was by no means unusual in ancient incantations. Within the Greek Magical Papyri there frequently appear formulas based upon acoustic symmetry, alliteration, and rhythmic repetition, where the acoustic structure itself was assumed to possess operative power.<sup>44</sup>

Particularly important is the fact that the expression “abracadabra” was used within an apotropaic context, namely as a protective formula against disease.<sup>45</sup> The triangular arrangement of the word, combined with the gradual elimination of letters, indicates a symbolic logic of “disappearance.” This is not merely a visual effect, but a ritual representation of the weakening of illness itself. Similar practices are known from other ancient traditions, where the destruction or reduction of a written text was identified with the destruction of the negative force represented by that text.

Contemporary scholarship increasingly emphasizes that “abracadabra” should be understood as part of a broader system of verbal ritualization rather than as an isolated “magic word.”<sup>46</sup> Within such a system, language operates simultaneously on several levels: semantic, phonetic, symbolic, ritual, and psychological.

One of the principal problems of earlier theories has been excessive insistence upon a single “final etymology.” Yet many ancient formulas emerged through prolonged processes of linguistic and cultural interaction.<sup>47</sup> Late Antiquity constituted a space of intense contact between Greek, Aramaic, Hebrew, Coptic, Latin, and numerous other linguistic systems. Within such an environment, magical formulas were frequently borrowed, adapted, and phonetically transformed across different traditions. For this reason, it is entirely possible that the expression “abracadabra” represents a hybrid form originating within a multicultural Mediterranean setting.

Of particular significance is the question of the relationship between language and identity in ancient magical thought.<sup>48</sup> In numerous religious traditions, knowledge of the “true name” of a particular force or being was regarded as a means of obtaining power over it. Such conceptions are present within Egyptian, Jewish, and gnostic traditions alike. In this sense, a magical formula was not merely a sequence of sounds, but an instrument for establishing control over reality itself.

Several contemporary scholars have argued that the Semitic tradition developed the concept of the creative power of speech with particular intensity.<sup>49</sup> In Hebrew, the act of naming frequently possesses ontological consequences. To assign a name does not merely mean to label an already existing object, but to establish its place within the cosmic order. Such conceptions later exerted profound influence upon the mystical and magical systems of Judaism and early Christianity.

Within this context, studies concerning interactions between Semitic and Slavic linguistic traditions are likewise noteworthy. Stanojević, Nedeljković, and Banks pointed to the existence of multilayered contacts between Northwest Semitic and Slavic linguistic systems, particularly in the areas of religious terminology, the symbolism of names, and the conceptualization of speech.<sup>50</sup> Although such influences cannot directly explain the origin of the expression

“abracadabra,” they nevertheless confirm that Semitic conceptions of language and its sacred function exercised a far broader cultural influence than previously assumed.

Additional importance belongs to the analysis of the Semitic roots ברא (bara) and דבר (davar). In his *Hebrew-Serbian Dictionary*, Stanojević emphasizes the semantic complexity of the term *davar*, which simultaneously denotes both “word” and “thing,” that is, concretized reality itself.<sup>51</sup> Such semantic structure provides an important argument supporting the claim that, within Semitic thought, speech and reality were profoundly interconnected concepts.

At the same time, however, it is necessary to avoid the methodological trap of retrospective mystification. Contemporary popular literature frequently romanticizes Semitic languages and magical traditions uncritically, thereby creating the impression that every ritual formula conceals a hidden “secret meaning.”<sup>52</sup> Serious philological analysis demands a considerably more cautious approach. Phonetic similarity alone does not constitute sufficient proof of etymological connection. It is necessary to take into account the historical context, paleographic evidence, grammatical structure, traditions of textual transmission, and the functional use of the formula itself.

Despite this, complete rejection of the Semitic context would also represent an oversimplification. The fact that the majority of serious theories concerning the origin of the expression continue to operate within the Aramaic-Hebrew cultural sphere demonstrates that a genuine conceptual basis for such interpretations undoubtedly exists.<sup>53</sup> Particularly significant is the fact that the idea of creation through speech appears precisely within those religious traditions from which most late antique magical formulas originated.

Contemporary scholarship increasingly emphasizes the need to approach “abracadabra” as a multilayered cultural phenomenon.<sup>54</sup> The expression most likely did not emerge at a single moment or within a single tradition. It is far more probable that it represents the result of a prolonged process involving phonetic transformation, ritual usage, interlinguistic contact, and symbolic reinterpretation.

For this reason, the question of the meaning of the expression “abracadabra” cannot be reduced to the simple translation of a single formula. Rather, it represents a significantly more complex phenomenon that offers important insights into the history of ritual language, ancient magic, and Semitic conceptions concerning the power of speech.

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## 4. Abracadabra as a Formula for the Dissolution of Disease

One of the most intriguing aspects of the tradition associated with the expression “abracadabra” is its use in the context of healing disease and protection against negative forces.<sup>55</sup> Unlike the modern perception of the formula as a theatrical or folkloric expression devoid of concrete meaning, ancient sources demonstrate that “abracadabra” possessed a clearly defined ritual and apotropaic function. Particularly significant is the manner in which the formula was written in triangular form through the gradual elimination of its final letters, representing one of the earliest known examples of the symbolic reduction of disease through textual manipulation.

The best-known ancient description of this practice appears in the *Liber Medicinalis* of Quintus Serenus Sammonicus from the third century CE.<sup>56</sup> The author recommends that a person suffering from fever should wear an amulet bearing the inscribed formula “abracadabra,” while the word itself is progressively shortened until only a single letter remains. The very structure of the formula demonstrates that this was not an arbitrary graphic arrangement, but rather a carefully designed ritual pattern.

Within ancient religious thought, disease was often understood not merely as a physiological disorder, but as the presence of a negative force, demonic entity, or chaotic energy disturbing the equilibrium of the human body.<sup>57</sup> For this reason, the ritual “diminution” of the word could symbolically represent the gradual weakening of the disease itself. As the text visually decreases, the negative force that the formula seeks to eliminate is likewise expected to disappear.

Contemporary research into ancient magic demonstrates that such symbolic logic was widespread throughout the Mediterranean world.<sup>58</sup> In numerous ritual practices, the destruction, tearing, burning, or gradual erasure of a particular text constituted a symbolic act of eliminating the undesirable phenomenon associated with it. Word and reality were viewed as interconnected spheres, so that manipulation of the symbol simultaneously represented manipulation of that which the symbol signified.

Particularly important is the concept of analogical magic, based upon the principle that symbolic action produces a corresponding effect in reality.<sup>59</sup> Within this context, the gradual disappearance of the word “abracadabra” was not merely an aesthetic or decorative device, but a ritual representation of the process of disease vanishing. The visual reduction of the text itself functioned as a model of the desired outcome.

Such practices were not limited to the Roman world alone. Egyptian, Greek, and Near Eastern ritual traditions preserve numerous examples of the symbolic destruction of names or texts for the purpose of neutralizing a particular force.<sup>60</sup> In ancient Egyptian magical rituals, hostile names were frequently written upon figurines or vessels that were subsequently broken or burned. Similar principles also appear in Mesopotamian exorcistic traditions, where the destruction of a ritual object symbolized the removal of demonic presence.

For this reason, contemporary scholars increasingly emphasize that “abracadabra” should be understood not merely as a verbal formula, but as a ritual process.<sup>61</sup> Its efficacy was not contained exclusively in the semantic meaning of the word itself, but in the performance of the ritual as a whole. In other words, the power of the formula derived not only from what it “said,” but from the manner in which it was written, worn, and ritually employed.

Additional significance lies in the fact that the formula was associated with amulets. In the ancient world, an amulet was not regarded as a passive object, but as an active instrument of protection.<sup>62</sup> Its efficacy depended upon the proper form, material, text, and ritual usage. Many amulets combined sacred names, symbolic signs, astral motifs, and ritual formulas. “Abracadabra” fits perfectly within this broader context of late antique protective magic.

A particularly fascinating aspect of the formula is its triangular arrangement. Certain scholars have argued that the triangle within ancient symbolism frequently represented a process of directing or concentrating force.<sup>63</sup> In the case of “abracadabra,” however, the process of reduction itself appears more important than the geometric form as such. Each successive line removes one letter, thereby visually producing the impression of dissolution and disappearance.

Such a structure also possesses a strong psychological dimension. Contemporary studies of ritual and symbolic therapy demonstrate that the repetition of structured patterns may exert a significant influence upon the perception of illness and the sense of control over crisis situations.<sup>64</sup> In a world lacking developed modern medicine, ritual formulas frequently constituted an important means of psychological stabilization and symbolic protection.

Nevertheless, it would be erroneous to interpret ancient rituals exclusively as a form of “primitive psychology.” For people of Late Antiquity, the boundary between religion, medicine, and magic was not clearly defined.<sup>65</sup> Healing could simultaneously involve pharmacological substances, prayers, amulets, astrological calculations, and ritual formulas. For this reason, “abracadabra” must not be viewed in isolation from the broader medico-magical traditions of the period.

Particularly important in this regard are the so-called *voces magicae*, ritual sequences of syllables found within the Greek Magical Papyri.<sup>66</sup> These formulas frequently lack fully transparent rational meaning, yet their efficacy was believed to derive from correct pronunciation, rhythm, acoustic structure, and ritual context. “Abracadabra” displays a number of characteristics typical of such formulas. Its rhythmic quality, syllabic repetition, and acoustic symmetry suggest that the auditory dimension of the expression was probably just as important as any possible semantic origin.

Several recent scholars argue that processuality itself constitutes the key to understanding the formula.<sup>67</sup> “Abracadabra” is not a static word, but a text that changes through ritual action. Such a dynamic structure distinguishes it from many other ancient amulets containing fixed texts or sacred names.

It is important to emphasize that similar patterns of reduction also appear in other ritual traditions. In certain medieval European magical practices, diseases were symbolically “transferred” onto objects, plants, or animals that were subsequently removed or destroyed.<sup>68</sup> The underlying principle remained the same: symbolic transformation was expected to produce real change.

Contemporary interdisciplinary scholarship increasingly emphasizes that ancient ritual formulas cannot be understood exclusively through linguistic analysis.<sup>69</sup> It is equally necessary to consider the visual organization of the text, the material form of the amulet, the ritual context, the psychological effect, and the broader religious system of belief. In the case of “abracadabra,” it is precisely the combination of all these elements that enabled the formula to survive for nearly two millennia. Its longevity is probably not the result of a single meaning or a single language, but rather of its capacity to function simultaneously as a word, a symbol, an acoustic pattern, a ritual, and a protective object.

In this sense, “abracadabra” represents far more than a folkloric magical formula. It is a valuable philological and historical-religious trace of a world in which speech, symbol, and reality were understood as inseparably interconnected.

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## 5. A Comparative Semitic Perspective

A comparative Semitic perspective must be established upon a strictly methodological foundation. The expression “abracadabra” is not attested in the Hebrew Bible, the Dead Sea Scrolls, the known scrolls from the Judean Desert, nor within the classical corpus of Old Testament apocrypha and pseudepigrapha. The digital descriptions of the DSS corpus list numerous manuscripts in Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and Latin, yet the formula itself is not registered as part of the known Qumran textual tradition.<sup>70</sup> The earliest secure attestation of the expression remains the late antique medico-magical context of Serenus Sammonicus, where the formula is employed against fever.<sup>71</sup> For this reason, “abracadabra” must not be presented as a directly biblical, Qumranic, or apocryphal term, but rather as a formula that may be analyzed

within the broader Semitic and late antique system of beliefs concerning the power of words, names, and written signs.

At precisely this point, the central scholarly problem emerges. If the formula is not directly attested within canonical or parabiblical Semitic texts, is it methodologically justified to speak at all of a Semitic background? The answer is affirmative, but only under one condition: the Semitic perspective must not be presented as proof of direct origin, but rather as an explanation of the conceptual horizon within which such formulas were intelligible. In other words, Hebrew and Aramaic do not in themselves prove the etymology of the expression, but they do illuminate the logic according to which spoken or written words could possess ritual, protective, and transformative functions.

Within the Hebrew language, three concepts are of particular significance for the present analysis: דָּבָר (*davar*), שֵׁם (*šem*), and בְּרָא (*bara*). Their interrelationship does not automatically provide the etymology of “abracadabra,” but it does permit the reconstruction of a semantic model in which speech, naming, and creation are deeply interconnected. It is precisely this model that constitutes the most stable scholarly basis for a comparative reading of the formula.

The term דָּבָר (*davar*) possesses an exceptionally broad semantic range within Biblical Hebrew. It signifies not merely “word,” but also “thing,” “event,” “act,” or “occurrence.”<sup>72</sup> Such semantic multidimensionality demonstrates that, within Hebrew linguistic thought, word and reality are not sharply separated. A word is not merely a neutral sign describing the external world; it may also denote an event in the process of being enacted or a reality in the process of being established. This point is of crucial importance for understanding magical formulas, because within ritual contexts speech frequently functions as action.

This aspect corresponds closely with modern theories of performative speech. Within the rituals of Late Antiquity, a formula did not necessarily have to be “rationally understandable” in the modern sense in order to be effective within its own system of belief. Its efficacy derived from pronunciation, graphic form, repetition, the authority of tradition, and belief in the power of properly structured speech.<sup>73</sup> In this sense, “abracadabra” is not merely a sequence of syllables; it constitutes a textual-ritual act.

The second key concept is שֵׁם (*šem*), “name.” In modern languages, a name is frequently understood as an external designation. Within Semitic religious thought, however, a name may signify identity, presence, reputation, authority, and essence. When biblical and postbiblical texts speak of the “name” of God, a human being, or a spiritual force, they do not refer merely to a phonetic form, but to the presence and authority of that which is named. For this reason, knowledge and proper use of names possessed extraordinary importance within magical and ritual traditions.<sup>74</sup>

This fact is significant for “abracadabra” for the following reason: a magical formula functions in a manner similar to a name. It need not constitute a sentence with fully transparent syntax; rather, it may operate as a ritual sign that invokes, directs, or neutralizes a particular force. Late antique magical texts frequently contain sacred names, sequences of incomprehensible syllables, and the so-called *voces magicae*, to which power was attributed precisely because they belonged to a

special register of ritual speech.<sup>75</sup> In this way, “abracadabra” may be understood as a formula functioning at the boundary between word, name, and acoustic sign.

The third concept, ברא (*bara'*), is associated with the act of creation. Within the Hebrew Bible, this verb possesses particular theological weight because it is frequently connected with divine creative activity. For this reason, the association of “abracadabra” with the popular Aramaic reconstruction אברא כדברא (*'ebrā kedebrā*) is attractive, yet it must be approached with considerable caution. It is insufficient simply to claim that “abracadabra” means “I shall create as I speak.” Such an interpretation is popular, but it has not been conclusively demonstrated historically. According to publicly available summaries, the *Oxford English Dictionary* treats the origin of the expression as uncertain and notes that none of the proposed etymologies possesses definitive documentary confirmation.<sup>76</sup>

The new scholarly contribution of the present chapter therefore does not consist in claiming that the etymology of the expression has been “finally solved.” Such a claim would be methodologically excessive. Rather, the contribution lies elsewhere: a tripartite Semitic model is proposed for understanding the ritual logic of the formula. This model consists of:

1. *davar* — word as event and reality;
2. *šem* — name as identity, presence, and power;
3. *bara'* — creation as an act associated with speech.

When these three concepts are considered together, “abracadabra” may be understood as a late antique formula whose power depends not solely upon etymology, but upon a broader belief that properly structured speech possesses the capacity to transform the condition of the world. This represents a significant advance beyond simplistic etymological explanations.

Such an interpretation becomes especially important in light of the triangular arrangement of the formula in Serenus Sammonicus. The formula is not employed merely as spoken speech, but as a visually structured text. Through the gradual elimination of letters, the ritual produces a representation of the disappearance of disease. This demonstrates that the formula operates simultaneously on three levels: as sound, as written sign, and as process. It is precisely this triple function that connects the formula with the Semitic model of word and name. If *davar* is a word capable of functioning as action, if *šem* is a name bearing presence, and if *bara'* represents creation associated with divine speech, then “abracadabra” is not meaningless nonsense, but rather a textual form of ritual action.

A similar principle appears within the Aramaic incantation bowls of Late Antiquity, where text functions as a protective instrument against disease, demons, and negative forces. In these texts, writing does not merely record prayer; it materializes protection itself. Name, formula, and graphic arrangement become part of the ritual object.<sup>77</sup> Although “abracadabra” itself is not attested in these bowls as a standard Aramaic expression, its function is comparable to the same type of ritual logic: text is employed in order to produce a protective effect.

It is nevertheless important to avoid two methodological errors. The first is the excessive attempt to prove Semitic origin solely on the basis of phonetic similarity. Such an approach is

insufficient for serious philology. The second is the complete rejection of the Semitic context merely because direct attestation has not been discovered. This would be equally problematic, since the late antique magical world was indeed a space of intensive interaction among Greek, Latin, Egyptian, Jewish, and Aramaic traditions.<sup>78</sup> Within such an environment, formulas frequently traveled, changed form, and acquired new interpretations.

For this reason, the most responsible conclusion is the following: “abracadabra” is not demonstrably a Hebrew, Aramaic, Qumranic, or apocryphal formula; nevertheless, its ritual structure is deeply compatible with Semitic concepts of word, name, and creation. This compatibility does not constitute proof of origin, but rather proof of interpretative plausibility. It is precisely here that the scholarly value of the comparative Semitic perspective resides.

Furthermore, a new research thesis may be formulated at this point: “abracadabra” should be analyzed not as an isolated magical word, but as a ritual-phonetic palimpsest—that is, a formula in which sound, graphic pattern, apotropaic function, and the Semitic-Mediterranean belief in the power of naming converged during Late Antiquity. Such an approach makes it possible to transcend the old dilemma of whether the formula is “truly Aramaic” or “merely meaningless.” It may, to some extent, be both simultaneously: phonetically transformed, historically hybrid, yet functionally intelligible within a world in which word, name, and action were not separate categories.

Within this perspective, *šem* occupies a particularly important place. It does not provide an etymology, but it does provide a key to the formula’s function. If a name bears identity and presence, then the formula may operate as an expanded name of the disease, force, or ritual process that is to be neutralized. “Abracadabra” is therefore interpreted not as an ordinary word, but as an operative sign: it names, shapes, and simultaneously dismantles that against which it is directed. In the case of fever, the gradual shortening of the formula visually dramatizes the elimination of the illness itself. The name-formula disappears; the disease is expected to disappear with it.

In this way, comparative Semitic analysis does not claim more than the evidence permits, yet it also avoids remaining superficial. It demonstrates that behind what appears to be a simple magical word lies a highly complex system of ideas concerning language. “Abracadabra” may therefore be understood as a late antique trace of the belief that word is not merely a means of communication, name is not merely designation, and creation is not merely an event of the past, but rather a continuing model of ritual action in the present.

## Discussion

The results of the present analysis demonstrate that the expression “abracadabra” cannot be satisfactorily explained either through simple etymology or by reducing the formula to a mere “meaningless magical word.” At the same time, no firm evidence exists that would allow the claim that the expression derives directly from the Dead Sea Scrolls, biblical texts, or Old Testament apocrypha.<sup>79</sup> It is precisely between these two extremes—uncritical mystification and complete reductionism—that space emerges for a more precise philological interpretation.

Previous scholarship has generally developed within three principal interpretative frameworks: Aramaic, gnostic-magical, and historical-religious.<sup>80</sup> Most authors, however, have focused either upon the possible translation of the formula or upon the history of its ritual usage, while considerably less attention has been devoted to the internal structure of the formula itself as a synthesis of speech, naming, visual dissolution, and ritual process. It is precisely within this area that the principal contribution of the present study may be located.

On the basis of comparative Semitic analysis, a new interpretative thesis may be proposed according to which “abracadabra” functions not primarily as a conventional “word,” but rather as a ritual-phonetic processual sign. In other words, its function derives not solely from possible semantic meaning, but from the fact that the formula simultaneously sounds, signifies, and disappears. To the best of the author’s knowledge, no systematic model has yet been developed within existing scholarship according to which “abracadabra” functions as a triple ritual mechanism: acoustic, graphic, and ontological-semiotic.

Numerous studies exist concerning *voces magicae*, ritual speech, the performative function of language, and ancient amulets,<sup>81</sup> yet no study has been identified that explicitly connects the Hebrew concept of *davar*, the Semitic understanding of *šem*, ritual textual reduction, and the processual structure of “abracadabra” within a unified philological model. For this reason, the present study proposes the concept of “ritual textual entropy.” By this term is meant a process in which the disintegration of text, the diminution of the formula, or the reduction of graphic structure symbolically represents the dissolution of the negative force that the formula seeks to eliminate.

In the case of “abracadabra,” this process is particularly evident. The formula is gradually shortened until only a single letter remains. The text does not remain static, but undergoes controlled degradation. Such a structure does not merely represent a decorative or graphic pattern; rather, it constitutes a ritual representation of the disappearance of disease. Previous scholarship has generally described the triangular arrangement of the formula as an amuletic or apotropaic symbol,<sup>82</sup> but the present study proposes a more precise interpretation: the formula functions as a textual dramatization of disappearance. In other words, “abracadabra” is not merely a text about disease; it is a text that ritually performs the disappearance of disease.

Within this context, the Hebrew concept דָּבָר (*davar*) acquires particular significance. In Biblical Hebrew, *davar* signifies not merely “word,” but also “thing,” “event,” “act,” and concrete reality itself.<sup>83</sup> Such semantic structure permits a fundamentally different understanding of ritual language. If a word may also constitute an event, then a ritual formula need not merely describe transformation—it may itself become transformation. It is precisely here that an important connection emerges between *davar*, performative speech, and “abracadabra.” The formula is therefore not an ordinary sentence nor a “secret magical password,” but processual speech intended to produce a specific condition.

Additional significance is acquired by the concept שֵׁם (*šem*). Within Semitic religious thought, a name is not merely designation, but identity, presence, and bearer of power.<sup>84</sup> In many ancient traditions, it was believed that correct naming enabled control over a particular force. In this sense, “abracadabra” may function as a ritual name for the process of disease and its removal. It

is important to emphasize that the present study does not claim that the formula etymologically derives from the word *šem*, nor that it is directly of Hebrew origin. Rather, the concept of *šem* is employed as a theoretical framework explaining why such a formula could be perceived as effective within a Semitic religious and magical context.

On this basis, a second important thesis of the present study may be formulated: “abracadabra” functions not primarily as a “magical word,” but as a ritual algorithm of reduction. To the best of the author’s knowledge, the concept “ritual algorithm of reduction” has not previously been employed in philological analyses of “abracadabra.” By this is meant a strictly organized sequence of textual transformations whose goal is the symbolic transformation of reality. The formula functions not merely phonetically or semantically, but procedurally. Its power resides in the execution of the process itself.

Such a model brings “abracadabra” closer to contemporary theories of ritual emphasizing that ritual is not primarily a “text with meaning,” but rather structured action.<sup>85</sup> In this sense, writing, letter arrangement, formula reduction, and visual pattern become components of a unified ritual system. This may explain the extraordinary longevity of the formula. Its survival over nearly two millennia probably derives not from a single translation, but from its multilayered nature: acoustic, visual, symbolic, and ritual.

It is important to emphasize that the present study does not claim that the etymology of the expression has been conclusively resolved, nor that a Qumranic or biblical origin has been demonstrated. Such claims would be methodologically unsustainable. The scholarly contribution of this work lies at another level: in the attempt to explain “abracadabra” through a unified model of ritual language grounded in Semitic ontology of speech, the ancient concept of the name, and the processual structure of ritual itself. On the basis of the existing review of scholarship, it appears that the combination of *davar* as “word-event,” *šem* as “name-presence,” and ritual textual entropy represents the most original aspect of the present research.

Particularly significant is the fact that such a model makes it possible to transcend the old dilemma of whether “abracadabra” is a “meaningful Semitic formula” or a “meaningless magical sound.” The results of the analysis indicate that these two dimensions are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The formula may simultaneously be partially semantic, partially phonetic, partially ritual, and historically hybrid. Such multilayered structure is precisely characteristic of late antique magical traditions.<sup>86</sup>

In this sense, “abracadabra” should be understood as the remnant of a much broader Mediterranean-Semitic system of belief according to which speech may transform reality, names may contain power, and text may become ritual action. It is precisely this relationship among language, naming, and process that constitutes the most important conclusion of the present study.

## Conclusion

The analysis conducted in the present study demonstrates that the expression “abracadabra” represents a considerably more complex linguistic and cultural phenomenon than is commonly assumed within contemporary popular culture. Although today the term is generally associated with stage magic, illusionism, and folkloric representations of “magic words,” historical and philological evidence indicates that its original function was deeply connected with ritual, apotropaic, and medico-magical practices of Late Antiquity. The earliest secure attestation of the formula appears in the *Liber Medicinalis* of Quintus Serenus Sammonicus, where “abracadabra” is employed as a protective formula against fever through a characteristic triangular arrangement involving the gradual elimination of letters. Such a structure demonstrates that the formula functioned not merely as spoken speech, but as a visual-ritual process intended to symbolize the “disappearance” of disease.

The present research has shown that previous theories concerning the origin of the expression, although important, have failed to produce a universally accepted solution. The Aramaic hypothesis based upon the reconstruction אברא כדברא (*ʿebrā kedēbrā*) remains philologically attractive because of its connection between speech and creation within Semitic traditions, yet no direct historical evidence exists that definitively confirms such an origin. Similarly, Hebrew-mystical and gnostic interpretations point toward important cultural and religious parallels, but do not by themselves resolve the problem of ultimate etymology. This demonstrates that “abracadabra” cannot be adequately explained through reduction to a single word, a single language, or a single religious tradition.

The most significant result of the present study lies in the attempt to approach “abracadabra” not primarily as a problem of etymology, but as the remnant of a much broader system of ritual language characteristic of the late antique Mediterranean and Near Eastern worlds. Comparative Semitic analysis has demonstrated that, within the ancient Near East, speech, naming, and creation constituted deeply interconnected concepts. Particular importance belongs to the Hebrew terms דבר (*davar*), שם (*šem*), and ברא (*bara*), which together point toward the existence of a religio-linguistic model in which language may possess ontological and performative functions. Within this context, the formula “abracadabra” becomes intelligible not so much as a “secret magical password,” but rather as an expression of a belief system according to which properly structured speech may affect reality itself.

On the basis of the analysis conducted, a new interpretative framework has been proposed according to which “abracadabra” functions as a ritual-phonetic processual sign. The concept of “ritual textual entropy” has also been introduced in order to designate the symbolic disintegration of negative force through the controlled disintegration of the formula itself. To the best of the author’s knowledge, such a model has not previously been systematically developed within the existing scholarship on “abracadabra.” The formula operates not merely semantically or phonetically, but procedurally and ritually. Its efficacy derives from the process of performance itself—that is, from the combination of pronunciation, writing, visual reduction, and symbolic disappearance. It is precisely this multilayered structure that may explain the extraordinary durability and cultural resilience of the formula over nearly two thousand years.

At the same time, the present research has confirmed the necessity of methodological caution. No evidence currently exists demonstrating that “abracadabra” is directly a Qumranic or biblical

formula, nor can it be reduced with certainty to a single etymology. Nevertheless, the fact that the formula is entirely intelligible within the Semitic concept of the power of speech demonstrates that its study requires an interdisciplinary approach combining Semitic philology, the history of religions, ancient magic, the pragmatics of ritual language, and visual semiotics. It is precisely the combination of these disciplines that enables a more precise understanding of how ancient societies conceived the relationship among language, reality, and ritual.

In conclusion, “abracadabra” should not be regarded merely as an archaic magical expression, but rather as a valuable historical-philological trace of a world in which word was not merely sign, name was not merely designation, and text was not merely writing, but an active participant in the process of shaping reality itself.

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