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**CIRCLES** *of*  
**POWER**

An Introduction to

**HERMETIC  
MAGIC**

Third Edition

**JOHN MICHAEL GREER**

**AEON**

# **CIRCLES** *of* **POWER**

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# FOREWORD TO THE NEW EDITION

I suspect most writers have mixed feelings when they look back over books from the early stages of their writing career. Certainly this has been true for me, and never more so than with the book you now hold in your hands. I wrote it in 1996, a year that was at once the beginning of my career as a published author and the peak of my involvement in the Golden Dawn tradition of ceremonial magic. At the time I had been practicing Golden Dawn magic for twenty years in all, and the process of writing my first published book on the tradition—*Paths of Wisdom*, a study of the magical Cabala—sparked a cascade of insights into the practical work of Golden Dawn magic. What started as a chapter on advanced ritual work in *Paths of Wisdom* exploded into a book of its own. I wrote it in a white heat of inspiration, fueled by the intensive ritual work needed to test each of the ceremonies in the book, and sent it to its first publisher convinced that I had produced the definitive guide to Golden Dawn magic.

The next year or two provided an excellent lesson in the difficulties encountered on the way from inspiration to realization. The book's first publisher managed to turn much of the Hebrew in the book into gibberish—it didn't help that nobody in the editorial department could pick their way through the Hebrew alphabet, even with a chart of the letters on their desk, or even knew that Hebrew reads from right to left. Still, most of the problems with the original edition came from my side. With the serene confidence of the half-educated, I thought I understood much more than I actually did, and several of the things I thought were the book's best features became sources of extreme embarrassment as my grasp of magical philosophy and practice deepened. In particular, I had saddled the book with an arbitrary division of the Golden Dawn system of initiation into three degrees, and though the rituals assigned to the First Degree worked well—not surprisingly, as they came straight out of the Golden Dawn papers—those I constructed for the Second and Third Degree turned out to be poorly conceived and ineffective. Sweeping generalizations in the discussion of the Middle Pillar exercises and elsewhere also provided a useful lesson in humility.

Despite all these drawbacks and very modest sales, though, *Circles of Power* found an audience that welcomed it as few of my other books have been welcomed. I have received more letters and emails from readers of other books

I wrote on occultism, but never so many from the people I most hoped to reach, the serious students of practical magic for whom books such as these are tools for the Great Work. Long after *Circles of Power* vanished from bookstore shelves and lingered only in the backlist of its first publisher, enthusiastic students of Hermetic ceremonial magic contacted me to tell me that it had become a valuable resource in their own magical training. Ultimately that was why, when I had the opportunity to have *Circles of Power* released in a new edition, I jumped at the chance.

The process of preparing the manuscript for the new edition gave me the opportunity to correct a great many errors. Readers familiar with the original edition will notice a number of changes, some subtle, others less so. The Hebrew lettering has been corrected, discussions of magical theory have been modified in the light of subsequent experience, and the system of three degrees has been edited out and a few of the rituals modified accordingly. Nearly everything else has been left as it was. If some passages still show the overconfidence of the insufficiently experienced, I can only hope that my readers will accept the book for what it is—the journeyman-work of a mage in training, which has been useful to other students of the Great Art of magic.

John Michael Greer, 2017

## FOREWORD TO THE ORIGINAL EDITION

# RITUAL MAGIC IN THE HERMETIC TRADITION

This book, like the tradition on which it's based, had unlikely origins. It began as part of a chapter in my previous book *Paths of Wisdom: An Introduction to the Hermetic Cabala*. After covering the theory and symbolism of the magical Cabala, the essentials of practice and some of the basic ritual work of the tradition, I hoped to summarize the more advanced methods of Cabalistic ritual magic in a few pages before going on to the chapter on meditation. Those few pages ballooned into a chapter and a half before I realized that my plans were going to have to change. The material that needed to be covered outstripped the space I had available in *Paths of Wisdom*, and in time it became obvious that it would need a book of its own.

*Circles of Power: An Introduction to Hermetic Magic* is that book. It is intended as a practical guide to the system of Cabalistic ritual magic developed by the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn in the late nineteenth century. That system is the most complete and fully developed of the living traditions of Western magic, and forms the foundation for much of the current occult revival throughout the Western world.

The Golden Dawn itself was the product of an earlier revival of magical traditions. Founded in 1888 by William Wynn Westcott and Samuel Mathers, both of them Freemasons and practicing magicians with some claims to scholarship, it attracted a circle of men and women who saw magic as a way toward spiritual as well as practical ends. In pursuit of these ends, they drew together magical teachings from a dizzying array of sources and assembled them into a coherent and effective system of mystical and magical philosophy, theory and practice, which deserves to rank among the world's major spiritual traditions.

Problems in its organizational structure caused the collapse of the Order itself in 1900, but many Golden Dawn members went on to found other magical orders along the same lines, using much of the same system. These successor orders—the Stella Matutina, the Fraternity of the Inner Light, and many others—produced many of the most important magicians of the twentieth century, and

gave the Golden Dawn system a wider exposure. The process culminated in 1938-41 when Israel Regardie, an ex-member of the Stella Matutina, published an extensive collection of rituals and papers in four volumes as *The Golden Dawn*. Since then, basic elements of the system such as the Lesser Ritual of the Pentagram have become all but universal in modern magical circles.

Too often, though, Golden Dawn techniques have been simply copied blindly, without any attempt to put them in the context of a coherent system or to work out their potentials and their applications to practical and spiritual goals. The more advanced levels of the Order's magical work have received very little attention in recent years, and many of the possibilities for expansion built into the system—possibilities that seem never to have been developed within the Golden Dawn or its successor orders—have been left equally neglected. This has been especially true of the ritual methods developed by the Order. This is unfortunate, because the higher reaches of Golden Dawn ritual magic involve some of the most fascinating and powerful aspects of the whole system.

In the chapters that follow, then, I've tried to present as complete a view of the Golden Dawn's Cabalistic ritual work as possible, from the basic elements of ritual practice up through advanced ceremonial methods. In the process, I have included a number of practices and applications of my own, and made some corrections to the tradition's methods where this seemed appropriate. The whole point of tradition, after all, is that it grows and develops over time, drawing on the contributions of many hands and minds.

## How to use this Book

*Circles of Power* is designed as a complete introduction to the Cabalistic ritual magic of the Golden Dawn tradition, and can be used on its own by the complete beginner. It does not, though, contain the complete Golden Dawn system of mysticism and magic. That would require a library, not a single book! Some of the subjects left out should be obvious enough—I have not, for example, covered Golden Dawn methods of divination, or of lodge work. Two exclusions, though, deserve some comment.

The first of these is that I have not covered the theory and philosophy of the Hermetic Cabala in this book. The Cabala is the foundation of the entire Golden Dawn system, the framework which links together every other aspect of the Order's work, and it has a similar role in the work of most of the Golden Dawn's successor groups. However it is possible to practice Golden Dawn ritual magic with only a small amount of Cabalistic background, and since that background can be picked up from a number of widely available sources—including, of course, my book *Paths of Wisdom*—I've limited the amount of

theory covered in this book to that actually needed to understand what's going on in the context of magical ritual.

The second exclusion is a little more complex. The Golden Dawn drew on two main sources for its system of ritual magic. The first was the Hermetic Cabala, as developed and expanded by Renaissance magicians such as Pico de Mirandola and Cornelius Agrippa. The second was the Enochian system devised by, or revealed to, the great Elizabethan occultist John Dee. These two sources share similar roots and similar approaches, but they are not the same. Each has its own structure and symbolism, its own language and applications, and putting both into a single book would have required either far too many deletions or far too many pages. Furthermore, on a more personal level, my main focus in the Golden Dawn tradition is the Hermetic Cabala and its applications, and my work with the Enochian system hasn't been extensive enough to make me sure of my ability to teach it.

As a result, I have left the Enochian system entirely out of this book, and revised certain ritual techniques so that they use a wholly Cabalistic symbolism. There are, again, a number of good books on Enochian magic available at present, and those who are interested in that system can find what they seek there. Similarly, a few other magical techniques that are not relevant to Cabalistic magic, such as the formulation and use of Egyptian godforms, have been omitted from this book; they can be found in the standard sourcebooks of Golden Dawn magic, such as Regardie's *The Golden Dawn*.

In learning the material in this book, it is a good idea to take the chapters in order, and to be sure you have a clear grasp of the material in one chapter before going on to the next. The basic ideas presented in Part One provide the framework for the fundamental techniques covered in the first three chapters of Part Two, and these in turn form the basic building blocks for the ritual applications given in the rest of Part Two. The methods covered in each chapter draw on those covered in earlier chapters, and a step-by-step approach will make sure that you know how to do what's needed at each point.

It is also worth noting that ritual magic is an art, and an art which has to be learned. Without regular practice of the basic techniques, none of the rituals given here will have any significant effect. The daily practice of the Lesser Middle Pillar exercise, which is given in Chapter Seven, is a vital part of magical training. So, in a broader sense, is the regular performance of magical rituals themselves. Just as a musician does not learn how to play without practicing and playing, a magician does not learn how to work magic without practicing and performing rituals. As with anything else, what you get out of magic is precisely measured by what you put into it.

## A Note on Sources and Spellings

The major sources for the material covered in this book are the surviving documents of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, especially those collected by Israel Regardie in *The Golden Dawn*. Several other sources deserve mention, though, and there are those who deserve thanks as well.

All Hebrew spellings used in this book are from *Godwin's Cabalistic Encyclopedia* by David Godwin, and the magic squares, seals and sigils of the planets are as corrected by Donald Tyson in his edition of Henry Cornelius Agrippa's *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*. Both these books belong on the shelf of any serious Cabalistic magician.

The method of evocation presented in Chapter Eleven is based on techniques found in John Hamill's collection of the magical papers of Frederick Hockley, *The Rosicrucian Seer*, and in the Dr. Rudd manuscripts edited by Adam McLean as *A Treatise on Angel Magic*, as well as other works of Renaissance magic.

I am grateful to a correspondent who wishes to remain anonymous, for access to a previously unpublished Golden Dawn paper on the relation between astrology and the IAO Signs.

Much of the material in this book was presented in one form or another to my friends and students in the early 1990s, and their responses were a constant source of help to me. Special thanks are owed to Carl Hood Jr., who has illuminated many aspects of the Golden Dawn system for me, to the late Corby Ingold for his enthusiasm and constant encouragement, and to my wife Sara, who has contributed to this and my previous book in more ways than I can name.

Finally, it is necessary to mention the issue (if it is an issue) of spelling. It has been suggested that in the magical community nowadays, a tradition consists of any three people who all spell the words "Cabala" and "magic" the same way. A great deal of importance has been attached to one or another variation; different spellings have been used as something not far from battle-flags in squabbles between groups. Be that as it may, like *Paths of Wisdom*, *Circles of Power* uses the standard dictionary spellings of both these words. Both are (or were) common English terms, and it seems reasonable to treat them as such.