



**University
of Southampton**

Curse or Blessing: What's in the Magic Bowl?

by Dr Dan Levene

The Ian Karten Lecture 2002



Parkes Institute Pamphlet

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Introduction

It is with great pleasure that we introduce Dr Dan Levene, whose appointment in 2000 was made possible through the generous benefactions of Mr Ian Karten. Dr Levene's arrival has greatly enhanced the work of the Parkes Institute in developing teaching and research in the ancient and late antique periods, vital areas - as James Parkes' own work acknowledged - for the study of Jewish/non-Jewish Relations. We are also very pleased to announce another very important development in this area in the form of our partnership with the Department of Classics at the University of Reading with whom we share the joint AHRB Greek Bible Project, led by Professor Tessa Rajak, Dr Sarah Pearce, Dr James Aitken and Dr Jenny Dines.

Dr Sarah J.K. Pearce
*Ian Karten Lecturer in Jewish History, The Parkes Institute for the
Study of Jewish/non-Jewish Relations*
November 2002

I am delighted to add my voice of introduction to this lecture in the Parkes series. Until very recently, the late antique Jewish magic bowl texts have been considerably under-valued, and Dan Levene has rapidly established himself as one of the world's leading scholars on this neglected area. More generally, as one of an up and coming generation of scholars of Jewish writings in late antiquity, Dan has significantly enriched the research and teaching of the Parkes Institute, helping to make it one of Europe's most diverse and innovative centres of Jewish historical scholarship. I wish this edition the wide readership it deserves.

Professor Mark Roseman
Director of the Parkes Institute

Curse or Blessing: What's in the Magic Bowl?
The Ian Karten Lecture 2002.

*I would like to thank Mr Ian Karten for his support of the Parkes Institute for Jewish non/Jewish relations which has made so much of our educational and research activities possible. I would also like to thank Dr Shlomo Moussaieff for putting his collection at my disposal, for encouraging and supporting my work and, more specifically, for sponsoring the publication of this lecture. To both I dedicate this paper.**

*** Introduction**

In this lecture I intend to look at magic bowls in order to see how and for what purpose they were used, and to get a glimpse at the way they worked and what hidden treasures can be found within them. Before considering the feast of images in these somewhat peculiar, some might say attractive objects, I should point out that in essence their greatest importance lies not so much in their physical appearance, seductive though it might be, but in the texts within them. The magic bowls, of which there are less than a couple of thousand, with only a few hundred having been deciphered and published so far,¹ are, in essence, a collection of manuscripts. They represent a rare archive dated to a period that is no later than the seventh century C.E: a period from which there is, in effect, no other current document in Jewish Aramaic; a dialect of the language that had been for almost a millennia, by that time, the lingua franca of the Near East. Indeed, I must qualify

* All the bowls that are marked M+number are from the Moussaieff Collection and are reproduced here with his kind permission.

¹ For a recent list of the main publications see J. B. Segal, *Catalogue of the Aramaic and Mandaic Incantation Bowls in the British Museum* (London: British Museum Press, 2000), 21.

this statement by adding that we do have one other document whose authorship and content is ascribed to the same period. That is, of course, the monumental literary compilation of the commentaries, thoughts, writings and other information from numerous rabbis and other Jews of that same period, namely the Babylonian Talmud. This qualification is, nevertheless, tempered by the fact that, whereas the bowls are actual manuscripts that were physically written at that time, the Talmud is a work that was copied over generations, so that the earliest manuscripts we have of it are from the 12th century. The reason that magic bowl texts survived was simply due to the fact that they were written with a permanent ink on earthenware pots that were buried soon after. Whereas, all other written material, letters, literature, receipts, accounts, Scripture, liturgy etc., everything, ... was written on materials such as vellum or parchment and were thus doomed to perish.

As I have just stated, fewer than five hundred bowls have been published so far. Over and above these, about a thousand or so in public and private collections are attracting a small number of scholars who are slowly deciphering them. The importance of these texts is considerable, and they can, without exaggeration, be considered on a similar scale of significance as the Cairo Geniza. They contain a substantial amount of important new material from the period in which rabbinic Judaism was being consolidated. Although only humble amulets, these texts contain a great wealth of information on a variety of subjects. They provide an insight into popular belief and custom that is complementary to the highly edited, often cryptic information that we have in the Talmud.² The Aramaic language in which these

² For magic in the Talmud see L. Blau, *Das Altjüdische Zauberwesen (Jahresbericht der Landes-Rabbineschule in Budapest für das Schuljahr 1897-88) (Strassburg: Trubner, 1898)*. For a more general survey of Jewish Magic see J. Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition* (New York: Atheneum, 1939; reprint, New York 1970).

texts are written is varied in terms of its dialects,³ which include both formal and colloquial aspects, not to mention a wealth of previously unattested verbal and noun forms as well as new lexemes all together. The bowls also contain a wealth of mythical stories from the various religious cultures of Late Antiquity,⁴ including early forms of liturgy,⁵ mystical literature⁶ and Biblical textual material, which in some cases happen to be their earliest known forms. The names of clients within them, of which we have in some cases whole families, are also revealing in that they tell us of the religious and cultural affiliation of their bearers. This complex of information in its entirety provides a glimpse into a world of intimate intercultural exchange between communities that have otherwise come to be perceived quite often as completely separate entities with well-defined boundaries.

One reason for the diversity of this material is probably due to the fact that these magical texts were produced by practitioners whose repute went beyond their own community; as indeed the variety of clients mentioned within them clearly attests. Furthermore, the esoteric nature of magical practice meant that the inclusion of elements that were not strictly from within the boundaries of conventional religion, or at least its outward public manifestation, seems to have been passed unchecked. Thus we

³ For the discussions on the dialect variation see T. Harviainen, "Diglossia in Jewish Eastern Aramaic," *Studia Orientalia* 55:2 (1983): 3-19; H. Juusola, "Linguistic Peculiarities in the Aramaic Magic Bowl Texts," *Studia Orientalia* 86 (1999); C. Müller-Kessler, "Aramäische Koiné - Ein Beschwörungsformular aus Mesopotamien," *Baghdader Mitteilungen* 29 (1998): 331-48; and C. Müller-Kessler and T. Kwasman, "A Unique Talmudic Aramaic Incantation Bowl," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 120, no. 2 (2000): 159-65.

⁴ See D. Levene, *Incantation Texts in Jewish Aramaic from Late Antiquity, A Corpus of Magic Bowls*. (London: Kegan Paul International, forthcoming). and D. Levene, "'... And by the Name of Jesus...' an Unpublished Magic Bowl in Jewish Aramaic," *JSQ* 6, no. 4 (1999): 283-308.

⁵ See J. Naveh and S. Shaked, *Magic Spells and Formulae* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1993), 22-31.

⁶ See S. Shaked, "'Peace Be Upon You Exalted Angels': On Hekhalot, Liturgy and Incantation Bowls," *JSQ* 2 (1995): 219-35.

have many texts which display what appear to be syncretistic forms of religion, that are, at first glance at least, rather surprising.⁷

*** The magic in the bowls.**

An enormous amount of ink has been spilled in endless discussions concerning the nature of magic. Anthropologists, archaeologists, historians, even philosophers⁸ have all pitched their fork into the mire. There are those who consider it a universal phenomenon that can be compared, like with like, across time and space. Others see it as only definable in terms of specific time and cultural frameworks. The term 'magic' can be very confusing, as it is one of those words that has different meanings in different cultural contexts and environments. Paul Daniels performs what we call magic; Hogwarts, where the fictional Harry Potter received his education, is the recently discovered school that specializes in teaching it. But neither of these concepts really applies to our bowls. This is not to say that the supernatural is not involved here; on the contrary, it is at its heart. The magic that is referred to in relation to our bowls is something that was, in one

⁷ See T. Harviainen, "Syncretistic and Confessional Features in Mesopotamian Incantation Bowls," *Studia Orientalia*, no. 70 (1993): 29-37.

⁸ Theoretical formulations concerning the nature of magic were being formed already in the nineteenth century, the beginning of which is most prominently marked by the the work of James Frazer (G. F. Frazer, *The Golden Bough, a Study in Magic and Religion* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1922)). Of the considerable literature that followed one might mention, for instance Malinowsky (B. Malinowsky, "Chapter V. The Art of Magic and the Power of Faith," in *Magic Science and Religion and Other Essays* (Glencoe: 1948).), Mauss (M. Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic*, trans. Translated from the French by Robert Brian (London, Boston: W. W. Norton & Company, 1972), 69-92), Evans-Pritchard (E. E. Evans-Pritchard, "Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande. Abridged with and Introduction by Eva Gillies," (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976)), and most recently Tambiah (S. J. Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion, and Scope for Rationality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990)) and Harari (Y. Harari, "Early Jewish Magic: Methodological and Phenomenological Studies" (PhD, The Hebrew University, 1998)).

sense, a common device that was available to people to help them deal with what might be considered, in the greater scope of things, as rather mundane, namely the everyday common woes of humanity which plague each and every generation. These include illness, misfortune, any kind of trouble, and, in some cases, just plain, good old-fashioned fear and depression. In another sense the mechanism from which the bowls derive their efficacy is rather extraordinary and shows up in some of the more literary of these texts elements from very esoteric mystical literature that would have been the preserve of a small elite of very learned men.

*** The earliest accounts.**

The first magic bowl texts were published in 1853 in Austin Layard's book *Discoveries in the Ruins of Nineveh and Babylon*.⁹ Of their discovery he offers this account:

The mound of Amran, as well as nearly all those in Babylonia, had been used as a place of burial for the dead long after the destruction of the great edifices whose ruins it covers. Some specimens of glass, and several terra-cotta figures, lamps, and jars, dug out of it, are evidently of the time of the Seleucidae or of the Greek occupation. With these relics were five cups or bowls of earthenware, and fragments of others, covered on the inner surface with letters written in a kind of ink. Similar objects had already been found in other Babylonian ruins. Two from the collection of the late Mr. Stewart had been deposited in the British Museum, and amongst the antiquities recently purchased by the Trustees from Colonel Rawlinson are eight specimens, obtained at Baghdad, where they are sometimes offered for sale by the Arabs; but it is not known from what sites they were brought. The characters upon them are in form not unlike the Hebrew, and on some they resembled the Sabaeen and Syriac. These bowls had not attracted notice, nor had the inscriptions upon them been fully examined before they were placed in the hands of Mr. Thomas Ellis, of the manuscript department in the British Museum, a gentleman of great learning and ingenuity as a Hebrew scholar. He

⁹ A.H. Layard, *Discoveries among the Ruins of Nineveh and Babylon* (New York: John Murray, 1853), 434-45.

has succeeded, after much labor, in deciphering the inscriptions of these singular relics.¹⁰

Indeed, Ellis's editions of these eight bowls were a breakthrough, and though his readings have since been greatly improved, his efforts can be credited as being the first serious treatment of these texts. Layard, who published Ellis's editions in his account of his excavations, did not, however, provide much of the finer detail concerning the circumstances in which the bowls were found. On the other hand, Hilprecht, who excavated at the turn of the 20th century, did provide a more graphic account:¹¹

... most of the one hundred bowls excavated while I was on the scene were found upside down in the ground, ... It is very evident that they had been placed thus intentionally, in order to prevent the demons adjured by the spiral inscription on the inner face of most of the vases, from doing any harm to the people living in that neighborhood. Sometimes two bowls facing one another had been cemented together with bitumen. In one case an inscribed hen's egg was concealed under the bowl. This egg, like the inscribed skulls previously reported, is probably to be regarded as a sacrifice to those demons to appease their wrath and check their evil influence.

John Punnett Peters, who also excavated in Nippur late in the 19th century, gives an additional account that is of interest:¹²

Kufic coins found in some of the houses of this settlement indicated that it was in existence as late as the seventh century AD. This Jewish town extended over a large part of the mounds to the southwest of the canal, from Camp Hill (marked I on the plan of the levels) to X, and is everywhere identifiable by the incantation bowls found in the houses, some of which are written in Syriac or even Arabic, although by far the larger part are in Jewish script.

Unfortunately, in most of the excavations where bowls were found, careful account of their positioning has been generally ignored, or neglected. This is to be lamented as many of the

¹⁰ Ibid., 511-12.

¹¹ H.V. Hilprecht, *Explorations in the Bible Lands During the 19th Century* (Philadelphia: 1903), 447.

¹² John Punnett Peters, in *Nippur, or Explorations and Adventures on the Euphrates* (New York and London: The Knickerbocker Press, 1897), 183-84.

bowls contain indications of their intended location within the house. These include the bedroom, the living room, the courtyard and the four corners of the house. Additionally, the bowls bear the names of their owners, of which we have whole family groups and indeed communities, which means that their location in a settlement could have been recorded. This negligence with regard to the bowls is probably to do with a generally low opinion that characterized late 19th and early 20th-century attitudes towards things magical. Magic was an aspect of culture that was regarded as rather vulgar, the importance of which was often deemed to be marginal.

No piece of work on the subject of magic bowls would be complete without the mention of James Montgomery, whose monumental work on the subject is still the corner stone of their study.¹³ His student Cyrus Gordon followed in his footsteps and published many bowls and produced a number of students who also made significant contributions to this growing field of study.

* **Shape and design.**

Magic bowls have been found in a variety of forms. The most common are round with round bases; similar in size and shape to an average cereal bowl (figure 1.). There are, however, others that are as small as an ash tray, and yet others that are as big as a generous salad bowl. Other unusual shapes include that of a goblet, of which there is only one known example (figure 2.); and there is also a small number of jug-shaped bowls, which are all of fairly similar shape (figure 3.).

The design of the application of the script and accompanying illustrations also varies. The most common of these is the spiral form (figure 4.). In bowls like these, the text usually starts at the bottom of the concave side of the bowl and flows in a clockwise

¹³ J.A. Montgomery, *Aramaic Incantation Texts from Nippur* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania. The Museum, Publications of the Babylonian Section, vol. III, 1913).

fashion towards the outer edge of the bowl. In some instances, the text flows over the edge and continues on the outer surface of the bowl. There is some variation to this design, found in a relatively small number of cases, where the text starts at the outer edge of the bowl and flows towards its centre. The second most common design is the three-section form. In these bowls the text covers the inside of the bowl in three equal sections, as with slices of a pie. The first line of the text starts at the middle of the bowl and flows in a straight line to the edge of the bowl. This is followed by a series of consecutive lines below the first until a third of the bowl is covered. The text is then resumed, covering the second and then third section of the bowl. In some very rare examples the text is divided into four sections, each covering a quarter of the surface of the bowl.¹⁴ More unusual shapes include: the sun shape,¹⁵ in which the text flows in a series of consecutive lines from the middle of the inner surface of the bowl surrounding its whole surface; the star/flower shape,¹⁶ in which the text flows in such a way as to produce a star shape filling the inner surface of the bowl; and, in one case, the text traces the shape of a man.¹⁷ Though most of the bowls have no writing on their outside, many do. Sometimes this consists of the text spilling out, so to speak, and over the edge of the bowl (figure 5).¹⁸ In other cases the name of the client and the opening of the formula is specified, and/or the location which the bowl was intended for, i.e. 'of the inner room, of the hall,' etc.¹⁹

¹⁴ Such a pair of bowls are found in the collection of the Vorderasiatisches Museum in Berlin (VA 3854 and VA 3853) the publication of which is forthcoming: "Heal O' Israel: A Pair of Duplicate Magic Bowls from the Pergamon Museum in Berlin," *JJS*.

¹⁵ MS 2053-205 (MS bowls cited here are bowls from the Martin Schøyen collection which will be published in the near future by Shaul Shaked).

¹⁶ MS 1928-19.

¹⁷ MS 1928-46.

¹⁸ M59.

¹⁹ See, for instance, Montgomery's Bowl 12 line 13 (Montgomery, *Aramaic Incantation Texts from Nippur*, 174.).

One of the most eye-catching aspects of the bowls is the drawings found within them. Such graphic elements mostly occur within the bowl in its centre. They can, however, be found on any part of the bowl, inside or out. Most frequently, these are depictions of bound demons (figure 6.), shackled hand and foot. This could be understood as a form of sympathetic magic, that is to say, that just as the demon is bound in the drawing on the bowl, so too it is bound in real life and thus rendered harmless. Many of the demons thus depicted are identifiable as being female and possessing feathered bird-like legs with claws (figure 7.).²⁰ In other bowls there are what appear to be depictions of fierce angels (figure 8.), much like those described in early Jewish mystical texts such as are found in the Hekhalot and Merkabah literature. In other bowls magical symbols are also found; in most cases the meanings of these are, as yet, unknown. Occasionally there are also depictions of animals such as dogs (figure 9.), scorpions (figure 10.), and hybrids of various creatures.²¹

*** The language of the bowl texts.**

The majority of magic bowls are written in Jewish Aramaic (figure 11.). These texts often include some portions of Hebrew, that consist, most commonly, of biblical citations. Within these there is a wide variety of styles of calligraphy. One may ascribe these differences to a number of possible factors. When the texts are of a good quality, the differences might be due to scribes who were working in different parts of the country or, indeed, were the products of different training schools or ateliers. In other cases the differences seem to result from poor writing skills and schooling. In some cases a text is so bad that one wonders if it was the work of an illiterate copyist rather than a scribe. Such texts are often distinguished by the fact that they display irregular handwriting,

²⁰ For more on this aspects of the demons see below.

²¹ A study of the iconography that appears in magic bowls is an important subject, that has, unfortunately, not yet been attempted.

more than the normal share of anomalies, and mistakes that are more likely to be attributed to a lack of understanding and ability rather than to such factors as transmission and acceptable levels of scribal error. Although the script in which these texts are written still lacks a distinction between certain letters, such as, for instance, *heh* (ה) and *het* (ח) or *waw* (ו) and *yod* (י),²² in some of the better ones a style can be discerned approaching that which we find in later, medieval, rabbinical manuscripts. The second largest group of texts is written in Mandaic script (figure 12.) that was used by the Gnostic Mandaean to write their dialect of Aramaic.²³ The third group in size is that of bowls written in Syriac in what is referred to as Syriac Manichaean.²⁴ (figure 13.) Most of these seem to have been written by Gnostics although there are a number that were clearly written by Christians.²⁵ There is yet another, even smaller, group of bowls that is written in a very cursive form of Pahlavi (figure 14.). Of this group none have yet been deciphered. There is one other group of writing that is referred to as gibberish and usually consists of one or a number of squiggles, or badly-written letters that are repeated several times. In some cases, however, it might be assumed that these represent secret or mystical characters, in others it is quite possible that the scribe who was plying his trade was, nevertheless, illiterate.

²² Montgomery, *Aramaic Incantation Texts from Nippur*, 27-28; W.H. Rossell, *A Handbook of Aramaic Magical Texts*, ed. Shelton Semitic Series, vol. 2 (New Jersey: 1953) 13-15.

²³ See E. Yamauchi, *Mandaic Incantation Texts*, vol. 49, *American Oriental Series* (New Haven, Connecticut: 1967).

²⁴ See J. Teixidor, "The Syriac Incantation Bowls in the Iraq Museum," *Sumer* 18 (1962) and S. Shaked, "Manichaean Incantation Bowls in Syriac," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, no. 24 (2000).

²⁵ See for example J.A. Montgomery, "A Syriac Incantation Bowl with Christian Formula," *AJSLL* 34 (1917/8).

*** Social context and technology.**

Before looking at some of the specific types of texts, it is worth considering the human context of a practice that might seem to us today at best bizarre and at worst a lot of mumbo jumbo. Magic bowls are a type of object and text that represents popular religion.²⁶ That is, they are an expression of beliefs that go beyond, or are in addition to, formal religious conventions of practice. The term 'popular' reflects a general set of beliefs found to have been common to all of the peoples of the Near East in Late Antiquity. In very simplified terms, what characterizes this form of popular religion is a belief that we humans share the world with a plethora of supernatural beings that consist of numerous categories of angels, a myriad of spirits and demons and in some cases a whole host of gods and goddesses. These supernatural beings, though undetected by the naked eye, were nevertheless considered as forces that had an important effect on human life. As we shall see, demons and spirits were often depicted as personifications of illness. These hindrances could only be combated within their own supernatural realm which is, in normal circumstances, inaccessible to mortals. The extraordinary technology by which one could rally other supernatural forces to fight the battle for you in that inaccessible realm was what we term as magic, and is in fact specifically what we find in our bowls. Magic bowls were tailor-made for each client independently, and though there is a great number of different formulae, the magic incantations do have some kind of common structure. A writer of amulets could combine various elements in different combinations and produce similar but different incantations for different clients. He could, so to speak, mix and match a variety of opening formulae, lists of demons, and powerful names. This depended on his knowledge, or if his repertoire was great, on what the client could afford to pay.

²⁶ See S. Shaked, "Popular Religion in Sasanian Babylonia," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 21 (1997).

*** The formulae in the bowl.**

M149 (figure 15.) is an incantation with a relatively standard structure that will serve to illustrate a basic principal form upon which we can later elaborate when discussing more complex examples. This is a fairly standard-looking bowl. There are three lines of characters which are some what obscured and which are set in what might roughly be termed as the shape of the English letter 'Y'. From what I could make out, these characters represent, at least in part, a permutation of the tetragrammaton, יהוה (YHWH), which is a holy name of God. Thereafter, the text consists of seven lines of text that are written in a fairly neat and probably learned hand. The main part of the text runs as follows (the division of the text into three parts is my own and made only for the purposes of illustrating the structure of the text as will become clear in what follows):

1. ... (5) By your name I make (this magical act).
2. Sealed and counter-sealed are the house, dwelling, possessions, (6) sons, daughters, cattle, foetus, seed and soul of Ahai son of (7) Ispandarmid and Ispandarmid daughter of Qiomta his wife, and all the members of their household. They are sealed and counter-sealed (8) from a demon, from a persecutor (שׂוֹטֵט), from a male and female idol (אִדֹּלִים), from a Lilith - male and female, from (9) a male or a female, from evil sorceries/sorcerers, from an evil eye and evil envy, from ... and anything evil.
3. (11) They are all sealed and counter-sealed by the name of YH YHWH Sebaot. Amen amen selah, hallelujah hallelujah.

The first section of the text in this incantation is a general declaration of the purpose and nature of the magical act which the bowl is intended to fulfill. The statement that the invocation is made by the power of a name is significant and to some extent crucial for understanding the technical rationale that lies behind this type of magical object. The driving principle, the force which drives the action, is linked to the idea that the utterance of sounds, commands if you wish, were part of the procedure of

creation itself. Thus it was believed that there were various combinations of characters that inherently contained something of the powers that transformed the primordial soup into the world we know. What we have in the magic bowls is what is referred to as 'word magic', i.e. the belief that the knowledge of certain combinations of letters and words would provide one who knew and used them with the ability to bring supernatural forces into play in a directed manner.

It is worth noting that the narrative of Ex 3:13, 14 is significant in the formation of the magical myths that support the concept and practice of the use of magical names.

[13] And Moses said unto God, Behold, when I come unto the children of Israel, and shall say unto them, The God of your fathers hath sent me unto you; and they shall say to me, What is his name? what shall I say unto them?

[14] And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you.²⁷

As stated above, the opening line of this bowl text is only one of a considerable variety of opening formulae that were used. Other common examples are: a) 'Healing (אצותא) from heaven shall be for,' followed by the name of the client and what the healing is required for, usually a list of supernatural malefactors and/or illnesses. b) 'By your name, Lord of healing, Great savior of love,' again usually followed by the name of the client and list of demons. And c) 'This is an amulet for the pressing (לכירבשא) of,' followed by the name of the client's human foe and the client's name. Such an opening is for a formula that although aggressive

²⁷ The power of the name that was revealed to Moses at the burning bush is reiterated in a number of places in magically related literature. A book of magical recipes that is traditionally ascribed to Moses, probably the most obvious example, is the *Sword of Moses* (Moses Gaster, "The Sword of Moses," in *Studies and Texts in Folklore, Magic, Mediaeval Romance, Hebrew Apocrypha, and Samaritan Archaeology* / *Collected and Reprinted by Moses Gaster. Prolegomenon by Theodor Gaster* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1928; reprint, 1971) and Y. Harari, *קורבא דמשח : מודדורה חודשה ומקור* (Jerusalem: 1997)).

from one perspective, is nevertheless, in essence also protective. I shall say more about this genre of text later.²⁸

The second section of our text provides the name of the client, the existing as well as future members of his household, his property and possessions. Note the fact that the name of the mother of the client is mentioned. This is always the case in Jewish magical texts and is thought to be due to an acknowledgment of the fact that one can only be certain of the maternal parentage, whereas the identity of the father could never be totally ascertained. The list of demons in the text is interesting and can provide some background information about the development of these traditions, and even provide an aspect of historical context. The *satana* (שטן), 'the persecutor', is derived from Persian and means 'adversary' within a legal context. This is like another common term, *dewa* (דיו), which can also be traced to Persian in which it describes a type of devil or demon. Another common term, that does not appear in our text but is nevertheless very common, is the *shed* (שד) derived from Akkadian *sheddu*, which originally meant 'protective deity' or 'household god'. This etymology is an important clue as to the origin of some of these categories of demons; once feared gods, they had become, in time, feared demons. As it is today, so too, in Late Antiquity, Mesopotamia was littered with ancient ruins that were inhabited by impressive, often frightening images of the gods of old; gods that had long been replaced. It is no surprise that in the Babylonian Talmud²⁹ we find a warning that states that: 'one must not go into a ruin: because of suspicion, of falling debris and of demons.' In Babylonia one might well find, in the ruins of ancient temples, the images of gods like

²⁸ For a discussion of opening formulae in magic bowls see T. Harviainen, "Pagan Incantations in Aramaic Incantation Bowls," in *Studia Aramaica, New Sources and New Approaches*, ed. M. J. Geller, J. C. Greenfield and M. P. Weitzman, *Journal of Semitic Studies Supplement 4* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 53-60.

²⁹ Berakhot 3a.



Figure 1. M123



Figure 2. M112



Figure 3. M113



Figure 4. M156



Figure 5. M59



Figure 6. M66



Figure 7. M59



Figure 8. M107



Figure 9. M120

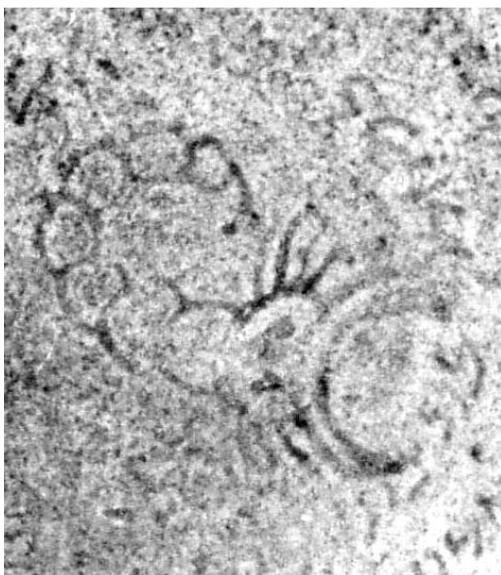


Figure 10. M53

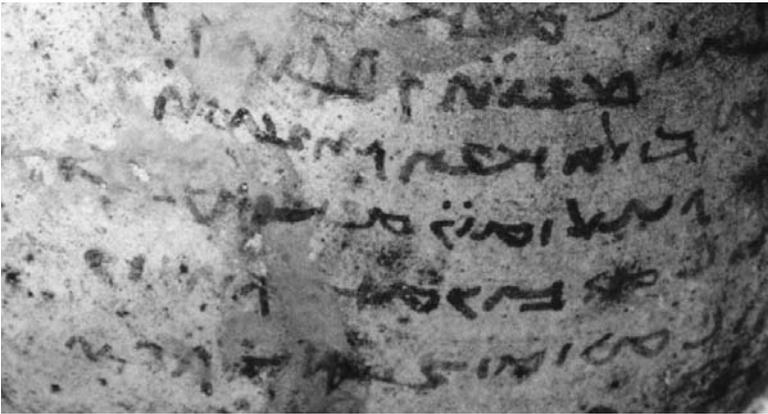


Figure 13.



Figure 14.



Figure 15. M149

Innana, also known as Ishtar, who was, in her time, the most important goddess in Mesopotamia. Innana was a goddess that was associated with war and sex, yet by the time of our bowls she was demoted to the mere rank of a category of demon which could be either male or female. Depictions show her with wings and bird feet,³⁰ features that are also attributed in the Talmud to Lilith and other demons.³¹ Lilith is another category of demon that features commonly in the bowls, and it is during this period that she begins to emerge from the status of a category of demon to an individual personification of the evil and lascivious child-snatcher who interferes in the relations of couples.³² The origin of the lil demons is probably two-fold. On the one hand, we have the ancient Babylonian Ardat-lilit who is the type of spirit formed from the untimely death of a girl or maiden who has never had sex or borne children. This kind of spirit was thought to have been condemned to eternal unrest as she yearned for such fulfillment and took her frustration out on pregnant women and young babies.³³ The other precursor of Lilith is the Babylonian goddess Lamshtu who is described as having the head of a lion, the teeth of a donkey, naked breasts on which a leopard and piglet suckled, a hairy body, bird's feet and bloody hands with long finger-nails, each clutching a snake. Her mission was to do evil, and her chief victims were unborn and newly-born babies. Her only adversary was the demonic god Pazuzu who pushed her into the underworld. It is noteworthy that the demons depicted in the bowls have birds' feet with claws like Innana, Pazuzu and Lamashtu as well as other features such as claws and the animal-like face that we find in these Mesopotamian precursors.

³⁰ As seen in the Burney relief.

³¹ See Babylonian Talmud Eruvin 100b and Niddah 24b.

³² M. Gaster, "Two Thousand Years of a Charm against the Child-Stealing Witch," *Folk-Lore* 11 (46) (1900): 129-62.

³³ See M. J. Geller, "New Duplicates to Sbtu II," *Archiv für Orientforschung* XXXV (1988): 1-23.

* Magic and Medicine.

In Late Antiquity, and earlier on, magic and medicine are inextricably connected. Note, for instance, that the Aramaic word *asuta* (אסוּתָא), 'healing', which is common in magical texts can be connected to 'healing' as we understand it in a medical text, as well as 'salvation' from demons and evil spirits as we have seen in the magical text (see opening formula example a above). Interestingly enough, this is a feature that can be found also in the Greek vocabulary within magical texts of the early centuries. This is not surprising as the relationship between what we would refer to as magical practices and medical treatment have a long history of association. We know already from early Akkadian records of the co-operation between the *asu*, the 'physician' and the *ashipu*, the 'sorcerer'. The association between the medical and magical can also be observed in Late Antique Jewish Babylonian Aramaic in the use of such terms as *baruqty* (ברוקתי)³⁴ meaning 'cataract' and *tsilcheta* (צילחֵתָא)³⁵ referring to 'migraine' which are also rendered as 'the spirit *bariqta*' (רוּחַ בְּרִיקְתָא) and 'the spirit *tsilcheta*' (רוּחַ צִילְחֵתָא).³⁶ Here we see, in a very literal sense, how the name of an illness becomes personified as a spirit, a form in which it can be comprehended and combated.

The third and final section of our incantation is a conclusion in which the authority by which this incantation has gained its efficacy is cited. Thus we can observe how the magical incantation has the form of a legal document with the name of the client and his/her adversaries (supernatural or human) and the agency by which the edict that it dictates is enforced. It operates on the premise that, provided it is properly written and set out, a chain of events will ensue. The appropriate forces will click into action and

³⁴ Babylonian Talmud Gittin 69a and Pesachim 111b.

³⁵ Babylonian Talmud Gittin 68b and Shabbat 60a.

³⁶ M1:3 and M1:5 respectively (Shaked, "'Peace Be Upon You Exalted Angels': On Hekhalot, Liturgy and Incantation Bowls," 207).

the demons or evil spirits will have no choice and be compelled as by law to depart.

*** The purposes for which magic bowls were used.**

There is a variety of purposes for which magic bowls themselves state to have been used. The first and most obvious is for general protection for the client, his or her family and possessions, as indeed the text we just looked at professes to supply. More specific designations are, however, also common. M155 includes the following plea:

This amulet shall be to heal Mahadukh (2) daughter of Neiwandukh. May she be healed from the spirit of the belly ... may the spirit of *blood* which is in Mahadukh daughter of Neiwandukh be annulled, and may her belly and interior dry up (10) from menstrual blood, and may it not cause her blood to come out. ... may they [i.e. the forces invoked] dry and nullify the blood from the womb of Mahadukh daughter of Neiwandukh ... accept this rebuke and carry away the evil spirit from the belly of Mahadukh daughter of Neiwandukh.

We may only speculate on the condition that this text is intended to remedy. Was this lady, who by the way is known to have commissioned a large number of bowls, in fear of miscarrying? Was she suffering from after-birth bleeding? Or was she suffering from the onset of menopausal bleeding. We cannot really know for a number of reasons. One is the danger of equating ancient descriptions of physical conditions with modern medical terminology, without having actually inspected the patient. The other reason is that in magical texts it is not uncommon for such descriptions as this to turn up in other texts, suggesting that they are textual formulae and not medical diagnoses. Nevertheless, it is clear that this bowl was intended to remedy a problem, or problems, that are connected with the female physiognomy.

In another bowl, M156, we find the following description:

May there be healing from heaven for Mahadukh daughter of Neiwandukh. ... [from] the spirit that lies between graves, and the

spirit that lies down between roofs and the spirit that lies down in her body, in her head, in her temple, in her ear, in the socket of the eye of Mahadukh daughter of Neiwandukh.

Again, we cannot ascertain from this text what exactly Mahadukh daughter of Neiwandukh suffered from. The terminology is, however, very interesting. The roof demon that is mentioned here is associated from very early antiquity with epilepsy,³⁷ and so the other symptoms described here are indicative of such a condition, or something similar to it. Incidentally, in this case the formula describing the illness also appears in a medieval magical document from the Geniza,³⁸ confirming that it is a standard formula and not a physician's diagnosis. Nevertheless, the terminology is useful to note, especially for a comparison with other magical and medical texts.

This crossover between medical and magical terminology is a testament to the relationship these two aspects of life had within the communities of Late Antiquity. It is clear that our definitions of medical and magical, and the dichotomy inherently implied in our use of these two terms is, in many ways, inappropriate in trying to understand and reconstruct the world view of the authors, the bowls and their clients.

A section of another interesting bowl text (M142) illustrates the kind of fears that our bowls were meant to counteract:

'I am he, the swift prince who cries out in the presence of the Lord of the world concerning the babies of women that are snatched.' *Bursting out*, thus he said: 'I sat upon the graves of the dead and heard the voice of women *wailing and in pain*, crying and sobbing ... *crying out* in one voice.' And thus they said: 'We are seeing an image of lightning, in the image of clouds they were brought *to me* that we may see the four great creatures who are sent against the babies.' One of

³⁷ M. Stol, *Epilepsy in Babylonia, Cuneiform Monographs 2* (Groningen: Styx Publications, 1993), 18.

³⁸ See T.-S. K. 1.56 1a 1.17 (P. Schäfer and S. Shaked, *Magische Texte aus der Kairoer Geniza*, vol. I (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1994), 31), and T.-S. NS 322.29 1b 1.6 וְיַדֵּי אֲתָרִי (P. Schäfer and S. Shaked, *Magische Texte aus der Kairoer Geniza*, vol. II (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), 335).

them is MBD[.]YTA', one of them is A'MWMYTA', one of them is BLYLYTA' and *ŠHLYT daughter of YMA'*. These are the ones that strangle, harm, *finish off* and eat. As the lion snatches and strangles, finishes off and eats, these are the ones that strangle, snatch, finish off and eat.

Here we have a story that is told by an angel, probably Metatron, who pleads on behalf of women whose babies have died. This might refer to miscarriage, or early death of a newborn. A concern that was surely common and for which any measure of protection was worth taking.

Yet another use for a magical bowl incantation, which is, by the way, very rare in this genre, is the love charm. An example of this appears in Montgomery 28:³⁹

Appointed is this bowl to the account of Anur ... bar Parkoi, that he be inflamed and kindled and burn after Ahath bath Nebazak. Amen.

The essence of this text is simple. The lady in question has commissioned this bowl in the hope that Anur son of Parkoi might develop an uncontrollable lust for her. The reason for her desire is not specified; it could be that this man was her husband who had lost interest in her. Alternatively, it is possible that she was either enamoured with him or was after a good match.

A final example of a genre of text, of which I have discovered a number, is of a type that might be perceived to be curse texts. The following is culled from M102:

This mystery is appointed for overturning sorceries, so that they [the sorceries] may be overturned from Safra son of Rabita and turn back against Ahatoi daughter of Ahati and against Ahati and against all who sent them. May [the sorceries] be turned back against all who made them and sent them and recited them. ... May all the healings that have been made for her come out badly. ... The curses of the earth and of the heavens and of the dead and of the living ... May they be dispatched against this Ahatoi and (this) Abirta. May no remedy or dissolving of sorceries be received for them ... May the evil sorceries be as mountains and high places and clothe Ahatoi and Abirta with

³⁹ Montgomery, *Aramaic Incantation Texts from Nippur*, 213.

evil sorceries as a garment of sores. May evil sorceries be drawn against them, and may they come to rest upon Ahatoi and Abirta, and may they sweep upon them like birds.

All the above mentioned examples of types of text, even the so called curse text cited above, can be seen as protection, or in the case of the love charm as a form of a plea for help (that is, if we consider that that particular text was commissioned to address a problem rather than a type of aggressive erotic magic; as is well known from the Greek magic⁴⁰). The problems that these people had to deal with are universal; they represent, as I have stated above, the diet of misfortune that was common to all the communities of that era.

*** Intercultural relations as reflected in magic bowls.**

The Jews were one of a number of communities in Mesopotamia. They were a minority, but a significant one, which by some theoretical estimates might have reached close to one million.⁴¹ The questions of how cohesive they were as a community, what factions they were composed of and, whether we would even recognize some of them as Jews at all are big questions in themselves. What the bowls show us is the fact that, at least in terms of popular beliefs, the Jews were a people of their age. Their understanding of illness and misfortune as linked to a reality that extends beyond into the supernatural realm, a realm that they believed could be accessed and interacted with, is an understanding that was common to all the peoples of the Near East. Such beliefs and practices were what made the difference between a feeling of total helplessness in the face of misfortune, that was not necessarily governed or caused by anything that could obviously be perceived, and a sense that there actually was the extraordinary possibility of influencing the

⁴⁰ See C. A. Faraone, *Ancient Greek Love Magic* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999).

⁴¹ See J. Neusner, *A History of the Jews in Babylonia. Vol. 2 : The Early Sassanian Period* (Leiden : Brill, 1965-1970), 245-49.

outcome of such circumstances. Surely, if nothing else, such beliefs, based as they were on long-held traditions, at least offered a sense of hope. It might not be an exaggeration to equate the belief in the efficacy of these practices to the faith we have in modern medicine and science. Most of us do not always understand why and how they work, yet we recognize that they are the technologies of our age that are held in great esteem. Indeed, there are those that refer to many of the magical practices of Late Antiquity as a form of technology.

Magic had a cross-cultural currency and dealt with issues that were not culture specific, which explains why people did not always choose practitioners according to their cultural affiliation, but according to reputation. This aspect of the nature of magic might be one of the reasons why we find considerable evidence of cross-cultural fertilization within magical texts. Indeed, Jewish bowls are no different in this respect to the amulets and magic books of others in that period who borrowed quite freely from each other. References to non-Jewish gods and other powers in the Jewish Aramaic magic bowls raise interesting questions about how such foreign elements came to be included in seemingly Jewish texts. It is not always easy to identify the processes of transmission by which such elements crossed cultural and linguistic boundaries to be used by the Jewish sorcerers. Needless to say, we know from the Mandaic and Syriac Manichaean bowls, as well as the Greek magical papyri,⁴² that this phenomenon of cross-cultural exchange was not unique to the Jewish magical texts, but was a common feature of the magical products of the Near East in Late Antiquity in general. Montgomery believed that the magic bowls 'and in a general way, all Jewish magic, has come out of the crucible of the Graeco-Roman world' and was therefore 'not Jewish but eclectic.'⁴³ Indeed, Hellenistic influence on Jewish magic is very obvious in

⁴² H. D. Betz and H. J. Johnson, *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation, Including the Demotic Spells*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), xlvi-xlvii.

⁴³ Montgomery, *Aramaic Incantation Texts from Nippur*, 9.

Sepher Ha-Razim IV:61-63 where a prayer to Helios occurs.⁴⁴ Other pagan gods, such as 'the Mesopotamian and Syrian Belti, Nereg, Nanai, Shamish, Dilbat and Mot; the Iranian Anahid, Danahish, Bagdana,'⁴⁵ as well as the Christian Holy Trinity⁴⁶ are invoked in Jewish Aramaic bowls. Conversely, the Jewish Iao Sabaoth is the most commonly invoked name in the Greek papyri. An unusual but nevertheless good example of borrowing from Jewish sources occurs in a Mandaic bowl (McCullough D)⁴⁷ that adjures 'in the name of Metatron HLDH who serves before the curtain,' which appears to be a quote from an unidentified Hekhalot text.⁴⁸ Harviainen provides a possible explanation to the, apparently, syncretistic tendencies of our magical texts and states that: '*Horror vacui*, the avoidance, or fear, of empty space, is a leading principle of popular magic. To be on the safe side it is also worthwhile to pay attention to foreign cults, demons, and deities.'⁴⁹ On the other hand, the syncretistic aspects present in many of these texts led Montgomery to be cautious in considering the attribution of the bowls according to their types of script. His opinion was that 'the

⁴⁴ M. Margalioth, *Sepher Ha-Razim. A Newly Recovered Book of Magic from the Talmudic Period*. (Jerusalem: Yediot Acharonot, 1966), 37.

⁴⁵ J. Naveh and S. Shaked, *Amulets and Magic Bowls, Aramaic Incantations of Late Antiquity*, 2nd ed. (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1987), 37.

⁴⁶ M163, see Levene, "'... And by the Name of Jesus...' an Unpublished Magic Bowl in Jewish Aramaic". In this bowl there are invocations of the pagan 'Shamish king of the gods,' the Jewish magical names 'Iam that I am God the Lord of Hosts,' and the Christian Holy Trinity 'by the name of Jesus who conquered the height and the depth by his cross and by the name of his exalted father and by the name of the holy spirits.'

⁴⁷ W.S. McCullough, *Jewish and Mandaean Incantation Bowls in the Royal Ontario Museum* (Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1967), 28-47.

⁴⁸ For more discussion concerning this reference see B.A. Levine, "the Language of the Magic Bowls," in *A History of the Jews in Babylonia*, ed. Jacob Neusner (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1970), 358-59. and J. C. Greenfield, "Notes on Some Aramaic and Mandaic Magic Bowls," *The Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society of Columbia University* 5 (The Gaster Festschrift) (1973): 154-56.

⁴⁹ Harviainen, "Pagan Incantations in Aramaic Incantation Bowls," 53.

magic of our bowls is so eclectic that even a "Jewish"-Aramaic text does not imply a Jewish exorcist.⁵⁰ Shaked has, however, contended that although there are cases in which the Jewishness of a text might be argued, there is nevertheless no compelling evidence that anyone but a Jew would use the Jewish Aramaic script.⁵¹ The use, by clients, of practitioners of other faiths other than their own is attested by the fact that bowls written in different dialects were, on occasion, found in the same house.⁵² Additionally, we know of a certain Dadbeh bar Asmandukh, for whom bowls were written in both Jewish Aramaic⁵³ and Syriac.⁵⁴ Thus, although, we might propose that practitioners of a particular faith wrote only in the dialect particular to them (i.e. Jews wrote in Jewish Aramaic, Mandaean wrote in Mandaic, etc.), we can see that customers were likely, at least in some cases, to venture beyond their own religious communities and obtain the services of practitioners of other faiths. The evidence clearly suggests that there is no obligation to assume that the religion of the sorcerer and client are synonymous.

Another aspect that testifies to the extent of the cultural exchange is the fact that we have duplicate texts across the different language groups. A particularly interesting case, recorded and published by Müller-Kessler, is of three texts: one in

⁵⁰ Montgomery, *Aramaic Incantation Texts from Nippur*, 50.

⁵¹ S. Shaked, "Jesus in the Magic Bowls. Apropos Dan Levene's '... And by the Name of Jesus...'," *JSQ* 6, no. 4 (1999): 314.

⁵² See John Punnett Peters, *Nippur, or Explorations and Adventures on the Euphrates*, vol. 2 (New York and London: The Knickerbocker Press, 1897): 187. In the 1989 excavations at Nippur that were carried out by the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, there was also a case recorded in which a pair of bowls in Jewish Aramaic were found in the same house as a pair in Mandaic (E.C.D. Hunter, "Combat and Conflict in Incantation Bowls: Studies on Two Aramaic Specimens from Nippur," in *Studia Aramaica: New Sources and New Approaches, Journal of Semitic Studies*, ed. M.J. Geller, J.C. Greenfield and M.P. Weitzman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 62.).

⁵³ Montgomery's bowls 12 and 16 (Montgomery, *Aramaic Incantation Texts from Nippur*, 174 and 88.).

⁵⁴ Montgomery's bowls 31 and 33 (*Ibid.*, 223 and 30.).

Jewish Aramaic, another in Syriac and a third in Mandaic, which all include the same formula with only minor differences.⁵⁵ This is the first attested case in which a formula is found in all three of the major dialects of the magic bowls. These texts bear witness that such formulae were transmitted from one religious community to another. One can only speculate about the way in which such material was passed on. Were such texts copied from one language into another, or were they passed on orally? It is possible that magicians of different religious groups exchanged trade secrets or consulted with each other on professional matters. We are told in the Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 116a that Mar Samuel and a certain Babylonian priest called Ablat discussed medical-astronomical issues together.⁵⁶ Was it the work of converted magicians who brought their old stock of trade with them across into new communities? As the world of magic, with its syncretistic tendencies, was so secretive and evidence so sparse, the answers to these questions are elusive.

To conclude with the title of my talk, 'Curse or Blessing?'. Well, most magic bowl texts are certainly blessings. Others, if not blessings, might be termed, at least, blessed curses.

⁵⁵ Müller-Kessler, "Aramäische Koiné - Ein Beschwörungssformular aus Mesopotamien."

⁵⁶ M. J. Geller, "The Last Wedge," *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie* 87 (1997): 57.

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Southampton's links with Jewish Studies go back to the beginning of the last century when Claude Montefiore became president of the University College of Southampton (1913-1934). The Parkes Library for the Study of Jewish/ non-Jewish Relations was established within the University in 1964, which included, besides Montefiore's personal library, the massive private collection of James Parkes. Since then, the study of Jewish History and Culture has developed enormously at the University of Southampton. The institute's activities include the teaching of a wide variety of specialist courses in Jewish History and Culture that contribute to BA, MA and PhD programmes; a dedicated team of research specialists in Jewish Studies on the teaching staff; a prestigious research centre dedicated to the study of Jewish/non-Jewish relations; and the superb resources of the Parkes Library and archives.

The Parkes Institute for the Study of Jewish / non-Jewish Relations website: <http://www.soton.ac.uk/~parkes>
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We welcome enquiries, and are happy to answer requests for further information. We also offer a number of opportunities for you to visit us and would be pleased to welcome you here as a guest.