INTRODUCTION

The Historical, Literary and Religious Context

Magic texts written on earthenware bowls in several dialects of Aramaic form the object of the present study; they constitute a peculiar phenomenon that is limited in place and time.\(^1\) We can be certain that they were produced during the sixth and seventh centuries CE. One may suppose that the practice began somewhat earlier, in the fifth or possibly even the fourth century CE, and may have continued until the early eighth century CE.\(^2\) The area where they were used appears to have been mainly Mesopotamia. Some bowls have been found in the western part of what is nowadays Iran, in the area of Khuzistan, perhaps more specifically in Susa, one of the centres of Persian administration since the Achaemenian period, and still an important town under the Sasanians.\(^3\) This is not entirely surprising, considering that both regions were part of the Sasanian empire at the time.

It is not easy to understand the sudden appearance of this practice in the Sasanian period, or its cessation in the early Islamic period. The texts, written on the surface of the bowls, are not conspicuously different from those produced for similar purposes on other surfaces, most commonly on sheets of metal (lead, bronze, silver or gold), known to us from the western regions, Palestine and Syria (and, in the case of Mandaic, from Mesopotamia). The main discernible difference is that the texts on the bowls are usually written in a much larger ductus and tend to be more extensive. This is because the surface of a bowl provides more room for writing (with the exception of leather amulets, of which we have some rare specimens).\(^4\) In addition, there are obvious differences in the type of Aramaic used in these two main regions, Syria-Palestine and Babylonia, and there are also differences as regards the prevalent cultural milieu, Hellenism and Roman culture in Palestine and its environs, as against an Iranian-Semitic syncretism in Babylonia. An obvious difference in the mode of use of bowls as against amulets on metal sheets is the fact that the latter are easy to fit into a small container that can be carried on the person of

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1. Some of the following observations apply primarily to the Jewish incantation bowls. The Mandaean and Christian bowls deserve a separate study. An extensive discussion of the Babylonian magic bowls may be found in Harari 2005, 59–82; see also Shaked 2006b; Bohak 2008, 193–195. For a historical perspective, see Morony 2003 and Morony 2007.

2. For a recent survey of the various proposals for dating the incantation bowls, based on archaeological and/or paleographical considerations, see Faraj 2010, 17–18 and the bibliography cited there. A number of bowls bearing specific dates have recently come to light and are being prepared for publication by S. Shaked and J.N. Ford. The dates range from 545 CE [1 Adar II, 856] (JNF 194) to 611 CE [28 Sivan, 922] (JNF 158). In the Schøyen Collection one finds the dates 573/4 CE [Kislev, 885] (MS 2053/284) and 580 CE [8 Adar II, 891] (MS 2053/19). No bowls with dates after the Islamic conquest of Iraq (beginning in 633 CE) are presently extant, but two bowls written partly in Arabic have recently come to light, one of which can be dated with certainty to the reign of Mu’āwiya (661–680 CE). The bowls are being prepared for publication by J.N. Ford. Both were prepared for a certain Farrokhzād son of Kumay, who is otherwise known to have possessed a considerable number of well executed bowls in JBA, Syriac and Mandaic. One of his Syriac bowls was recently published in Abousamra 2010. A Mandaic bowl possessed by an individual with this name was reedited in Müller-Kessler 1996. As the bowl was acquired early in the twentieth century, it may not have belonged to the same person, but an unpublished Mandaic bowl in a private collection names our Farrokhzād along with other known members of his family. Others written in JBA and Syriac are being prepared for publication by J.N. Ford. The quantity and quality of the bowls that this individual owned are eloquent proof that the custom of writing incantation bowls still flourished during the first decades after the Islamic conquest of Iraq.

3. These are mostly conserved in the Louvre Museum, Paris, as I was told by Professor Myriam Rosen-Ayalon, whom I wish to thank (SS). A search conducted some years ago in the Louvre collection did not succeed in locating them. For additional references to incantation bowls excavated in Iran, see Gordon 1951, 306.

4. See, e.g., Gignoux 1987, where three Syriac texts are published. They are made for one client, a woman by the name of Khwarr-weh-zād (thus read by Gignoux, but this could also be interpreted as Khwarrōzād, with the ke serving as a mater lectionis), nicknamed Yazdān-zādag, daughter of Dēnaq. The editor assigns these texts conjecturally to sixth or seventh-century Iran (Gignoux 1987, 2).
its owner or, in some cases, stuck in a niche on a wall (as perhaps was done with the amulets found in synagogues in Palestine), while bowls can only be used in a stationary position, most commonly buried under the ground, often under the threshold of a house.

One reason for the popularity of bowls as a surface for writing spells in Babylonia must have been the fact that the material from which bowls were produced—clay—was handy, inexpensive and easy to inscribe, as opposed to other materials that were sometimes used for writing, such as leather, metal or stone. Parchment may indeed have also frequently been used, despite its relatively high cost, but only a few specimens from this general period have survived. The climate of Babylonia, which was not favourable for the preservation of leather, may be responsible for the small number preserved. A considerable number of metal amulets from Babylonia have survived, but these are invariably in Mandaic. Amulets on gems or stones are quite plentiful, but they are for the most part devoid of substantial text. Only very few inscribed gems have come down to us.

These considerations are valid for the period preceding the fifth century ce as well as for the one following the seventh century ce. They can hardly explain the great surge in the use of bowls in the period under consideration. It is true that the Sasanian era was one in which there was much religious debate concerning received religious traditions, especially with regard to questions concerning the eschatological period and life after death. This probing was chiefly attested within the Zoroastrian community, but Jewish and Christian thinkers were also preoccupied with such questions. It was out of these debates that a new Zoroastrian orthodoxy emerged. Among the Jews, the Babylonian schools were at their height. Although these schools were largely concerned with the legal definitions of the religious injunctions, there were undercurrents of religious fervour, and a strong sense of the presence of spirits and demons that had considerable effect on human life. There was also a tendency towards visionary mysticism in the form of journeys to the upper worlds. In Christianity, the basic tenets of the faith were formulated, and the major theological points were discussed. Magic is typically concerned with the more intimate and immediate concerns of the individual, and reflects minor frictions within society. It addresses the worries of the individual concerning problems of health, the assault of malevolent powers, or a lack of control over one's destiny, rather than the big religious issues. Nevertheless, it seems possible to speculate that the prevailing religious unrest may have served as a breeding ground for a new style of magical practice, which took its shape in the language and in the textual expression of the bowls.

The production of incantation bowls stopped towards the end of the seventh century ce or shortly thereafter. This came not long after the Arab conquest of Mesopotamia and the imposition of Islam as the dominant religion. As Islam was opposed to magic, it seems to follow that the Muslim authorities would have forcibly stopped the fabrication of incantation bowls. Yet it does not appear likely that an Islamic decree was issued against the writing of magic bowls, as a result of which Jews, Mandaeans, Christians, as well as Muslims, stopped producing them all at once. We have no knowledge of such an edict, and of course the term “incantation bowl” is not even attested in Arabic documents from that time. Islam was indeed officially opposed to magic, but so were also the older religions of revelation: Judaism, Christianity, Mandaism, as well as Zoroastrianism. The strong opposition to magic in these religions never prevented people from writing what we call magical texts. Instead, they avoided terminology

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6 Most of these amulets are made of lead. A Mandaean gold amulet was published in Müller-Kessler 1998.
7 An eclectic collection of gems is given in Spier 2007; see also Gyselen 1995.
8 See the remarks in Shaked 1994a, 27–51.
9 The Zoroastrian writings in Pahlavi are, as a rule, undated, but are mostly assigned to the ninth or tenth centuries ce—see Cereti 2001, 9. At the same time, there is no doubt that many of them contain much older material.
10 In addition to the incantation bowls discussed above in n. 2, we know of a small number of metal bowls inscribed in Arabic from the very early Islamic period—see Canaan 1923; Maddison et al. 1997; Kriss and Kriss-Heinrich 1960/2.
such as “magic” or “witchcraft” when describing their practices and called their texts by a variety of appellations which implicitly rejected any imputation of sorcery. Terms such as “magic” (Heb. qesamin, Ar. sihr), “witchcraft” (Heb. kešafim, Aram. hiršē, ma’badē) were essentially pejorative; they could as a rule be applied only to evil-doers, followers of other religions or cults. Adherents of these religions would rather speak of amulets, invocations, healing and protection, and would surely object to the idea that these texts formed part of a practice forbidden by religion.

In Islam, similar practices, which involved the adjuration of angels and demons and the writing of amulets, including a type of magic bowl, eventually developed and flourished without any noticeable religious prohibition. Muslims in time produced a wealth of literature and artefacts, but some time had to pass before this new approach to the practice of magic to develop and to find its own new, Islamic, voice. It may be assumed that in the early period of Islam there reigned uncertainty as to whether the production of invocations to angels and spirits would be received well by the leaders of the Islamic state, and at some point this may have stifled the inclination to produce such artefacts, eventually leading to the discontinuation of the practice. This is the best guess we can come up with as to why the writing of Aramaic spells on earthenware bowls ceased more or less abruptly at the turn of the seventh and eighth centuries. The matter certainly merits further investigation. The spells themselves, however, were not entirely lost, and many of the same magical motifs and literary forms, and even on occasion the very same spells, turn up centuries later in the Cairo Geniza.

If this approach has any merit, it may be noted that it associates the appearance and decline of the practice of bowl magic with two crucial points in the religious history of the Near East: the consolidation of Christianity as a major religious movement, accompanied by the slow disintegration and eventual disappearance of the cultural world of the ancient Near East; and, at the other end of the period, is the dramatic spread of a new religious order, that of Islam, whose particular form of powerful monotheism may have had something to do with the fall of a distinctive magical practice. The coincidence of these large developments with the fairly modest changes in the field of magic may not be entirely fortuitous.

Another point may be mentioned. During the Sasanian period a movement towards redacting and producing religious texts is discernible within the different religious cultures in Babylonia, and a wave of awareness of the contrast between oral and written traditions comes to the fore. In Judaism, the biblical canon had for a long time enjoyed a canonical status; it existed in writing and in accessible copies, and could easily be quoted from memory or from scrolls, as evidenced, among other things, by the magic bowls. This was achieved at the cost of eliminating several other corpora that were

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11 There is little similarity between the modest-looking earthenware incantation bowls of the Sasanian period and the more elaborate metal bowls of the Islamic period. This regards appearance, contents and application. Islamic magic bowls are made of metal, usually bronze, and are densely inscribed with Quranic verses and magical symbols or combinations of numbers. They are usually called tāsāt al-raja’ “quake (or shudder) bowls”, or tāsāt al-ṭarba “sadness (or joy) bowls”. The bowls are said to have been filled with water and sometimes with small iron keys, and given to a patient to drink for healing. See Canaan 1923; Kris and Kriss-Heinrich 1960/2, II:126–137 and plates 100–110; Zwemer 1920, 179–184; Spoer 1935; Spoer 1938. The earliest recorded appearance of such cups is in the twelfth century, although at least one is known from a much earlier date (much different in appearance from the usual Islamic cups)—see Savage-Smith in Maddison et al. 1997, 172–105. A group of three brass magic bowls inscribed in Judeo-Arabic, presumably of recent fabrication, was published in Reich 1937/8; see also Shaked 1983.

We also have anthropological reports of a medium, usually a prepubescent boy, made to look at a smooth surface, such as water, oil or a mirror, under conditions of artificially created tension. The medium reports visions that come to him while looking at the surface. See, e.g. Naveh and Shaked 1993, 173–174; Bilu 1993, 83–85; Fodor 1994. In many reports this mirror-like surface was created by an ink stain on the boy’s own palm, but it seems conceivable that metal or wooden cups would have been used for the same purpose.

12 On Muslim magical literature, see Ullmann 1972.

13 For the relevance of the Geniza magical texts for the incantation bowls, see Naveh and Shaked 1985; Naveh and Shaked 1993; Levene and Bohak 2012.

14 Geller 2004b, 38, suggests that the appearance of the magic bowls may be due to the closing of the ancient Mesopotamian temples under the Sasanians and the resulting loss of Mesopotamian medical lore.
competing for canonical status. Some of them were eliminated from Judaism alone; this applies to most of the Apocrypha, which survived within Christianity. Others were entirely obliterated; this applies, for example, to the writings of the group that was centred around the Dead Sea, the existence of which is now known only from chance discoveries. It may be postulated that there were several other groups that did not survive the imposition of the orthodox canon. At the same time, a new canon was emerging: an oral Torah was beginning to circulate, and some of it became part of the liturgy or embedded in the Midrash and Aggadah, portions of which are extant in the magic bowls. Although the doctrine of two separate canons, a written one next to a binding oral text, was being formulated and constantly repeated, it is clear that this question only arose because there were internal pressures in Judaism to have the so-called oral law transformed into a written code, as is witnessed, for example, by the systematic arrangement of the Mishna, already before the Sasanian period.

Society in general, in Babylonia as well as in other parts of the Middle East, and Jewish society in particular, was highly aware of the authority and prestige of written documents, and people made constant use of writing, for example, in formulating deeds of sale between two parties over landed property, or in concluding or severing matrimonial ties by a ketubba “marriage contract” or a get “deed of divorce” respectively—two situations where a written document is mandatory by Jewish law practically since biblical times. The rabbinical authorities resisted the pressure that no doubt was felt to extend the use of writing to the field of oral law. In fact, explicit barriers were set up against writing down the newly emerging law (in the form of Mishna) and the learned debates that led to the formulation and justification of legal rules (Gemara), as well as the exposition and exegesis of the text of the Torah (which took the form of Midrash). Eventually the resistance broke down, and the canon of oral law joined that of the written law to form a whole complex of scriptures, all written down, but retaining up to the present day the old designations of “oral” against “written”.

Several leading scholars have discussed over the past century and a half various aspects of this peculiar situation. At the outset it seems hardly credible that an enormous body of literature, such as that contained in the two massive collections of the Talmud as well as the adjunct literature of the Midrash, could be retained and transmitted by heart, without the aid of written documents. And yet, it has been shown by a close study of the sources that this is indeed what happened: the Talmudic literature was indeed taught orally, memorised and survived over a period of several centuries before it was committed to writing. Even when the oral Torah was available in book form, the practice of memorising it was continued in part even up to the present. Some scholars have maintained that there is no evidence for a reliance on written notes for the transmission of this literature, while others are inclined to concede that the memorisation process was accompanied by a sporadic use of written texts.

The cardinal point that must be made is that this orality is imposed on a society that was to a large extent literate, not necessarily in the sense that most people could read and write, but in the sense that reliance on written documents was widespread and even mandatory, and that a strong literate class formed part of the society. It is noteworthy that even those who possessed the skill of literacy were forbidden to use it in certain aspects of their religious life. While the scriptures must be read from a written source, the rabbinical deliberations and pronouncements were only supposed to be recited and heard. The prohibition on writing applied only to the genre of halakhot, while the compositional genre

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15 See sections I.1 and I.2.1, as well as the discussion of mishnaic quotations below (pp. 22–23).
16 See Sussmann 2005 (the essence of this study had already been formulated by Sussmann long before its date of publication); see also Elman 1999.
17 The two major studies devoted to this question are mentioned in the preceding footnote; they contain a rich bibliography of sources and of earlier scholarly discussions.
18 Sussmann 2005 asserts the exclusive dominance of orality in the transmission of the Talmud, while Elman 1999 and Naeh 1997 are willing to concede that there were occasional cases when writing was used, without however affecting the principle of oral study and transmission.
known as midrash was apparently exempt from this restriction, as we learn from the study of Naeh with regard to Midrash torat kohanim. This was a prohibition meant to create a sharp boundary between one type of revelation, the Torah, and another, rabbinical teachings. Thus religious laws were classified as either de-ʾorayta “of the Torah” or de-rabbanan “of the Rabbis”. The idea was to drive home a notion of the hierarchy of the sources of divine revelation, to put them in two separate compartments. With the last of the Prophets one type of human communication with the divine was over, and another one was introduced, one based on study and speculation. The means chosen to implement this distinction was to separate textuality from oral transmission. As with many such decrees, there were some exceptions that crept in and disrupted the harmony, making it frustrating for later research to understand how the system worked. Thus, there was no ban on writing in many fields of activity. The fields of economy and family relations were based on written documents. In magic one was free to write texts, even if based on quotations from liturgical and mishnaic texts. Liturgical texts may have been put down in writing for synagogue use, although we have no direct evidence of this; and it is not unlikely that people kept private notes of discussions in sessions of study, which may or may not have been used afterwards in compiling the Talmud. But an absolute (theoretical) interdiction applied to writing down the “oral Torah”. This transmission dichotomy was observed as a cultic requirement, not as a rational code of behaviour. Paradoxically, despite the clear doctrinal hierarchy between the written and the oral law, the oral canon attracted greater application and its study often enjoyed higher status than that of the written scripture.

Christianity never had this problem: the Christian attitude can be described, on the contrary, as an acute reaction to the dichotomy of textual revelation and oral expansion of the texts. What Jesus spoke (as did several Jewish sages in his time) had to be put down in writing, in the form of gospels. The climax of the history of revelation according to the Christian perception came after the closure of the Old Testament with the advent of Jesus, followed by the institution of a new scripture, one that was given the same degree of sanctity as the Old Testament. There was no room for a distinction between written and oral scriptures (apart from the distinction between canonical and extra-canonical, apocryphal writings).

Neither did Islam have to grapple with a split revelation in the same manner. The book of Islamic revelations, the Qurʾān, was theoretically contemporary with the orally transmitted body of ḥadīth, the sayings of the Prophet, and the two went to some extent hand in hand, although there was a hierarchy of sanctity and authority that placed the Qurʾān high above the ḥadīth. Both were orally transmitted texts, but the Qurʾān was recognised as a book with divine authority, while the ḥadīth was a floating and loosely-structured text, partly under traditional scrutiny for inauthentic sayings.

The only major contemporary religion that had a comparable situation of a double scripture with an oral-textual split was Zoroastrianism, with its distinction between Avesta and zand. The Zoroastrians are perhaps the only major religious group that did not have an official written scripture at the beginning of the Sasanian period (in the third century CE). They nevertheless based themselves explicitly on what we may term ‘oral scriptures’ and claimed divine authority for their sacred texts: their religious canon was a book, even if it was not written down and was not recited from a written source. The internal pressure within the community was no doubt already in operation to transfer their orally transmitted book into a proper written text. Indeed, within about two centuries, the Avesta was going to take shape. An alphabet was especially devised for transmitting it, and a body of exegesis, zand, was being composed, orally at first, in order to accompany it. This exegesis was eventually recorded in writing. The analogy to the Jewish system of a two-layer system of scriptures is striking, although there is no evidence for a ban on writing in Zoroastrianism.

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19 Naeh 1997, 506.
20 See Shaked (forthcoming).
21 For further discussions of these points, see Shaked 1994a and Shaked (forthcoming).
In Manichaeism, scriptures were not only central, ubiquitous, and forming the very basis of the religion, their written character was essential. Apart from scriptures, there were also liturgical pieces that circulated in written form. The very idea of orally transmitted revelation was vigorously rejected by Mani (third century CE), the founder of the religion. Orality, according to Mani, lies at the root of a religion’s corruptibility and harmful diversity.\(^{22}\)

The Mandaeans at this time were probably still engaged in developing their written canon of scriptures, but it seems evident (for example from reading the magical literature of the Mandaeans) that their religion was already based on sacred texts, possibly available in a written form. Unfortunately, we have little information about the history or chronology of the Mandaean scriptures, and the origins of this community are obscure.\(^{23}\)

The emergence of the magic bowls in Babylonia, and, in parallel fashion, of the inscribed metal amulets in the area of Palestine, may be understood as part of this movement of writing down texts of religious and spiritual content. Although magic texts were occasionally written down during the First Temple Period in Palestine,\(^{24}\) those were not texts composed as spells; they contained, as a rule, biblical quotations. By the end of the Second Temple Period, however, we find that writing down spells was part of the activity of the people of Qumran.\(^{25}\) In the period under consideration, a movement was afoot for writing down handbooks and collections of amuletic texts in the form of books.

The magic texts were different from other religious texts in the sense that they were not meant to form a corpus or a canon, and that they did not circulate widely nor were they recited publicly. The spells on amulets or bowls were written individually according to need and in answer to a specific order placed by a client and normally executed by a professional. The latter—we may refer to such a person as the magician or the practitioner—used his stock of spells and selected one (or several) from among those most appropriate for the occasion at hand. There was one aspect of his activity that came close to the production of a written text for a canon: that is when the practitioner set down in writing a handbook of spells.

The manuscript collections of spells have the status of books, but they differ from other books by not being publicly accessible in the same manner, and most often they were restricted in circulation to the limited circle of professional practitioners. We have a certain number of such books from the period we are discussing: The Book of Mysteries or Sefer ha-razim,\(^ {26}\) The Sword of Moses,\(^ {27}\) and some smaller texts.\(^ {28}\) Several books of magic recipes, which may have originated in the pre-Islamic period, may also be listed here.\(^ {29}\) In a sense, the Hekhalot compositions also fall within the same category, although their genre classification is less solidly assured. All of these books seem to have been composed in


\(^{23}\) The pendulum has swung between an assertion of Palestinian origin and a more recent claim of Babylonian origin—see Lidzbarski 1925, x; Rudolph 1968/9; Macuch 1965b; Müller-Kessler 2004. It must be noted that, in the discussion of the question of origins, elements such as the origin of the Mandaic script, or the linguistic classification of the Mandaic dialect, have been given undue weight. Both of these aspects of Mandaic culture are clearly eastern. But this argument has little relevance to their origin. One need only compare Jewish Babylonian Aramaic: an eastern Aramaic dialect, despite the clearly established historical origin of its speakers from Palestine. Mandaic mythology shows a mixture of Palestinian and Babylonian elements. This may direct us to a possible solution of the question of origins: a Palestinian gnostic group that came to Babylonia and merged with a local group.

\(^{24}\) For a prominent example, see the Ketef Hinnom amulets from Jerusalem, where the entire text consists of the Priestly Blessing from the Pentateuch—see Yardeni 1991; Barkay 1992; Barkay et al. 2004.


\(^{26}\) For the Hebrew text, see Margaliot 1966; for an edition with German translation, see Rebiger and Schäfer 2009; for an English translation, see Morgan 1983.

\(^{27}\) See Harari 1997; Harari 2012.

\(^{28}\) E.g. Havdala de-Rabbi ‘Aqiva—see Scholem 1980/1; Pišra de-Rabbi Ḥanina ben Dosa—see Tocci 1986.

Palestine, but there may have also existed Babylonian books of the same genre which have not survived. 30 These handbooks, like the amulets and bowl texts themselves, possessed a pragmatic orientation and were in principle reserved for the use of specialists. They were not texts meant to be studied by the general public. Although they were based on mystical visions and supported by a theoretical view of the supernatural, they were dedicated to the task of presenting an applied aspect of the science from which they were derived. In this sense they should not be viewed as part of “normal” religious literature, but may be compared, as far as their utilitarian approach is concerned, to the handbooks of liturgy, the prayer-books, which aimed to facilitate the choice of texts to be used in the synagogue or church service and to establish the order of the texts. 31 The magic handbooks were, therefore, part of a certain type of religious practice. Their main distinction from the prayer-book type of composition lay in the fact that they were partly or wholly private or esoteric.

A prominent part of the texts is devoted to verses quoted from the Bible. The magic literature that was being formed in the period we are reviewing is in a sense an exegesis and expansion of biblical literature, engaging in an interesting dialogue with other essays in interpretation of the biblical texts, with the Talmudic and extra-Talmudic a g g a d a , and with the body of quasi-mythical legends concerning the Jewish sages. It may be assumed that non-verbal and non-textual magic continued to be used. The form that this magic took in writing was by drawings and symbols; the form it took in practice was by performing certain acts and gestures (but our knowledge of ancient performances is naturally limited). What distinguishes magic of the early centuries of the Christian era is the great surge in the use of written texts as a major vehicle of communication with the invisible powers. In the case of the texts with which we are here concerned, this is done in most cases in order to achieve utilitarian aims.

It should be stressed that, as far as we can tell, no particular tension can be noticed in the literature of the period around the practice of incantation texts, whether bowls or portable amulets, in any of the religions which are relevant for our study, namely, Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism or Mandaism, and later on also Islam, after it had become an established religion. 32 Doubts are occasionally expressed as to the efficacy of such practices or the sincerity of the practitioners, but there is hardly any attempt to impute to them the harsh judgement of the scriptures concerning witchcraft. On the Jewish side, although there are several statements expressing disapproval of such practices in the rabbinical sources (in addition to the sharp repudiation of such practices in the Hebrew Bible), 33 there seems to be no reason to suppose that the incantation bowls were identified by the rabbinical leaders of the Jewish communities as belonging to the phenomenon of witchcraft; this would have caused them to be strictly forbidden. 34 On the contrary, we occasionally find magic bowls that were prepared specifically for individuals with the title Rav. 35 We may reasonably assume that the practice of writing texts on bowls could be described as a way of appealing to the higher powers, such as God and his angels, for help with pressing human needs, mainly health problems and sexual fears, both attributed largely to demons. 36

30 We have some allusions to Hekhalot compositions in Babylonia; see the discussion below (pp. 23–27).
31 Prayer-books are, however, only known from the late Gaonic period, from the tenth century CE on.
32 For convenience, we shall apply to these religions the general term “religions of revelation”, for want of a better all-embracing label.
33 See Blau 1898; Veltri 1997; Bohak 2008; Harari 2010.
34 A detailed discussion of the rabbinical attitudes towards witchcraft and their ambiguities can be found in chapter six of Bohak 2008 (see especially 422–425 in the summary).
35 See, for example, Ford and Ten-Ami 2011/2.
36 Requests for love or popularity are found more commonly in amulets than in bowl texts—for surveys of the material, see Harari 2010, 162–167; Saar 2008. Requests for business success (e.g. Levene and Bhayro 2005/6), and the cursing of a specific human opponent (e.g. Levene 2013) are attested but are much less common in the incantation bowls. References to legal battles are exceedingly rare in the bowls, in contrast to the Greco-Roman defixiones literature, where such references are quite prominent. For the latter literature, see Gager 1992, 116–150. Jewish amulets, however, do indicate this concern, for example, an unpublished gold amulet in the possession of Alexander L. Wolfe, to be published shortly by S. Shaked and R. Elitzur-Leiman.
Put in these terms, the production of these magic texts could arguably be regarded as an exercise in piety.\textsuperscript{37}

Terms Designating “Bowl”, “Amulet” and “Spell”

The object on which the incantation is written, i.e. the bowl, is referred to internally, in the language of the incantations, in several ways. It is sometimes called qmyʾ “amulet”,\textsuperscript{38} a word which seems etymologically derived from a root that denotes the practice of binding an amulet to the arm.\textsuperscript{39} Quite often a reference to the vessel itself is used: ksʾ “bowl”,\textsuperscript{40} and sometimes a reference to the object as a written document: ktbʾ.\textsuperscript{41}

In general, however, the self-designations that occur in the bowls do not allude to the object which is being used, but to its function or purpose. The action performed by the bowl is sometimes referred to with a general term such as ’wbdʾ “(magical) act”\textsuperscript{42} or rzʾ “mystery”.\textsuperscript{43} The designation may specifically refer to the aggressive action effected by the spell against the maleficent agents, such as mwmtʾ “oath”,\textsuperscript{44} šmtʾ “ban”,\textsuperscript{45} kybšʾ “suppression”,\textsuperscript{46} or qyblh “countercharm”,\textsuperscript{47} or it may refer to the beneficial effect desired for the client, such as ʾswtʾ “healing”\textsuperscript{48} used in an introductory phrase to a spell. Strings of such appellations are sometimes found, as in: hdyn qmyʾh whdyn ʾsrʾ whdyn rzʾ “this amulet, and this binding, and this mystery”.\textsuperscript{49}

The incantation is sometimes alluded to metaphorically as pwrʾ “a lot (that is cast)”, a loanword from Akkadian in Aramaic,\textsuperscript{50} ḫtnʾ “seal”,\textsuperscript{51} or gyṭʾ “legal deed”, or more particularly “deed of divorce”,\textsuperscript{52} where this is an appropriate term for the type of spell that is being used.

The drawings occurring on bowls are sometimes referred to as ṣylmʾ “image”.\textsuperscript{53}

The Structure of an Incantation\textsuperscript{54}

The text that is written on a bowl is called, for our purposes, an incantation. It consists normally of several different parts. Most prominent among them is a spell, or quite frequently several spells. Spells

\textsuperscript{37} In a similar manner, Doutté 1909, 52–57, shows the close resemblance between marabouts, the Muslim saintly men in modern North Africa, and sorcerers, who engage in witchcraft. Nevertheless he argues that the marabouts operate within the religion and in the name of Allāh, while sorcerers act beyond the limits of Islam.

\textsuperscript{38} E.g. JBA 4:2 (see the Glossary for further attestations).

\textsuperscript{39} The verb is not attested in Aramaic with this meaning, but this connection can be made on the basis of Mishnaic Hebrew—see DJPA, 496; Levene 2003a, 85. In JBA, the same root appears as a denominative verb ʾytqmyʾ in the itpe. stem with the meaning “to prepare an amulet”. See Ford 2006, 210 and contrast Levene 2003, 85. For additional references, see Levene 2003, 152. SL, 1378 similarly analyses Syr. qmʾ (pe.) as a denominative verb “to make an amulet”.

\textsuperscript{40} E.g. JBA 4:2.

\textsuperscript{41} E.g. JBA 4:2.

\textsuperscript{42} E.g. JBA 20:13.

\textsuperscript{43} E.g. MS 1927/62:1.

\textsuperscript{44} E.g. MS 1928/22:8.

\textsuperscript{45} E.g. JBA 1:2.

\textsuperscript{46} E.g. MS 2053/229:3, 4, 15, 16.

\textsuperscript{47} We use here the terminology proposed in Shaked 2011.
are the blocks of text that come up as central components of the magical expression, and that are found as a rule in other incantations as well. The incantation also incorporates a number of additional phrases that serve various purposes: opening phrases, linking segments, concluding formulae, quotations from the scriptures, and more. Not every incantation contains a spell, but most of the fully-developed incantations do.

Single-Spell Incantations

Here is the structure of a typical single-spell incantation. The spell occurs in section 4 of this incantation. It is preceded by introductory sections that invoke several powers and establish the identity of the client, thus making the otherwise neutral spell something that is relevant to a specific person in a given situation. The spell is followed by phrases, consisting of *nomina barbara* and a reference to a signet ring engraved with the great ineffable name, that reinforce the power and authority of the incantation.

JBA 34

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section number</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Internal divisions; the function of the segments</th>
<th>The text in English(^{55})</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Opening invocation</td>
<td></td>
<td>By the mercy of heaven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Requests asking for protection to the client and her offspring</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>May there be sealing for D. d. H.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>And may children endure for her</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>C</td>
<td>And may her body endure for her</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>D</td>
<td>And let no tormentor that is in the world touch her</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>“By the name of”: authorities</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>By the name of I-am-that-I-am</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Elisur Bagdana, the king of [demons and dēvs] and the great ruler of liliths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Spell: “I beswear you”: Main section, divorce formula</td>
<td>address</td>
<td>I beswear you, the lilith Hablas, granddaughter of the lilith Zarnay, who resides on the threshold of the house of D. d. H. and appears [---] boys and girls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>wish</td>
<td>I beswear you that you should be struck in your pericardium by the lance of the mighty [Qitaros], who is ruler over demons, dēvs and liliths.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>dismissal</td>
<td>Behold, [I dismiss] you from this D.d.H. and from her children, those that she has and those that she will have</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>exemplum</td>
<td>[Just as demons write] deeds of divorce to their wives and do not come back to them again.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{55}\) Taking some liberties with style. For the edition and a more literal translation of the text, see the main edition under JBA 34.
Multi-Spell Incantations

Many incantations are made up by combining two or more spells. The definition of a spell is not always easy. In principle, a spell is a text occurring in an incantation that is self-sufficient, i.e. it includes all the elements necessary for accomplishing its goal. A spell is typically marked by the fact that it is not unique, but is also attested in other bowls, either on its own or in company with other spells. We may imagine a recipe book of spells in which all the spells used by magicians are quoted with the appropriate headings indicating their purpose and aim. In the absence of such a book for the Babylonian magic bowls, we cannot always be sure that a text designated by us as a spell was indeed regarded as an independent unit of incantation in the professional circle of magicians.

We do not possess all the bowls ever produced, and never will; many bowls are no doubt still buried in the ground, others are broken or effaced. We do not even have access to all the bowls unearthed and presently in the hands of collectors or curators. We thus cannot take the preceding guidelines as absolute criteria. Even if we did have the full texts of all bowls, we would no doubt come across sections of text in some incantations which bear all the hallmarks of a spell, but are attested on no other bowl: this is because the practitioner on occasion felt at liberty to improvise and produce a new text in a style and mould with which he was intimately acquainted (we may assume that most practitioners of this type of magic were men). New spells were also likely obtained from the less rigorous oral composition. It may be supposed that such free oral compositions could be put down in writing and eventually become part of the repertory of spells.

One seldom comes across a spell text that occurs without accompanying phrases, and it is not always easy to determine the boundaries of a spell when it is not frequently used. In some cases we can discern more than one theme in an incantation, without being able to state that each one is an independent spell as defined here. Let us nevertheless take an incantation that contains several themes, and try to divide it into spells intuitively, according to our (somewhat subjective) feelings. In the following example there are two spells, occupying sections 3–5 and 6 respectively.