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SYNCRETISTIC AND CONFESSIONAL FEATURES IN
MESOPOTAMIAN INCANTATION BOWLS

In 1973 an Aramaic incantation bowl was purchased by a Finn in Borsippa (Birs Nimrud) in Iraq. The seller was a local boy who obviously had private excavations as his hobby. The bowl was broken into two bigger and three smaller pieces, but since all the pieces were preserved, the new possessor was able to glue the bowl together. Seven years later, still curious to know what was written in the bowl, he contacted the Finnish National Museum. A couple of years earlier I had published a Syriac incantation bowl (*Studia Orientalia* 51:1, 1978/81)¹ which, as a gift of the Iraqi Government to President Urho Kekkonen, was treasured in the same Museum. As a consequence, the owner of the bowl obtained my telephone number from the Museum and called me at home. The bowl text was published by me in *Studia Orientalia* 51:14 in 1981 under the title "An Aramaic incantation bowl from Borsippa. Another specimen of Eastern Aramaic 'koiné'". The article includes an appendix called "A cryptographic bowl text or an original fake?"; the cryptic bowl dealt with in the appendix was presented by the Iraqi Government to His Majesty Carl XVI Gustaf, the King of Sweden. It seems that the magic bowls have been in fashion as gifts.

The Aramaic Borsippa bowl is inscribed with ink in Hebrew square characters. Bowls with Hebrew script are traditionally called Jewish incantation bowls.

Jonas Greenfield and *Joseph Naveh* published a Mandaic lead amulet in the periodical series *Eretz-Israel* in 1985.² In the beginning of the article "Qami' manda'i ba'al arba' hašba'ot" ('An Mandaic amulet with four incantations') they state solely: "ha-qami' nimša' be-maḥoz ḥuzistan be-ma'arab paras we-šullam šam" ('the amulet was found in the province of Khuzestan in Western Iran and photographed there'). The lapidary style is insinuating: this amulet was obviously also found by a devotee of private archaeology. The photographer remains unknown, as does the present location of the amulet.

More important than the similar vicissitudes is the similarity of the incantations which have been inscribed inside of the Jewish Aramaic bowl and on the Mandaic lead roll. A third member in this incantation family consists of another Mandaic lead roll which was published by *Rudolf Macuch* in the book of *Altheim* and *Stiehl*, *Die*

¹ The correct Iraqi Museum number of the bowl is I.M. 78630 instead of I.M. 7863 mentioned in the article; I am indebted to Dr. Erica Hunter for the clarification.

² Vol. XVIII (Nahman Avigad Volume), pp. 97-107, and Plates XXI-XXII, Text *beth*, lines 3-29, and Text *gimel*, lines 2-20.

Araber in der Alten Welt in 1967-1968.³ Greenfield and Naveh serve the readers a synopsis of the parallel passages in these three incantations. On the basis of comparison they conclude that the Jewish text is dependent upon a Mandaic *Vorlage* which included words and expressions found solely in Mandaic. Obviously the Jewish magician did not understand all of the words and sometimes he replaced them with uncorrect counterparts in his copy. The bowl is the first example of a Jewish incantation text which derives its origin to a Mandaic incantation. Contrary to that, cases of reverse order have been known before.⁴

We have no information of especially friendly contacts between Jews and Mandaeans in the period of incantation bowls and amulets which have been dated, traditionally, to between 5th and the 8th centuries A.D. The opposite seems to have been true at all times. Nevertheless, a Jew by the name of Keyaniḥaye bar Ḥatai had an incantation bowl written for the salvation and protection of himself and his house, and the bowl was copied in Hebrew script from Mandaic amulets.

What was this kind of early ecumenical movement? In this respect it is instructive to examine which objects have been condemned in these incantations and which helpers have been appealed to for salvation and protection.

With minor deviations the parallel passages of these three incantations condemn and ban the curses, the vows, the invocations, the envy, the dishonour, the disgrace, the sin of idols (*patikre*), the vow of gods, the word of ishtars, the violent countercharm, the stumbling block on roads, the highway robber, the demons of streets, the *poltergeist* of roof, the *bat-qol* whisper on market place, the ay-ay-sound in the field and the ay-ay-sound in the town, the appearance of crowds(?)⁵, the whisper of (street-)corners, the running of (crescent) demons, the walk of oaths, the bans (or: the figures) of night and the vision of day time. All of these will be bound and they will turn against their master, maker, and sender.

Although the names are exotic, the condemned adversaries, in fact, consist of quite general types of human fears: dishonorable incidents as well as dreadful and unfavourable ghosts and foreign deities. The same tone goes on in the continuation of the text (*gimel*) of Greenfield and Naveh (this part has a parallel in the bowl published by me but not in the one of Macuch): the owners of these texts shall be guarded against the evil eye, the envious gaze, the evil thought of heart, and the evil word of tongue. Incidentally, the numerous diseases which are a commonplace in incantations do not occur in these texts.

Who are the helpers which effect the salvation or health ('asuta) shared by the Mandaean gentleman Aban bar Sisin-anahid and his family, as well as that of the clan

³ "Altmandäische Bleirollen", *Id*, lines 65-84 (*Die Araber in der Alten Welt*, IV, Berlin 1967, pp. 91-203, and V/1, Berlin 1968, pp. 34-72).

⁴ Greenfield-Naveh 1985, p. 97.

⁵ Cf. Mand. *hisbia* 'spasms, convulsions, racking pains' (E.S. Drower and R. Macuch, *A Mandaic Dictionary*, Oxford 1963, p. 147a) and Syriac *ḥebṣā* 'turba, crepitus ventri' (Karl Brockelmann, *Lexicon syriacum*², Halis Saxonum 1928, repr. Tübingen 1982, p. 211b), 'a crowd, throng (a throng of robbers)' (J. Payne Smith, *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary*, Oxford 1903, repr. 1976, p. 125a).

of Keyaniḥaye bar Ḥatai who obviously was a Jew? The former seeks help in the name of Life (b-šumh/a ḏ hiia, 'alef line 1, bet 1, dalet 1), and a mighty angel (mlaka taqipa) will be a wall and boundary between the good and the evil for him (*gimel* 2-3). The bowl of Keyaniḥaye appeals to *he* and *yod-yod*, i.e. to Yahwe (centre), to the heaven (šemayya, line 1), the mercies of the heaven (raḥme di-šmayya, 3), three angels Sarial, Mazdat (?) and 'Ekhrum (8); a conjuration has been announced "in the name of the idol-spirits and ishtars and for the sake of the name 'Ar'ar and Yeduel and Ram-we-Nišša" (12), and in the end of the text, Keyaniḥaye bar Ḥatai is bound and sealed "with the signet-ring of Great Selitos" (12).

As stated by Greenfield and Naveh, the Jewish text is an adaptation of a Mandaean *Vorlage*. However, this seems to be true solely as far as the adversaries are concerned. Contrary to that, the helpers have been chosen from different sources of deities and angels. And what is important, is the selection of helpers who have been introduced into the Jewish text for Keyaniḥaye: although they deviate from the Mandaean ones, only some of them can be called Jewish. The reading of a number of names is not certain, but even the existence of idol-spirits and ishtars in the conjuration looks rather syncretistic. It is worthy of note that the texts deviate from each another on just this point—the identity of the helpers—in this particular incantation, a text which evidently was shared by Mandaean and Jewish clients.

In general, however, the religious boundary appears less clear-cut between the Jewish, Mandaean, and Syriac bowl texts. The incantations dealt with here thusfar could be called quite orthodox in comparison with the majority of Mesopotamian bowl texts.

Let us look at a few examples of the syncretistic nature of the helpers in them. I quote the important study *Amulets and Magic Bowls* by Joseph Naveh and Shaul Shaked (Jerusalem – Leiden 1985): "In the Jewish bowl texts from Mesopotamia, the divine names appealed to include, besides Yahwe and his epithets, and the Jewish angels Gabriel, Yehoel, Yequiel, Michael, Nuriel, etc., also names of pagan gods such as the Greek Hermes; the Mesopotamian and Syrian Belti, Nereg, Nanai, Shamish, Dlibat and Mot; the Iranian Anahid, Danahish, Bagdana, and others" (p. 36-37).

The Syriac bowls may include passages as "the lord Shemesh has sent me against you, Sin has despatched me, Bel has appointed me, Nannai has commanded me and Nebo has ... me [with] his girdle, and Nirig has given me power that I might go against her, the evil spirit..." — and then the text ends with "amen, amen, selah".⁶ Two Syriac amulets published by Philippe Gignoux⁷ start "in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost", but also they abound with peculiar names of angels. The Syriac bowl donated to President Kekkonen includes a wish "receive peace from your Father who is in heaven and seven (greetings of) peace from the male gods

⁶ J.A. Montgomery, *Aramaic Incantation Texts from Nippur* (University of Pennsylvania, The Museum, Publications of the Babylonian Section, Vol. III, Philadelphia 1913), Text 36, lines 3-4, = Victor Hamilton, *Syriac Incantation Bowls* (Diss., Brandeis University, Department of Mediterranean Studies, 1971, University Microfilms International, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 71-30,130), Text 8.

⁷ *Incantations magiques syriaques*. Collection de la Revue des Études Juives dirigée par Gérard Nahon et Charles Touati (E. Peeters, Louvain-Paris 1987).

and the female ishtars..." (line 9). The abbreviated form *Yah* of the Jewish name Yahwe appears in the same bowl of Kekkonen, and it also occurs frequently in other Syriac bowl texts.

As for the Syriac texts in general, we can ask, if they are or should be Christian on the basis of the Syriac alphabet styled traditionally as the alphabet of the Near Eastern Christians. But what was the alphabet of the Near Eastern pagans? There is no tangible Christian evidence in the Syrian bowls; e.g. small crosses also appear on Jewish bowls.⁸ And is it necessary to suppose that everyone who wrote Aramaic in Hebrew characters was a Jew?⁹

On the other hand, it seems quite improbable that the sectarian Mandaic script had been used by non-Mandaeans. Nevertheless, alongside of the special Mandaean *genii*, spirits of light, emanations, *utria* etc., the Mandaean incantations also appeal to numerous hosts of Jewish-looking angels as well as other deities and barbaric ghost names. Various names of the Hebrew God also occur frequently in Mandaean bowls; such are e.g. *Adunai Šbaut*, *Ya*, and *Yahu*. Planets (Bel-Jupiter, Venus-Dlibat-Libat, Saturn-Kewan, Mercury-Nebo, Mars-Nergal) may be invoked for aid; in certain other texts, however, they are condemned, so e.g. in Macuch's text referred to above.

Lists of features which do not belong to the "orthodox" realm of these three religions could be prolonged with names of gods, angels, demons and *nomina barbarica*. The pictures and drawings found in quite numerous bowls also reveal a great number of similarities.

As an ancient parallel of bowl texts, we may refer to the Akkadian incantations as well as to amulets against the child-snatching demoness Lamaštu.¹⁰ At the other end, it is not difficult to pinpoint names of demons and dangerous adversaries as well as numerous other details, drawings, Seal or Ring of Solomon, etc. which have been transmitted inside of the Oriental communities up to this very day. Among the literary material, I refer to the Syriac charms published by *Hermann Gollanz* in 1912.¹¹ A part of his texts was copied in the end of the 19th century, and there is no reason to suppose that among such group as the Christians in Lebanon the protective magic had undergone any reduction in demand during this very enlightened 20th century.

The Jews have retained the habit of protecting the woman in labour and her newborn baby with special amulets. In Europe these have been called *kimpet-tsetl*, from German *Kinderbett* + *Zettel*. I am told by my Israeli friends that sometimes in well-educated families the mother or mother-in-law will bring a protective *tsetl*-letter in the

⁸ J.N. Epstein ("Gloses babylo-araméennes", *Revue des études juives*, Vol. 73, 1921, pp. 27-58, and Vol. 74, 1922, pp. 40-72), 1922, p. 44; Hamilton 1971, p. 96

⁹ J.N. Epstein (Vol. 74, 1922, pp. 41-45) deals with the different scripts and the names of bowl owners, gods and spirits mentioned in the incantations; on the basis of these facts he endeavours to discern between Jewish and pagan texts. However, the intention to include both native and foreign helpers in the incantations (see below) as well as our limited knowledge of the owners of the bowls and their prosopography render the conclusions of Epstein uncertain.

¹⁰ See W. Farber, *Schlaf, Kindchen, schlaf!* Mesopotamische Baby-Beschwörungen und -Rituale (Mesopotamian Civilizations, 2), Winona Lake 1989.

¹¹ *The Book of Protection, Being a Collection of Syriac Charms* (London 1912, repr. Amsterdam 1976).

room of a mother *in spe*, because "anyway, it does not harm, at least". Amulets were printed in Poland and elsewhere in Eastern Europe less than one hundred years ago; the idioms and many names constitute precise parallels to the bowl texts. The Hebraica Collection of the Helsinki University Library includes a number of beautiful specimens of printed amulets, and a few others are to be seen in the book *Amulets and Magic Bowls* by Naveh and Shaked (Fig. 19 and 21). Besides Lilith and her companions, the amulets turn against Sanoy (Sinoi), Sansanoy (Sinsinoi), and Samangalaf (Samengelof) as well as the evil eye, the pestilence, the plague, the demons, the spirits, the black eye, the yellow eye, etc. One of the duties of rabbis in the Hasidic and also in other communities in Europe has been the writing of amulets for childless couples and against diseases.¹² In Israel *segullot li-shmira*, amulets for protection attributed to Moroccan *hakhamim*, in particular, are still on sale at the graves of well-known rabbis.

The Mandaean magic scrolls have been a part of normal life until the present,¹³ and certainly, they still are — in the Mandaean communities which have survived the eight years of war between Iraq and Iran.

Unfortunately the Arabic incantation and bowl texts (in bowls with a conic central part) have not aroused much interest among scholars. Obviously, they have been considered to be a part of Arabic popular superstition, something which does not constitute a honorable field of research. I believe that an examination of modern Arabic amulets would reveal numerous phenomena which go back to earlier Aramaic habits.

The so-called syncretistic features are numerous in these quite recent Syriac-Christian, Jewish, and Mandaean amulets. Nevertheless, there is no doubt about their respective Christian, Jewish, and Mandaean nature.

The long-lived incantation traditions reveal at least one important aspect of the prophylactic magic. The official religion (Judaism, Christianity, Mandaism, Islam) has not been considered sufficiently effective to protect a human being against secret adversaries. There are gaps in the security system, and the gaps should be closed. As a consequence, all aggressive forces must always be mentioned by name and then they can be sealed, counter-sealed, uprooted, and expelled. *Horror vacui*, the avoidance of empty space, is a leading principle of popular magic. To be on the safe side, it is also profitable to pay attention to foreign cults, demons, and deities. The avoidance of gaps is demonstrated well by the alphabet which constitutes the end of several bowl texts. Since all the words, the helpful as well as the evil ones, are included in the alphabet, the last circle with the alphabet renders the incantation completed.

The bowl incantations remind us of the new avenues in the study of the religion of ancient Israel. The excavations have revealed plenty of Israelite miniature statues, cult objects, and even texts (e.g. Kuntillet 'Ajrud with the Ashera of Yahwe) which do not

¹² See the chapter "Amulets" in the *Jewish Magic and Superstition* by Joshua Trachtenberg (New York 1939, pp. 132-152), Raphael Posner - Theodore Schrire, entry "Amulets" in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Vol. 2 (Jerusalem 1971), cc. 906-915, and the copies of talismans in the collection *Signes hebraïques* (Jacques Damase Editeur, Paris 1990).

¹³ Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Mandaic Incantation Texts* (American Oriental Series, Volume 49, New Haven, Connecticut 1967), p. 7-12.

accord with the biblical type of Israeli religion. In fact, these findings are in obvious contradiction with the prohibitions expressed in the biblical law as well as with the preaching of prophets. At present we have justification for claiming that the prophets had good reasons to preach against the foreign cults and idolatry in Israel. The religious ideas were on quite a different level among the large masses than was the biblical ideal. What strikes one in this context is the discrepancy which always and everywhere has prevailed between the ideology of a religion and its various popular manifestations.

Were they heretics, those Jews who had statues of nude goddesses or young bulls at their home? Or were the scribes or the owners of the syncretistic incantation bowls persons who had discarded their religion? It is very improbable. In the Near East a person without a religion is a person without honour, i.e. a non-person without a social reference group. I think that the syncretistic aspects both among the common Israelites as well as those of the incantation believers have been stressed at the expense of confessional marks of identification.

In this connection I would like to return to *the opening phrases* of the incantation bowls.¹⁴ What was not copied from the Mandaic bowl text into the Jewish Aramaic one? The Mandaic lead amulet published by Greenfield and Naveh starts with the typically Mandaean invocation *b-šumh d hiia* (bu-šmi ad-heyyi) 'in the name of Life'. The same invocation occurs in the start of three different incantations in the amulet.

However, in the Jewish bowl which finally arrived in Finland, the beginning of the text reads *šema'u we-qabbelu h de-zahar yy* 'hear and accept the Lord who has warned, Yahwe!' While large parts of the text, demons, deities, and curses inclusive, were copied from a Mandaic model—as Greenfield and Naveh have demonstrated—the Mandaean watchword was not accepted by the scribe who employed the Jewish Hebrew script for the incantation. Instead of the Life, the primordial deity of the Mandaean religion, the (probably) Jewish magician appealed to the God of the Jews, Yahwe, the name of which he spelled in two different abbreviated forms, *he* and *yod-yod*.

When we have a look on the opening phrases of the incantations, in general, interesting observations can be made. Let first us consider the Mandaean texts. In the thirty one texts published by *Edwin Yamauchi*¹⁵ the opening formula appears in three main types: (1) *asuta* (etc.) *thui-lh* 'may there be salvation to (with a name of the client)', this wish occurs seven times, (2) '*pika krika* 'sir' repulsed, averted, bound (are all the curses etc.)', this occurs ten times, while (3) the third phrase 'in the name of Life' (*b-šumh d hiia*) opens an incantation eleven times. The Mandaic incantations published later do not alter the general picture. In addition to the beginnings, the Mandaean *basmala*, viz. *b-šumh d hiia*, is found inside numerous incantations.

The most common initial phrases in some ninety Jewish bowls¹⁶ constitute five

¹⁴ For a more detailed presentation, see my article "Pagan incantations in Aramaic magic bowls" (forthcoming in the *Aramaean and Aramaic* volume to be published through the *Journal of Semitic Studies*, ed. by J.C. Greenfield, M. Weitzman, M.J. Geller and J.F. Healey).

¹⁵ Yamauchi 1967.

groups with smaller variation: (1) "This is the amulet of" (haden qemi'a / šilma d-) and then a personal name — six or seven occurrences; (2) "This bowl is designated for the salvation of NN" (mezamman hana kasa / qemi'a le-'asuta de-NN), it occurs seven times, at least; (3) "Salvation from the heavens for" (asuta men šemayya le-) plus personal names, eleven cases; (4) "Sealed and doubly-sealed and bound are the house etc. of NN" (ḥatim wa-mḥattam beteh d-NN), ten bowls; and (5) "In your name, Lord of salvation, great Saviour of love" (bi-šmak mare 'asuta, 'asya rabba de-rahme) which occurs six times in this form and three times at least as shorter variants; on the basis of parallel wordings in other Jewish bowls,¹⁷ it is probable that the Lord of salvation refers to the God of Israel, Yahwe. In quite many bowls the beginning has disappeared.

Alongside of the concrete evidence it is important to notice which types of opening phrases do not appear in Jewish bowls. No Jewish Aramaic bowl text starts with the Mandaic formula "in the name of Life". Other Mandaic phrases also have very few parallels in Jewish bowls. The expression "This bowl is designated for the salvation of NN" will be seen in Syriac bowls.

In the Jewish bowls known to me, the only distinctly "heretic" initial phrase reads: "By the power of the Great One, and by the command of the angels, and by the name of the lord Bagdana 'Aziza, the great one of the gods, and the king, head of sixty kingdoms, etc.". However, this text (Naveh-Shaked Bowl 13, pp. 198-214) is also unique in many other respects.

Concerning the opening formula, the Syriac bowls are the most stereotypic ones. Among twenty-six Syriac bowl texts,¹⁸ the beginning is visible in sixteen. Twelve of these sixteen start with words "This amulet / bowl is designated for the salvation / sealing of the house etc. of" (mezamman hana qemi'a / kasa l-asyuta / la-ḥtamta de-bayteh etc. de-) plus a personal name. As mentioned above, this opening is also quite usual in Jewish bowls (mezamman hana kasa le-'asuta de-X). The phrase *ḥatim bayteh de-NN* ('sealed is the house of NN') opens a Syriac bowl twice.

Again, what is lacking in Syriac bowls? There is no invocation of a god or a deity in the beginning of them. Syriac is considered to be the language of Eastern Aramaic Christians. This being the case, we could expect that Christian formulae would occur in Syriac incantations. In fact, only one bowl ends "in the name of the Father and the

¹⁶ Charles D. Isbell, *Corpus of Aramaic Incantation Bowls* (Society of Biblical Literature, Dissertation Series, Number 17, Missoula, Montana 1975), Joseph Naveh - Shaul Shaked, *Amulets and Magic Bowls. Aramaic Incantations of Late Antiquity* (Jerusalem - Leiden 1985), M.J. Geller, "Eight incantation bowls" (*Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica*, 17, 1986, pp. 101-117), A.J. Borisov, "Эпиграфические заметки" (*Эпиграфика Востока*, XIX, 1969, pp. 1-13), and Harviainen 1981.

¹⁷ "In your name I am acting, Yahwe the Great God" (Isbell 9), "In the name of the God, the God of gods" (Borisov 1969, p. 11, end), and "In the name of Yahwe Sebaoth, the God of Israel" (K.A.D. Smelik, "An Aramaic incantation bowl in the Allard Pierson Museum, *Bibliotheca Orientalis*, XXXV, 1978, c. 176, line 2).

¹⁸ See Hamilton 1971, M.J. Geller, "Two incantation bowls inscribed in Syriac and Aramaic" (*Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*, Vol. XXXIX, 1976, pp. 422-427), Harviainen 1978/81, Naveh-Shaked 1985, and Ph. Gignoux, "A new incantation bowl inscribed in Syriac" (*East and West*, 34, 1984, pp. 47-53).

Son and the Holy Ghost";¹⁹ none starts with these words.

In this respect the Syriac amulets published by Gignoux²⁰ deviate from the bowl texts; Gignoux dates the incantations to the sixth or seventh century. Two of these three very syncretistic amulet incantations start *be-šum 'aba wa-bra we-ruḥa qaddištā* 'in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost'. It is also the normal starting phrase in the rather recent Syriac amulets published by Gollanz.²¹ Although the contents of these amulets and the bowl texts do not differ much each from another, all the Christian characteristics, as mentioned before, are very rare in the Syriac bowl texts.

The bowls vary with respect to the script and language or dialect. They also vary with respect to their initial phrases. *It is not only the alphabet and script, but also the opening formulae which keep the different groups of Eastern Arameans apart.* "This bowl / amulet is designated to the salvation of NN" is the sole initial formula which passes over from one script and one group to another; it occurs in both Jewish and Syriac bowls.

The magicians knew how they had to commence the bowl texts in order to remain in the realm of their particular religious and social groups. The religion characterized the social group dependence, and as a consequence, the *basmalas* typical of other religions could not be used as the titles of incantations. "In the name of Life" is a typical *basmala* of Mandaeans, and among the Jews "in your name, Lord of salvation, great Saviour of love" at least partly had a similar function.²² The confessional aspect, the dependence to a religious group, is manifested in the form of the accepted and disapproved initial phrases and invocations in the bowl texts.

The Syriac bowls lack specific opening phrases, *basmalas*. As a consequence, I believe that some of them, at least, were not intended for, or inscribed by Christians;²³ this supposition implies that Syriac was also employed as the literary language outside the Christian circles.

We have seen that the so-called syncretistic features are a common property of all the bowl texts, irrespective of language and religion. These features have been stressed in numerous studies with the conclusion that folk magic is highly interconfessional. And it really is. The horoscopes in our weeklies are a proof in favour of this view. Similarly, we have to keep in mind the much younger but highly syncretistic Christian, Mandaean and Jewish amulets which were dealt with above. In the middle of the fifth century Isaac of Antioch complained that Christians were making use of Jewish amulets and charms, although the amulets are void of magical power and should not be relied upon.²⁴ This once again sounds to us as the voice of the prophets in Israel, as

¹⁹ Hamilton 1971, Text 2.

²⁰ Gignoux 1987.

²¹ Gollanz 1912.

²² For the formula "in the name of X" in other Jewish incantations, see the chapter "Das instrumentale 'bei...'" in J.-H. Niggemeyer, *Beschwörungsformeln aus dem „Buch der Geheimnisse“* (Judaistische Texte und Studien. Hrsg. von Johann Maier, Band 3. Hildesheim - New York 1975), pp. 99-107.

²³ On the basis of general impressions, this has been proposed e.g. by Naveh-Shaked 1985, p. 18.

²⁴ Jacob Neusner, *Judaism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism in Talmudic Babylonia* (Lanham, New

the voice of the official religion in contrast with popular habits.

What can we say about the multitude of syncretistic and pagan material which is so common in all of the bowl texts? I am inclined to look at it in the light of *horror vacui*. The magicians wanted to render the incantations as watertight as possible. When they had started the texts with correct words, they were allowed and even obliged to refer to all the protective powers to overcome all the adversaries which were known to them. The gaps were dangerous, and that is why the Christian priests, Rabbis and Mandaean priests and magicians endeavoured to stop up every hole in the defensive systems. The correct intention, the confessional start, *basmala*, also subdued and compelled the foreign ghosts and deities to promote health and salvation, and there is nothing more desirable than salvation.

The syncretistic features in bowl incantations reflect a Middle Eastern society in which various religions living side by side shared numerous ideas and practices on the level of popular beliefs and customs, although these, in theory at least, were not accepted by the leading groups of each religion. On the other hand, the confessional formulae testify that even magic was not outside the realm of religion – in this respect the incantation texts are not interconfessional. The magicians (and obviously their clients as well) were fully aware of the religious groups inside which they were born and within which they were living and acting. Syncretism did not imply independence of religion; it was solely an additional instrument with which people tried to strengthen the protection system provided by their native religion.

York, London 1986), p. 142, with reference to "Isaac of Antioch's Homily against the Jews" (*Oriens Christianus* 45 1961, 46 1962, 47 1963, and 49 1965).

