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Kelsey Museum of Archaeology  
Jackier Prize Submission  
January 2020

“I Would *Never* Practice Magic... It’s Not Kosher!”  
*An Examination of Jewish Magic in Antiquity*

According to historian J. Z. Smith, we can divide ancient religious practices into “three spatial categories: (1) the ‘here’ of domestic religion... (2) the ‘there’ of public... religions, largely based in temple constructions; and (3) the ‘anywhere’ of a rich diversity of religious formations that occupy an interstitial space between these other two loci.”<sup>i</sup> According to Smith, a combination of dislocations due to imperialism and “the model of the distant emperor” as opposed to a “native kingship,” alongside changing notions of cosmography, led to an explosion of the unorthodox religious practices of “anywhere” during the late antique period.<sup>ii</sup> Ancient Jews reckoned with dislocation from their religious center with magical practices of the “anywhere” that incorporated elements of other religious sects; the Jewish shift in the late antique period toward codifying magical practices exhibits both this prioritization of portability and those tell-tale marks of syncretism.

The first dislocation which particularly afflicted the psyche and religious modes of Mediterranean Jews occurred in the sixth century BCE when Babylonians conquered the Kingdom of Judah, destroyed the Jewish temple, and deported Jews from the land of Palestine. While Cyrus the Great of Persia conquered Babylonia half a century later and allowed the Jews to return shortly thereafter, many Jews remained in Babylonia, creating the first chasm splitting Jews from their religious heartland.<sup>iii</sup> The Jews who did return to Palestine rebuilt the temple between the sixth and fourth centuries BCE, beginning the so-called Second Temple Period which lasted until 70 CE.<sup>iv</sup> While Jews who were able to return to the heartland had access to the temple, or the public, civic religion of “there,” they still began to make use of the resources of

the religion of “anywhere.” The fundamental anxiety plaguing Jews in this unstable political climate, where their fates were determined by far-off rulers, is most viscerally embodied in their newfound obsession with demons.

Jews made sense of these devastating political developments by writing new bodies of scripture claiming that the cause of their misfortune was the “subversion by rebellious angels” of the “ancient order of Creation.”<sup>v</sup> Accordingly, Jews created and practiced a diverse and blossoming field of “[p]ractical antidemonic knowledge” in order to exorcise the “evil spirits” to whom they “ascribed human suffering.”<sup>vi</sup> The dominant tradition of exorcisms in this period relied on vegetal, animal, and mineral materials.<sup>vii</sup> The Jewish historian Josephus describes in *The Jewish Wars* one such root whose “color is like to that of flame, and towards the evenings it sends out a certain ray like lightning.”<sup>viii</sup> This root will not “yield itself to be taken quietly, until either the urine of a woman, or her menstrual blood, be poured upon it; nay, even then it is certain death to those that touch it”; yet Josephus describes a complicated scheme whereby one can access the root by tricking one’s dog into pulling the root out for him.<sup>ix</sup> Josephus clarifies that the trouble of attaining this root is worth it, for “it quickly drives away those called demons, which are no other than the spirits of the wicked, that enter into men that are alive and kill them.”<sup>x</sup> This complex procedure demonstrates the ancient mechanism of a novel set of rituals that grant them a semblance of control over the “demons” which haunted their fortunes. Moreover, as Gideon Bohak notes, “there was absolutely no narrative necessity for Josephus to enter this entire subject here... but rather [took] it as a source of ethnic pride.”<sup>xi</sup> For ancient Jews who had suffered harsh religious persecution and dramatic dislocation at the hands of far-off foreign rulers, the understanding that their precious religious wisdom and scrappy creativity could rid them of the evil spirits who they blamed for their misfortune was a source of solace.

In *Antiquities*, Josephus relates that King Solomon himself “left behind him the manner of using exorcisms... and this method of cure is of great force unto this day; for I have seen... Eleazar, releasing people that were demonical in the presence of Vespasian, and his sons, and his captains, and the whole multitude of his soldiers... he drew out the demon through [the man’s] nostrils... reciting the incantations which [Solomon] composed.”<sup>xii</sup> While magic may seem antithetical to Jewish religious orthodoxy as practiced today, Josephus places these practices in a lineage of Jewish whit dating back to Solomon, granting the practice a form of biblical legitimacy. Further, Eleazar’s exorcism before Vespasian not only represented a public display of aforementioned “ethnic pride,” but also, to Josephus, constituted an advantage of familial wisdom which Jews held that their Roman overlords did not. Ancient Jews practiced exorcisms, in part, to gain some semblance of control over a seemingly arbitrary and certainly cruel universe; Josephus’ boast that a Jew was able to ostentatiously impress a Roman emperor, who was the political colonial overlord and master of the Jews’ fate, demonstrates this fascination. To Josephus, Eleazar with his magic was David with his slingshot, showing off in front of the Goliath power of Vespasian and his men.

Jewish magic during the Second Temple period was primarily oral in nature, and in many cases magical power derived from the spoken word itself.<sup>xiii</sup> Eleazar exorcises the demon using biblical incantations; likewise, speaking God’s name to channel spiritual energy was a recurring magical technique.<sup>xiv</sup> In late antiquity, however, the act of writing became a core component of Jewish magical ritual, as well as of everyday religious practice as Jewish rabbinic scholarship expanded.<sup>xv</sup> This latter phenomenon is well-understood. After the Romans destroyed the second Jewish temple in 70 CE in response to a Jewish revolt,<sup>xvi</sup> Jews were permanently dislocated from their central place of worship and unable to practice their longstanding rituals,

which were tied closely to the temple. Later, Jews insurrected the Bar-Kochba Revolt in the second century CE against their Roman overlords in response to their ban on circumcision and proposal to construct a Temple to Jupiter on the remains of the second temple. After the difficult victory against his Jewish subjects, Emperor Hadrian exiled much of the Jewish population and particularly banned Jews from Jerusalem.<sup>xvii</sup> Jews in exile in Babylonia and Palestine created rabbinic Judaism – dispersed academic study in schools and worship in synagogues under the tutelage of rabbis – to adapt to life far from the lost land and temple.<sup>xviii</sup> Jews redacted religious exegesis and textual guidance for religious and judicial practices into documents known as the Palestinian Talmud in the third and fourth centuries CE and the Babylonian Talmud in the seventh and sixth centuries CE.<sup>xix</sup> Generally, the shift of the center of Jewish religious life from the public temple to portable and codified rituals and scripture, compiled and supervised under the tutelage of rabbis, facilitated dislocated religious practice and represented the shift from the religion of “there” to the religion of “anywhere” that Smith describes.

As the burgeoning Jewish rabbinic order increasingly cohered on the basis of the study and redaction of the written word, so, too, did Jewish magical practices. To explain this transformation from oral to written tradition in popular Jewish magic, Gideon Bohak cites a few plausible theories, all of which could easily have functioned in tandem and two of which reflect important components of the religion of “anywhere.” First, this shift toward written magical practices could have been “correlate[d]” with the orientation of Jewish religion around the written word described above. Bohak particularly notes that a “shift from Temple-based priestly magic” also occurred during this period, presumably due to the destruction of the Second Temple;<sup>xx</sup> hence, this disruption dislocated some Jewish magical practices just as it did the religious orthodoxy. Further, just as recording traditions in the Talmud preserved and protected

the faith's tenets from the ravages of potential future dislocations, so too did the inscription of magical practices. Given that Jews forged a new religious backbone in order to salvage important values of the old, temple-based religion, adapt those to life far from the religious heartland, and withstand potential future dislocations, it makes sense that their magical practices would have followed a similar trajectory.

Second, Bohak suggests that Jewish magicians may have “developed the habit of writing down so many magical recipes... as a result of their direct contact with the Greco-Egyptian magical tradition, where this had already become the accepted norm.”<sup>xxi</sup> Bohak further argues that the “layout” of Jewish magical texts “bears [a] close resemblance” to Greco-Egyptian magical texts.<sup>xxii</sup> When Jews were dislocated from their religious homeland, they also *relocated* to other parts of Israel and the Middle East at large. It makes sense, then, that their rapidly transforming religious practices would adapt aspects of other religions Jews encountered in the places they moved to. Bohak's argument that Jewish, Greek, and Egyptian magical practices specifically interacted in terms of the written word is exemplified by a particular Egyptian magical gem in the collection of the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology. This gem's obverse displays a “serpent swallowing its own tail... enclosing a cock-headed, snake-legged deity dressed in Roman military garb” (Figure 3); the reverse displays “an eagle-headed deity with six wings; and “on the bevel, we see crocodiles, scarabs, a baboon, and other animals and figures” (Figure 4).<sup>xxiii</sup> Bohak identifies the imagery as Greek, Roman, and Egyptian, yet the inscriptions include references to “Michael, Raphael, Gabriel, and Ouriel,” and Bohak clarifies that “the four Archangels are indeed Jewish (or Christian) in origin... beyond any doubt.”<sup>xxiv</sup> This magical gem demonstrates that aspects of theology, including written holy names of Jewish religion, passed from Jews to Egyptians. Moreover, the gem demonstrates that not only may the notion of the

sacredness of the written word have spread from Greeks and Egyptians to Jews, but also the written word inscribed on portable objects, such as gems, could easily have changed hands and *also* facilitated the spread of religious ideas. In other words, syncretism led to more writing, and writing facilitated more syncretism.

Babylonian demon bowls, alternately known as Aramaic incantation bowls, found in lower Iraq and dating to the Sassanian period between the fifth and eighth centuries CE,<sup>xxv</sup> also illustrate the dislocated, disaffiliated properties of the religion of “anywhere.” The user of a demon bowl would overturn the bowl and place it in a corner of the home to protect the occupants of the household from demons, perhaps analogous to a mouse trap for the paranormal.<sup>xxvi</sup> A square with a circle at each corner illustrated on one incantation bowl at the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology perhaps self-referentially depicts the four overturned bowls at the corners of a room (Figure 1).<sup>xxvii</sup> Another bowl at the Kelsey Museum depicts demons with bound hands and chained feet, indicating the bowl’s intended use (Figure 2).<sup>xxviii</sup> This resurgent obsession with demonology mirrors that of the Second Temple Period, and like the popular exorcisms of centuries prior, reflects psychological distress due to political instability and dislocation; these bowls circulated in response to profound, endemic anxiety among Babylonians of a spiritual infestation of one’s home.

The bowls were sometimes inscribed with an incantation, frequently written circularly in a spiral and forcing the practitioner to rotate the bowl to read it.<sup>xxix</sup> Inscriptions would reference “power supernatural being[s],” such as Jewish angels or Yahweh.<sup>xxx</sup> Other bowls were inscribed with pseudo-script rather than actual text, perhaps indicating illiteracy of the bowl’s maker or user;<sup>xxxi</sup> pseudo-script on one bowl at the Kelsey Museum appears to emulate the square script of rabbinic Aramaic, yet it does not spell any words (Figure 1).<sup>xxxii</sup> Evidently even illiterate creators

of Babylonian demon bowls possessed the same belief in the sacred power of writing so pervasive among various religious associations, and particularly Jews, during the late antique period. It is important to note that the language and content of a bowl's inscription can suggest the religion of the bowl's maker, but not that of the bowl's user; the names of the bowls' clients and the set-up guide written on the outside of the bowl frequently differ from the (assumed) ethnic identity of the bowl's maker.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Further, sometimes an excavation of a single home will yield bowls whose languages and texts appear to come from different cultures.<sup>xxxiv</sup> The shared faith in the spirituality of writing in tandem with the cultural fluidity of these bowls demonstrates extensive syncretism among shared, disaffiliated magical practices. Moreover, that religious traditions were specifically transmitted between groups through inscriptions demonstrates the aforementioned symbiotic relationship between the spread of writing and the spread of religious ideas.

Some incantation bowls "display their composers' use of distinctly rabbinic materials, including even citations of the Mishnah and of rabbinic materials."<sup>xxxv</sup> This indicates a degree of connection between the newly forged Jewish orthodoxy and these magical practices which seem so heretical to Judaism as practiced through the ages; in one passage of the Talmud, "R. Yohanan said: Why are they [magicians] called by the name *'khashafim*'? Because they diminish the heavenly family (*makhshishin famili'a shel m'alah*)."<sup>xxxvi</sup> The religious orthodoxy of not only the present but also the past would have us believe that these dispersed magical practices were universally known as sacrilegious in their day. The aforementioned archaeological evidence of Babylonian demon bowls certainly cuts against this supposed prohibition; perhaps these ancient Jews were renegades while the rabbis lived truly sacred lives, just as the biblical Israelites

worshipped their golden calf while Moses was away. Yet a closer examination of the Talmud reveals that the document's sages seem to relish dabbling in magical practices. In one passage,

“Rav Papa said: Yosef the demon told me that for two drinks the demons kill. . . . And, in the case where a man forgets. . . . He should take the thumb of his right hand in the left hand the thumb of the left hand in the right hand and say the following: ‘You and I, behold we are three.’ And if he hears someone say to him, “you and I, behold that is four,’ he should say ‘you and I, behold we are five.’ . . . Once it happened to go as far as one hundred and one, and the demon burst.”<sup>xxxvii</sup>

The rabbi touts the words of his friendly neighborhood demon as proof that his useful incantation to rid oneself of a demon would work<sup>xxxviii</sup> – because “Yosef the demon told me” himself. Rav Papa *boasts* of his access to the demon world and knowledge of the correct magic to combat it in order to substantiate his authority as a knowledgeable religious figure, despite that this incantation would have been a clear violation of *keshaphim*. Moreover, Rav Papa’s spell is inscribed in the Talmud, indicating that the rabbis considered this knowledge to be not only practical but also sacred. Hence, the desire among rabbis to ensure the posterity and portability of Jewish religion in general also included the blossoming Jewish magical practices of the late antique period; so long as one had the codified texts of Jewish wisdom on hand, one had the ability to exorcise a demon, no matter what distant land he had been made to roam.

In another passage, “Rav Hanina and Rav Oshayah would sit every Friday and study the Book of Creation, and create for themselves a one-third calf, and eat it.”<sup>xxxix</sup> The rabbis, then, were actively engaged in magical practices, and their miraculous creation of a living creature is used as evidence of the intensity of their scholarly study as well as their direct access to Jewish spirituality. Despite the awesome power of their (mythological) creation of a calf, this seems such a blatant use of magic that the modern reader would assume it to be forbidden. Yet according to the Talmud, “Abaye said: the laws governing magic (*khshafim*) are[:] Doing an actual act of magic is punishable with stoning; performing a sleight of hand. . . is exempt but

forbidden. And which acts are permissible from the beginning? Those, such as Rav Hanina and Rav Oshaia did.”<sup>xl</sup> This statement remains incongruous with the aforementioned condemnation against “khashafim” as a “diminish[ment] of the heavenly family” and without explanation; it is also particularly galling because the rabbis themselves acknowledge the contradiction. The less charitable interpretation of this phenomenon would be that rabbis saw themselves as above the law, but Bohak argues that “we find [rabbis] forbidding all types of *keshaphim*, in line with the biblical prohibition, but also leaving many loopholes which enabled their entry into the heart of rabbinic Judaism.”<sup>xli</sup> According to Bohak, the distinctions between forbidden and encouraged magic depended on both the origin and the nature of the magical techniques used.<sup>xlii</sup> Despite their backward-bending rules, then, the rabbis did have *some* schema to dictate the bounds of prohibited magical practices.

Scholar Kimberly Stratton argues that there actually lies a sharp distinction between the Palestinian and Babylonian sources of the Talmud, which were later woven together into one document. According to Stratton, “Palestinian sources... almost unanimously portray [magic] negatively as a source of danger, attributing power to piety and spiritual merit, while Babylonian sources... represent themselves as masters of magical know-how and demonology.”<sup>xliii</sup> Stratton ascribes this difference in perspective to the influence of “Zoroastrianism and its dualistic belief in demons” on the “religious and cultural landscape of Jewish Babylonia,” such that “the ability to assuage and control demons” was woven so intimately into the lives of Babylonian Jews that they did not see this particular brand of magic as countering their long-held religious tenets. Unlike Palestinian Jews still living in the land of Israel, Babylonian Jews had been uprooted far from the Jewish homeland to a melting pot of different religious and cultural strains; therefore, it

makes sense that Babylonian Jews would develop syncretic magical practices for which Palestinian Jews had less of a psychological need.

Ancient Jewish magic has deep roots. As Josephus' tall tales show, Jews justified the popular exorcisms of the Second Temple period with the ascription of magical knowledge to biblical figures and the contemporaneous need to defend oneself against the whims of foreign powers. Jews aiming to hold onto their religion for posterity and adapt to life in the wake of the destruction of the Second Temple and their expulsion from Jerusalem codified both their magical and rabbinical practices for the purposes of posterity and portability; yet this sacred act of writing was also influenced by Greco-Egyptian magical traditions, as the Kelsey gem's syncretic nature demonstrates. Babylonian demon bowls represent not only the core psychological need which the magical practices of "anywhere" filled for Late Antique Jews but also the way that dislocation created opportunities for cross-cultural magical interaction. In tandem, the demon bowls and the Kelsey gem demonstrate the cyclical relationships between the spread of writing, communication, and extensive syncretism. Moreover, the Talmud reveals that rabbis both upheld their own authority by deeming themselves the ultimate masters of magical practices while struggling to create a religious schema of acceptability which accommodated the disaffiliated magical practices of their era. Yet social history is best told from the perspectives of everyday people as opposed to that of the elite; the material evidence tells us that, no matter what his rabbi wrote, the Babylonian Jew did not consider his household demon trap to be an egregious crime.

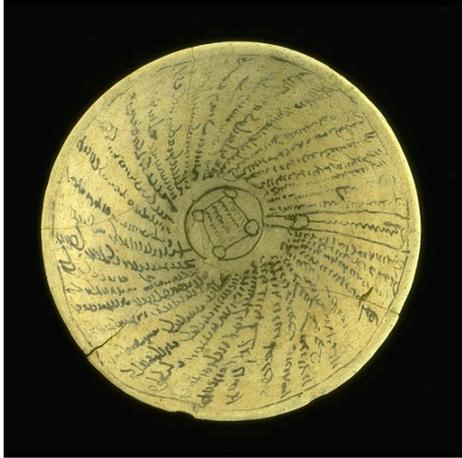


Figure 1: *Kelsey Museum 19502 (Babylonian Demon Bowl)*, Seleucia-on-Tigris, ca. 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> c. CE, Clay.



Figure 2: *Kelsey Museum 33756 (Babylonian Demon Bowl)*, Seleucia-on-Tigris, ca. 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> c. CE, Clay.



Figure 3: *Kelsey Museum 26054 (Magical Gem)*, Obverse, n.d., Green Jasper.



Figure 4: *Kelsey Museum 26054 (Magical Gem)*, Reverse, n.d., Green Jasper.

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## Notes

- <sup>i</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, "Here, There, and Anywhere," in *Prayer, Magic, and the Stars in the Ancient and Late Antique World*, (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), 23.
- <sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*, 23; 31-33.
- <sup>iii</sup> Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Babylonian Captivity," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, April 9, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Babylonian-Captivity>.
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- <sup>iv</sup> Harvard Divinity School.
- <sup>v</sup> Yuval Harari, *Jewish Magic before the Rise of Kabbalah* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2017), 296.
- <sup>vi</sup> Harari, 300.
- <sup>vii</sup> Gideon Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic: A History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 89.
- <sup>viii</sup> Flavius Josephus, *Wars of the Jews*, 7.6.3.
- <sup>ix</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>x</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>xi</sup> Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic*, 91.
- <sup>xii</sup> Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities*, 8.2.5.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic*, 143.
- <sup>xiv</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.
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- <sup>xviii</sup> Greenberg.
- <sup>xix</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>xx</sup> Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic*, 284.
- <sup>xxi</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>xxii</sup> Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic*, 284.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.
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- <sup>xxiv</sup> Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic*, 197.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Michael G. Morony, "Magic and Society in Late Sasanian Iraq," in *Prayer, Magic, and the Stars in the Ancient and Late Antique World*, (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), 83.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Morony, 95-97.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Gideon Bohak, *Traditions of Magic in Late Antiquity* (Ann Arbor, MI: Special Connection Library, University of Michigan Library, 1996), 27.
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- <sup>xxviii</sup> Bohak, *Traditions of Magic in Late Antiquity*, 29.
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- <sup>xxix</sup> Morony, 93-94.
- <sup>xxx</sup> Morony, 97.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic*, 185.
- <sup>xxxii</sup> Bohak, *Traditions of Magic in Late Antiquity*, 29.
- Kelsey Museum 19502*.
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic*, 190-191.
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>xxxv</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.
- <sup>xxxvi</sup> Kimberly Stratton, "Imagining Power: Magic, Miracle, and the Social Context of Rabbinic Self-Representation," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73, no. 2 (2005): 372, [www.jstor.org/stable/4139802](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4139802).
- <sup>xxxvii</sup> Stratton, 368.
- <sup>xxxviii</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>xxxix</sup> Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic*, 363.
- <sup>xl</sup> Stratton, 366.
- <sup>xli</sup> Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic*, 422.
- <sup>xlii</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>xliii</sup> Stratton, 385.