TRANSMISSION AND TRANSFORMATION OF SPELLS: THE CASE OF THE JEWISH BABYLONIAN ARAMAIC BOWLS

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The Aramaic magic bowls from Mesopotamia do not contain names of authors, nor do they have references to sources from which the authors of these texts culled their materials. They contain, as a rule, the names of their owners, people for whom they were prepared; a few of them have dates, very few have names that can be assigned to historical figures, and very few indeed, if any, give us a hint as to their place of provenance. And yet, we may already be in a position at this stage to enquire what sources the authors of the texts used, how they learned their texts and how they transmitted them, and what is the structure of a text. The information is not explicit in the texts; it must be teased out of them, and the conclusions are at this stage merely tentative.

The authors of the Jewish bowl texts use among their sources the corpus of the Hebrew Bible, which they often quote, as a rule in the original Hebrew, rarely in an Aramaic version, including the Onkelos Targum; and in some cases Mishna passages, but so far we know only of such passages which were incorporated in the Jewish daily liturgy. They also use non-canonical texts which form part of the Jewish liturgy, such as the formula known as Qeri'at šema' al hammitṭa, the prayer before going to sleep, with an invocation of angels who stand on all sides of the person for protection; they sometimes quote passages of Hekhalot compositions and of poetic pieces which may have belonged to the same genre; and they give evidence of their acquaintance with the midrashic literature, sometimes alluding to otherwise unattested midrashim. The authors of the bowl texts were clearly familiar with a wide array of Jewish source material. This may give us an idea as to the range of literature that formed part of the Jewish religious discourse.

1 The present contribution is part of a series started by Shaked 1999a. The first paper in this series was published under the title "Poetics of Spells" in Shaked (1999a). Other items in this series are listed in Shaked (2006). I wish to thank Yuval Harari for his careful reading of a draft of this paper and for helpful comments.

of the period. If we add to this the fact that the names of owners of some bowls are adorned with the title “rabbi”, a form of address which in all likelihood was not employed lightly at that time, one gets an impression of how much the literary and religious activity represented by the magic bowls was embedded in the Jewish tradition. At the same time it is evident that the people who composed the texts of the bowls were open to non-Jewish environment, including Mandaean, Christian, and to some degree also Iranian, and often to vestiges of older Babylonian elements which must have been still alive in late antique Babylonia.

We are here particularly interested in the ways in which the texts were composed and transmitted. One way of arriving at this information is to arrange the texts in thematic groups and identify bowl texts which have the same formula, even if what we call the “same” is never quite identical. Each bowl is written at the order of a specific client, and is in its way an independent composition. We can thus try to understand the degree of fidelity in the transmission of the text, on the one hand, and, on the other, the text variations in different bowls, thus perhaps discovering the limits implicitly imposed on the freedom to invent new expressions, new motifs and new combinations.

We shall have to introduce into our enquiry some new terms, which, in order to serve our purposes, should be given precise and unequivocal definitions. The text of a bowl will be called an incantation. An incantation may consist of one or more segments (which we shall call “spells”), and these can turn up on occasion in other incantations as well.

A spell reflects, with greater or lesser fidelity, what I should like to call a formula. This term denotes an ideal structure of a text which the practitioner aims at reproducing. A formula may be envisioned as the text that could have been placed in a carefully written model book of spells, even though no such composition is known to have existed.

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3 Such texts will be published in a separate study.
4 The influence of Mandaic elements on JBA magic texts has been pointed out chiefly by Ch. Müller-Kessler (1999a) and other publications.
5 The Christian element is explicitly present in the few bowls where the trinity is invoked; cf. Levene 1999, and Shaked 1999b. Other unpublished bowls with similar formulae have been noticed.