CHAPTER TWENTY

MAGICAL BOWLS AND MANICHAEANS

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Magic bowls are apotropaic and exorcistic objects found predominantly in Mesopotamia. They are shallow bowls of varying size, inscribed with binding spells and invocations, and dating roughly from the 5th to 7th centuries CE. The bowls have been classified by their languages and scripts into four main types: Judeo-Aramaic, Mandaean, and two varieties of Syriac. The "magic" of the bowls, drawn from the available apotropaic and exorcistic practices of the region, claims to protect a person, family or household from demonic intrusion by declaring a "seal" upon the particular persons or places which expels or incapacitates evil forces. This practice was "available" in the sense that no institution had exclusive authority over its use, and it was adopted by various religious practitioners in the service of their clientele. The bowls survive, therefore, as artifacts of religious competition and rival claims to power. The variations in script and content among the bowls show that the technique was employed by Jews, Arameans, and Persians in the Persian empire.

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2 "The text of the bowls very often talks of chaining and pressing the evil entities; at the same time it may also bid them go away, leave the house and desist from bothering the house owner. The bowl thus serves both to entrap the evil powers and to reject them; there is no real contradiction between these two propositions" (Joseph Naveh and Shaul Shaked, *Amulets and Magic Bowls: Aramaic Incantations of Late Antiquity* [Leiden: Brill, 1985], 15). Self-referential designations found in the bowl texts are "press" (kibsha) and "seal" (hatma).

3 A wonderful testimony to this milieu is Isbell’s Judeo-Aramaic bowl 49: "And there will cease from this dwelling and threshold of this Parrukdad the son of Zebinta and of Qamoi the daughter of Zaraq, Aramean black-arts, Jewish black-arts, Arabic black-arts, Persian black-arts, Indian black-arts, Greek black-arts, black-arts of the Romans, black-arts which are practiced in the seventy languages, either by woman or by man" (Charles D. Isbell, *Corpus of the Aramaic Incantation Bowls* [Missoula: Scholars Press, 1975], 113).
Mandaeans, Christians, and—perhaps—Manichaeans.4

Eighty years ago, James Montgomery of the University of Pennsylvania discovered that one of the two Syriac scripts found on the bowls was identical, for all intents and purposes, to the script used by the Manichaeans.5 Because the content of the bowl inscriptions written in Manichaean script was not doctrinally significant, nor even definitively attributable to Manichaeans,6 Montgomery’s discovery has never been followed up and its ramifications for the history of Manichaeism have never seemed worth pursuing. But a reevaluation of Montgomery’s discovery is overdue. Put simply, are these bowls Manichaean, and did the Manichaeans practice “magic”?

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To the cultural establishment of the Roman and Sasanid Empires, the Manichaeans who came pouring into their respective realms from Mesopotamia in the 3rd century CE were both detested and feared, and they were subject to suspicion and suppression. As objects of loathing and dread, the Manichaeans had but two options by which to survive and advance. The first option was to assimilate, to mask strangeness and learn to speak with a famil-

4 The various languages and scripts of the bowls are indicative of the “magicians” who prepared them; their clients are not necessarily of the same ethnic or religious community. In fact, the majority of the bowls were apparently prepared by Jewish “magicians” for Persian or non-Jewish Semitic clients (Naveh and Shaked, 17-18). In several cases, the same client has in his possession bowls from different traditions, hedging his bets, as it were, by covering himself with power from as many sources as he could arrange (see note 38).

5 Montgomery, 1913: 32-34. Allotte de la Fuye apparently reached the same conclusion independently, but did not report his findings until 1924 (“Une coupe magique en écriture manichéenne,” CRAIBL [1924]: 388-99). The Manichaean script is known from extensive texts in Iranian and Turkic languages recovered from Turfan and surrounding locales in Central Asia, smaller Syriac fragments recovered in Egypt, and a single crystal seal found in Mesopotamia reading, in Syriac, “Mar Mani, the Apostle of Jesus Christ.”

6 Montgomery concludes that “there are no Manichaean traces in the bowls” (1913: 35); cf “Original Script . . .,” 28. But it should be pointed out that the position taken by Montgomery and merely repeated by all who have addressed the question since—that the script represents the source from which the Manichaeans developed their own—is untenable. The Manichaean script is traceable to the 3rd century, and hence predates the bowls by as much as three centuries. By the time the bowls were made, there was no surviving indigenous Mesopotamian scribal tradition unaffiliated with the major religious communities of the region. Therefore, the bowl script can only be derived from the Manichaean script.