CHAPTER 16

Between Demons and Kings
_The Art of Babylonian Incantation Bowls_

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From different types of evidence, both textual and material, we learn that the Jews, like their neighbours, believed that the world was populated by supernatural entities, some of which might harm people, while others had the power to protect them. They believed that man could control these entities, mobilizing them for their own benefit, either by certain activities that had to be thoroughly learnt and implemented with care and precision, or by seeking the assistance of professional practitioners or sorcerers.

It seems that during the first four centuries following the destruction of the Second Temple, belief in magic, like other belief systems, underwent an essential transformation among the Jews. This change was characterized by the increasingly popular use of magic, as evidenced by artefacts dated from the fourth century CE to the Islamic period and discovered in Palestine and Mesopotamia. Scholars of ancient Jewish history have claimed that the Judaism of Late Antiquity reflected inner processes of change which had already begun at the end of the Second Temple period, some of which resulted from external influences. Certain changes in Jewish thought already exist in the books of the Pseudepigrapha and Apocrypha, parts of which were written at the end of the Second Temple period (Shaked 1982). This change took place partly as a result of the infiltration of new ideas into Jewish thinking, among them the idea of struggle between the opposing forces of God and the devil and the alignment of good and evil angels alongside (or against) God, who till then had been regarded as a single authority (ibid.: 245). The origins of these concepts are deeply rooted in Iranian Zoroastrian culture, mainly of the Sasanian period. Iranian influences on the Jewish cultural-religious milieu of the time also comprised magic elements, as reflected, for example, in the Book of Tobit (ibid.: 247).

In their work on incantation bowls Shaked and Naveh, using textual evidence, have shown that the Iranian influence on Judaism continued into late antiquity, as demonstrated by linguistic allusions in the bowls, which bear witness to the merging of the Aramaic and Middle Persian, including Persian names of demons and humans (Naveh and Shaked 1985; idem 1993). In this
article I attempt to present a visual interpretation of Jewish magic and its link with Iranian influences as reflected in the bowl paintings, focusing in particular on figures and inscriptions found on Mesopotamian incantation bowls.\footnote{Most of the bowls belong to the Schøyen Collection. I am grateful to Shaul Shaked who read and interpreted the texts for facilitating their study.} I deal with their artistic and iconographic significance as well as with their function in the culture from which they emerged. I attempt to trace Iranian artistic influences on the bowl paintings, hopefully reinforcing the findings of the philological research which point to definite influences on the Jews of Mesopotamia.

The incantation bowls were found in archaeological excavations throughout Mesopotamia, many of them being made available for research due to antique dealers.\footnote{On this, see McCown 1967. Among the first publications on the subject are Montgomery 1913; Gordon 1934; idem 1937; Yamauchi 1965.} The bowls are simple in design, inscribed for the most part with ink in a spiral pattern and sometimes featuring a figurative painting on the inner or outer surface (Figs. 16.1 and 16.1a). We know today of around two thousand bowls; approximately two-thirds of them are inscribed in Jewish Aramaic and reflect a profound knowledge of Jewish sources. Hence, only a community member who was well versed in Jewish writings and holy books could have inscribed them, even if they were not intended for Jewish customers.\footnote{Shaked 2005. [On incantation texts within the orality-textuality continuum, see Ch. Häberl’s article in this volume.]} Similar incantation bowls with Syriac, Middle Persian or Mandaean inscriptions have also been found, and these seem to have been inscribed by members of neighbouring communities in Mesopotamia.\footnote{See McCullough 1967; Yamauchi 1967.}

In general, the essence of the decorations is linked to the demonic world to which the incantation is addressed, apart from a few depictions of the sorcerer. However, only rarely is the text on the bowl directly connected to the picture on it, thus hindering our optimal interpretation of the material. Most of the paintings present various types of male and female demons, hybrid creatures and humans; most of them possess a range of identifying features, such as bestial anatomical elements (horns, claws, or tails), wild hair or naked bodies (Figs. 16.2 and 16.2a). Almost all the demons are figured bound in chains or shackles, which to an extent defines their demonic nature. Indeed, most