



Christians, Jews, and Magic in the Sasanian Realm: Between Confrontation and Cooperation

SERGEY MINOV

Institute for Oriental and Classical Studies, HSE University, Moscow

ABSTRACT This essay focuses on one particular aspect of Jewish-Christian relations during the Sasanian period, namely various types of interaction between the two religious groups in the domain of magic. For that purpose, two distinctive bodies of textual evidence are examined: hagiographical literature produced by Syriac Christians, and Aramaic magic bowls, Jewish as well as Christian. Illuminating and complementing each other, the two corpora shed light on the dual dynamics of competition and cooperation between Jews and Christians in the field of popular religion.

KEYWORDS Jewish-Christian relations, Sasanian empire, Syriac Christianity, magic, popular religion, magic bowls, hagiography

Introduction

From the point of view of a modern historian, Jews and Christians constituted the two most visible religious minorities in the multi-ethnic and multi-confessional society of the Sasanian empire, especially in its Western provinces of Northern Syria and Mesopotamia, where they often lived in close proximity to each other.¹ Yet, developing a comprehensive picture of Jewish-Christian relations in late antique Syria-Mesopotamia is a challenging task, beset by many difficulties, which still awaits a systematic treatment.² In this article, I would like to present and discuss existing evidence on different types of encounters, imagined or real, between Syriac Christians of the Sasanian empire and their Jewish neighbours in the domain of magic and popular religion. [1]

Both Jews and Christians of the pre-Islamic Near East developed their own sets of beliefs, [2]

1 For overviews of the history and culture of Jews in the Sasanian empire, see Neusner (1965–1970), Gafni (1990), Rubenstein (2003). A fundamental up-to-date overview of Sasanian Christianity is still a desideratum; meanwhile, see Labourt (1904), as well as Asmussen (1983); Herman (2019b).

2 On some aspects, see Neusner (1971a, 1972); Becker (2003, 2010); Koltun-Fromm (2011); Minov (2019, 2021, 49–141); Rubenstein (2020).

practices, and taxonomies pertaining to magic, broadly defined.³ Scholars of Late Antiquity interested in Jewish-Christian interactions in this sphere tend to focus on the literary and archaeological evidence that comes from the Roman Empire (Simon 1948, 394–431; Lacerenza 2002; Sanzo 2017). In those instances when they do venture into the Sasanian realm, it is usually done by students of Judaism, who, for obvious reasons, place the main focus on the Babylonian Talmud or Jewish incantation bowls as the primary sets of sources.⁴ In what follows, I aim at presenting a comprehensive overview of the domain of magic and popular religion as a meeting ground between Jews and Christians of Sasanian Syria-Mesopotamia, in which I will take into account not only these important textual corpora produced by the Jews of Babylonia, but also broaden the scope of investigation by bringing into discussion relevant evidence scattered through Christian literary sources written in Syriac and other languages. Of particular importance in that regard will be Syriac hagiographical compositions, in which one comes across several accounts of the interaction between Jews and Christians in the context of magic.

Putting these two major bodies of evidence alongside each other can help us produce a more detailed and stereoscopic picture of multifaceted relationships between Christians and Jews in the domain of magic, as it enables us to distinguish diverse patterns of interaction between the two religious communities, to map various social sites in which such contacts took place, and to identify different categories of ritual practitioners that were involved in these exchanges. In my discussion, I divide all relevant evidence into two main groups, in accordance with genre and ideological propensity of the sources: one, comprised mainly by Syriac hagiographical accounts, where the themes of confrontation and competition dominate, and another, constituted by Jewish and Christian incantation bowls, for which the notions of cooperation and syncretism are more relevant. [3]

Before proceeding further, however, a brief terminological explanation is necessary in order to clarify the use of such a controversial term as “magic”. Using it interchangeably with the more neutral definition “popular religion,” I follow the methodological lead of David Frankfurter, who redefines “magic” as a flexible heuristic category that describes “the invocation and deployment of an authoritative tradition in a local performative context through the creative agency of a ritual expert and involving various ritual media” (Frankfurter 2019, 722).⁵ In most of the cases discussed below, the local performative context emerges as a result of the interference of two such authoritative traditions, Jewish and Christian. This zone of interference engenders its own complex dynamics, so that, depending on the social site in which it unfolds, we can observe different strategies to be enacted by the ritual experts of both reli- [4]

3 For a comprehensive analysis of Jewish magic during Late Antiquity, see Bohak (2008), together with an important complement on late antique Babylonia in Bohak (2019). On the development of Christian discourse and practice of magic during this period, see Sanzo (2019); van der Vliet (2019). While there are more than a few fundamental studies of Christian magic in late Roman Egypt—see esp. Frankfurter (2018), de Bruyn (2017)—no comparable treatment of this phenomenon among Christians of the Sasanian Empire or Syriac Christians in general is available yet. For some relevant observations, see Trzcionka (2007); Ruani (2013); Parmentier (2014); Moriggi (2016).

4 See Geller (1977); Bohak (2003); Ilan (2013); Jaffé (2015); Boustan & Sanzo (2017). For general discussions of popular religion in Sasanian Babylonia, based for the most part on the evidence of incantation bowls, see Shaked (1997); Morony (2003).

5 Illuminating discussions of the discourse on magic in the ancient world can be found in Dickie (2001); Janowitz (2001); Stratton (2012); Edmonds (2019).

gious traditions, who seek to demonstrate their efficacy and authority as they channel their knowledge to the local level of “simple believers.”⁶

Confrontation and Competition

When we turn to the instances when Christian literary sources, written in Syriac or other languages, describe encounters between Jews and Christians in the context of magic, one distinctive pattern that emerges is that of a hostile confrontation between the two communities or competition between their ritual experts. [5]

The Sasanian society had a differentiated cognitive map of the domain of evil. Based on the radically dualistic vision of the material world as a battlefield where the forces of good engage those of evil, Zoroastrianism developed a rich taxonomy of malevolent and demonic creatures, including those connected to the domain of “sorcery” (*ǰādūgīh*).⁷ To this realm belonged such human agents as male “sorcerer” (*ǰādūg*) and female “witch” (*parīg*), who worked in close partnership with demons and their head Ahriman. [6]

Although almost no literary evidence describing attitudes of Zoroastrians to other confessional groups during the Sasanian period survived, it appears that the rhetoric of “sorcery” was occasionally used by them in order to address the problem of religious otherness. In this regard, it might not be accidental that the allegation of sorcery is a recurring theme in the hagiographical works comprising the literary corpus of the so-called Persian martyrs that describe the persecution of Christians in the Sasanian empire. Most of these compositions that celebrate the lives and deaths of Christians persecuted by Zoroastrian authorities were written in Syriac by Christians living in the Sasanian empire between the fifth and seventh centuries. The accusation of sorcery already appears in the most influential and one of the earliest specimens of this literary corpus, the *Martyrdom of Simeon bar Šabbaʿe*, where king Shapur II is represented as referring disparagingly to Christians as “sorcerers” (*ḥarāšē*).⁸ In another hagiographical account situated in the times of the Great Persecution, the *Martyrdom of Pūsai*, the same king Shapur is portrayed fulminating against “those sorcerers (*ḥarāšē*), called bishops and priests, who profess the religion of Christians and teach (it) to others.”⁹ Similarly, in the *Martyrdom of Gubarlaha*, the Zoroastrian priest and judge questions the martyr as to how he “became intoxicated with the witchcraft (*ḥaršē*) of Christians.”¹⁰ The persistence of this accusation in the corpus of Persian martyrs finds confirmation in such compositions as the *History of Qardagh*, produced towards the end of the Sasanian period. There, one comes across a scene depicting a group of Iranian nobles accusing the holy man Abdišo of being a “sorcerer” (*ḥarāšā*) who has spoiled their polo game session by immobilizing the ball through his “enchantments” (*ḥaršē*).¹¹ While the question of origins, genesis, and regional peculiarities of this anti-Christian topos lies beyond the scope of our investigation,¹² it may be added [7]

6 On the importance of taking beliefs and practices of this mostly silent group into consideration, see Tannous (2018, esp. 46-81).

7 For an overview of Zoroastrian conceptualizations of magic and sorcery, see de Jong (2019); see also Pekala (2000); Callieri (2001); Forrest (2011). On the use of protective amulets and seals by Zoroastrians, see Gyselen (1995); Kiyarad (2018).

8 §§12, 30; trans. Smith (2014, 26–27, 40–41).

9 Ed. Bedjan (1890–1897, 2:215).

10 Ed. Bedjan (1890–1897, 4:143).

11 Ed. Abbeloos (1890, 19, §11); for an English trans., see Walker (2006, 25–26).

12 For its earliest attestations in the Roman tradition of anti-Christian polemic, see Levieils (2007, 274–91).

that such accusation also appears in hagiographical works dedicated to Persian martyrs that were composed within the Roman empire.¹³

It is hardly surprising, then, to discover that different religious groups within the Sasanian realm, including Jews and Christians, resorted to similar rhetoric in their attempts to undermine each other.¹⁴ Thus, one comes across the accusation of “sorcery” being levelled against both the founder of Christianity and his followers in Jewish sources from Late Antiquity, including those composed in Sasanian Mesopotamia.¹⁵ For example, on one of those rare occasions when the editors of the Babylonian Talmud mention Jesus by name, they do so by bringing forward a saying attributed to an unnamed authority that “Jesus the Nazarene practiced sorcery and enticed and led Israel astray.”¹⁶ This defamation against Jesus was not confined to the learned elites of Babylonian yeshivot, but had a wider public circulation. The first letter written by the West Syrian bishop Simeon of Bēt Aršām in the aftermath of the persecution of the Christians of Najran in South Arabia by the Jewish king of Ḥimyar Dhū Nuwās (r. ca 517–525) bears witness to this. Simeon quotes a letter sent by Dhū Nuwās to the Arab ruler of al-Ḥīra Mundar in which he boasts about persecuting Christians in his realm and refers to Jesus as a “deceiver and sorcerer” (*maṭ’yānā w-ḥarāšā*),¹⁷ using words that echo closely the phrasing of the Babylonian Talmud.

Sometimes, hagiographical sources present us with a more detailed account of how the accusation of sorcery surfaces in the context of a power struggle between the two religious communities, being employed by Jews to incriminate Christians in the eyes of Zoroastrian rulers. This scenario plays out in an account found in the *Martyrdom of Tarbo*, another composition from the corpus of Persian martyrs, which dates from about the fifth century.¹⁸ It tells the story of the martyrdom of three female Christians, two sisters of the bishop Simeon bar Šabbae, perhaps the most famous Persian martyr, and their maid. They perished during the so-called Great Persecution of the fourth century under Shapur II. The narrative opens with a brief prologue, in which we are told that it happened that on one day the queen fell ill and that the Jews, to whom she was favourably inclined, told her that the illness was brought about by the sisters of the recently executed bishop Simeon who “have put spells on you (*bad leki ḥaršē*) because their brother has been put to death.”¹⁹ The women are then arrested and brought to the royal residence for interrogation, during which the chief Mobed accuses them of performing “sorcery” (*ḥaršē*) on the queen.²⁰ After a brief imprisonment, during which the women reject the judges’ advances, they are confirmed to be “witches” (*ḥarāšātā*), and are sentenced to death. The martyrs are executed in the following gruesome manner:

They took the three holy women outside the city and drove into the ground two stakes for each woman, and they stretched them out, attaching them by their hands and feet, like lambs about to be shorn. Thereupon they sawed their bodies in halves, cut them up into six portions, placing them in six baskets, which they suspended on six forked pieces of wood; these they thrust into the ground, three

13 See *Martyrdom of Ma’in*, ed. Brock (2008, 32–33, §39); *Martyrs of Mount Ber’ain*, ed. Brock (2014, 46–47, §43; 74–81, §§84–93).

14 This is not to say that Zoroastrian polemical vocabulary was the only or even the most decisive factor behind the mutual accusations of sorcery by Jews and Christians. Both groups were perfectly able to weaponize

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on each side of the road. These were shaped like half crosses, carrying half a body each.²¹

After the execution, the queen is brought and made to walk between the pieces of the bodies. [11]
According to the narrative, this was done in order to neutralise the effect of sorcery and heal the queen.

Such an unusually detailed and unparalleled depiction of the execution of the women accused of sorcery made the modern translators of the *Martyrdom* suggest that it may reflect “the punishment decreed for witches in the Zoroastrian law code” (Brock and Ashbrook Harvey 1987, 65). To support this scenario, they refer to a paragraph in the early medieval Zoroastrian compendium *Dēnkard* (VIII.42.1-6), which contains a concise summary of a section of the lost *Sakādām Nask* of the Sasanian Avesta that was dedicated to the laws of ordeal in the case of charges of sorcery, as well as the procedure of the execution of a condemned sorcerer.²² Unfortunately, our knowledge of the Sasanian legal tradition and the practice of its implementation is very limited, making it nearly impossible to figure out whether the *Martyrdom*’s narrative is entirely fictitious or contains some elements of truth. [12]

Due to the abovementioned limitations imposed by the lack of evidence, it is challenging [13]
to contextualise Syriac hagiographical reports of the accusations of sorcery made against Christians by Jews or Zoroastrians and to establish to what extent they merely continue the Christian rhetoric of self-othering that goes back to the New Testament passages where Jesus is said to be accused of being possessed by a demon,²³ and to what extent they reflect actual sensibilities of Zoroastrians in their dealings with cultural and religious otherness. As one tries to assess the latter scenario, it should be taken into consideration that we do know that the notion of sorcery was an operative category in Sasanian legal discourse: The late-Sasanian legal compendium *Book of a Thousand Judgements* mentions the figure of “sorcerer” (*jadūg*) on several occasions, including a description of the procedure of ordeal aimed at such an accused.²⁴

An attempt to offer a balanced assessment of the historical plausibility of the hostile intrigues ascribed to the courtier Jews in the *Martyrdom of Tarbo* would take us far beyond the [14]
framework of this paper.²⁵ I believe that such discussion should take into consideration two major factors. On the one hand, the *Martyrdom*’s account is certainly rooted in and shaped by the long-standing polemical tradition of representing Jews as mortal enemies of Christianity

the rhetoric of “sorcery” found in the authoritative corpus of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, where it was often employed to demarcate religious difference and deviance; see Jeffers (1996); Hamori (2015).

15 On Jesus’ portrayal as a sorcerer in Jewish sources, see Schäfer (2007, 102–6); Swartz (2018, 71–88).

16 *b.Sanhedrin* 107b: וַיֹּאמֶר מִרְיָם בִּישָׁף וְהִסִּית וְהָדִיחַ אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל; cf. also *b.Shabbath* 104b, where Jesus, called “son of Pandira,” is identified with certain Ben Stada, who “brought sorcery (כַּשְׁפִּים) from Egypt in the cutting on his flesh”.

17 Ed. Guidi (1881, 504, 506).

18 For the Syriac text, see Bedjan (1890–1897, 2:254–260); for an English translation, see Brock & Harvey (1987, 73–76).

19 Ed. Bedjan (1890–1897, 2:254); trans. Brock & Harvey (1987, 73).

20 Ed. Bedjan (1890–1897, 2:256); trans. Brock & Harvey (1987, 74).

21 Ed. Bedjan (1890–1897, 2:258–259); trans. Brock & Harvey (1987, 76).

22 For an English translation, see West (1892, 144–45).

23 See Mark 3:21–22; Luke 11:14–20; Matthew 12:22–29; for a discussion, see Stanton (2004, 127–47).

24 78.2–11, A15.11–12, A15.15–17, A38.12–16; ed. Perikhanian (1997, 191, 275, 317). See also de Jong (2019, 79–81).

25 The most systematic attempt to clarify this issue was made by Neusner (1972); see also remarks by Rubenstein (2018, 200–201).

and Christians, which already begins in the New Testament itself.²⁶ On the other hand, there is no compelling reason to doubt that, given an opportunity, at least some Jews of the late antique Near East would not have missed a chance to live up to such expectations of Christians, as the case of the anti-Christian outburst in the sixth-century Ḥimyar suggests.²⁷

A more dynamic scenario of antagonism between Jews and Christians in the context of magic is that of a contest between ritual experts. Usually, it involves a display of supernatural prowess, as a result of which a Christian holy man prevails in a situation where his Jewish rivals fail. This scenario is enacted, for example, in the account of the martyrdom of Anahid, which forms a part of the more extensive Syriac hagiographical work entitled *Martyrdom of Pethion and Adurhormizd*, another composition from the hagiographical corpus of Persian martyrs.²⁸ It tells the story of conversion and martyrdom of a daughter of Adurhormizd, a Zoroastrian official from the region of Balashfarr, which allegedly takes place under king Yazdgird II in the middle of the fifth century. The narrative opens with Anahid falling gravely ill after being attacked by an “evil spirit” (*rūḥā bištā*).²⁹ Adurhormizd seeks help from many Jewish, Manichaean, and Zoroastrian “sorcerers” (*ḥarāšē*) who came around, but none of them is able to restore his daughter’s health. Anahid gets healed only when Adurhormizd sends her to the Christian holy man Pethion, who exorcises the demon by evoking the name of Jesus. The grateful father offers Pethion anything he wishes, but the holy man refuses to accept any material reward and admonishes Adurhormizd to exercise his official authority in a just and impartial manner and show mercy to the oppressed. After that, the narrative proceeds to detail the conversion of Anahid and, afterwards, of her father.

Another example where a Christian protagonist invested with supernatural authority demonstrates his efficacy as a ritual expert vis-à-vis Jewish practitioners comes from the *Ecclesiastical History* by Theodore Anagnostes, or Theodore the Lector, a sixth-century Greek historiographer. He relates a story about the Sasanian king Kavad I (r. 488–531) and a fortress called Tzoundadeer (Τζουνδαδέερ), located somewhere on the eastern frontier of the Sasanian empire.³⁰ When Kavad learned that a great treasure was kept there, he wanted to capture it, but was prevented by the demons who guarded the fortress. After his own “magi,” presumably Zoroastrian, fail to overcome the obstacle, the king turns to Jewish ones, but they too prove to be powerless. Finally, Kavad seeks help from local Christians, and a certain unnamed bishop of the Persian Christians succeeds where the others failed. He expels the demons with the sign of the cross, allowing the king to take over the fortress. Grateful, Kavad confers upon the bishop the honour of sitting next to him, which until then was reserved only for Manichaeans and Jews, and grants immunity to those of his subjects who want to convert to Christianity.

Hardly historically trustworthy accounts, both this narrative and the story of Anahid are nevertheless important as literary expressions of the ideology and culture of the Christians of the Sasanian empire. These narratives’ primary goal was to assure their Christian audience of the ultimate superiority of Christianity and its religious virtuosi. A part of the complex process of identity building and maintenance among Syriac Christians, this cultural work is

26 For discussions of some early specimen of this anti-Jewish rhetoric, including hagiographical works, see Hare (1967); Lieu (1998); Gibson (2001).

27 On the persecution of the Christians of South Arabia by Dhū Nuwās, see Gajda (2009, 82–102); Robin (2010); Beaucamp et alii (2010).

28 For the Syriac text, see Bedjan (1890–1897, 2:565–603); for a (partial) English translation, see Brock & Harvey (1987, 82–99).

29 Ed. Bedjan (1890–1897, 2:565).

30 *Hist. eccl.*, fragm. 512; ed. Kosiński et alii (2021, 351).

carried out with an eye toward the larger context of religious dynamics in Iranian society. Both accounts envisage recognition of the prowess of Christian holy men by the high-ranking Iranian other: the healing of Anahid results in her and her father leaving Zoroastrians for Christianity, whereas the feat of the bishop in Theodore's *History* makes the shah bring about a dramatic improvement in the social standing of Christians in Persia. For our discussion it is important that while constructing the narrative framework of a contest over the mastery of the supernatural realm by fighting against the demonic forces, their authors single out Jewish ritual experts alongside Zoroastrian ones as the primary rivals of Christian holy men, making them serve as a foil for the latter's triumph.

Finally, there is additional noteworthy evidence on competition in the field of magic between Jews and Syriac Christians that comes from the *Life of Jacob Baradaeus*, a West Syrian hagiographical composition that describes the career of the famous sixth-century bishop of Edessa, after whom the Monophysite church became known as "Jacobite". The *Life* contains an account that describes an encounter between the bishop and a Jewish magician (Brooks 1923–1925, 3:243–244). We are told that when Jacob was travelling through the region of Mount Izla in Tur Abdin, in the Sasanian territory, he came to the village called Gūmtā. At the same time, a "certain Jewish sorcerer" (*ḥad gabrā yihūdāyā ḥarāšā*) also happened to be there who "was deceiving the people by his sorceries". When the magician was summoned to the bishop, Jacob chastised him and rendered him deaf and mute until he confessed Christ. After that, Satan leaves the magician's body "in the form of an Ethiopian" and departs from the village. [18]

This account is highly stereotypical, and one recognises at once several well-known hagiographical topoi deployed by its author, such as the inevitable triumph of a Christian holy man over a magician, the association of Jews with Satan, and the Ethiopian appearance of demons. Nevertheless, one of its basic elements, namely the figure of a travelling Jewish ritual practitioner who offered his services to the Christian villagers, may have more to it than the well-established stereotype in the ancient world of the close link between Jews and magic. It suggests that not only Christian ascetics, whose lifestyle of wandering is well documented in monastic hagiographical literature,³¹ but ritual practitioners of other confessions too, including Jews, could embark on the career of a travelling freelance religious expert, offering their services to whoever might need them.³² A piece of evidence that supports this scenario is provided by one of the Jewish incantation bowls, produced to protect its client from all kinds of hostile human agents, including "all people who write books (כתבי סיפרי), who sit in forts, who sit in market places and in streets, and who go out on roads (נפקי אורחות)." ³³ What we see here is a list of various locations where Jewish scribes would render their services as writers of amulets, including travelling around. The *modus operandi* of the Jewish magician in *Life of Jacob Baradaeus*, who makes a living by producing amulets for the villagers, reflects the flexible lifestyle of these ritual experts. [19]

Cooperation and Syncretism

The narrative of the conflict between Jacob Baradaeus and the Jewish magician, discussed [20]

31 On wandering as an important element of the monastic way of life in the late antique Near East, see Guillaumont (1968); Palmer (1989); Caner (2002).

32 On this socio-religious phenomenon in the context of the Roman empire, see Wendt (2016).

33 Bowl 6 in Naveh & Shaked (1998, 164–65). For a discussion, see Manekin-Bamberger (2020, 242–45).

in the previous section, brings us to another aspect of Jewish-Christian interactions in the domain of magic, namely the phenomenon of Christians seeking help from Jewish ritual practitioners or otherwise resorting to the tradition of Jewish ritual power.³⁴ One comes across this tendency expressed visibly in the exhortatory rhetoric of some high-ranking members of the clergy. The most well-known instance of this kind from the region of Syria comes from the *Homilies against the Jews* by John Chrysostom. Preaching in late-fourth-century Antioch, the patriarch reproaches those Christians who go to the synagogues to be healed by means of their spells, amulets, and potions.³⁵ More than a century later, we see how amulets are associated with Jews in one of the homilies of another Antiochene patriarch, Severus. The hierarch admonishes his audience to abstain from the use of “phylacteries,” explained as “protective amulets,” while tracing the genealogy of this practice back to the Pharisees of the New Testament.³⁶

It is the archaeological material from Sasanian Mesopotamia that allows us to put this rhetoric into some perspective, offering a rich body of non-literary textual evidence that enables us to descend to the lower steps of the social ladder, and makes possible a better understanding of the role played by magic in the world of “simple believers” with their mundane concerns. This body of evidence is comprised, first and foremost, of the so-called incantation bowls, which demonstrate that Christians of late ancient Mesopotamia did not hesitate to resort to the service of Jewish ritual practitioners or to integrate Jewish magical traditions into their own practices of ritual power. [21]

Incantation bowls are ordinary earthenware bowls of an average diameter between 15 and 20 cm with spells inscribed in ink on the inside. When found in situ, they are usually buried upside down under the floor of people’s homes. Their primary function was apotropaic, that is, they were meant to protect the members of a household and their livestock from the threat posed by demonic or human adversaries. There is a smaller number of bowls, however, which were used for love magic or aggressive magic. [22]

Usually dated to the period between the sixth and seventh centuries, incantation bowls seem to be a uniquely late antique phenomenon, confined, for the most part, to Sasanian Mesopotamia.³⁷ There are no precedents of this kind of magical artefacts in the ancient Near East, and no continuity of this practice in the later Islamic period. Regarding the known geographical distribution of bowls, they were found in such archaeological sites in Mesopotamia as Babylon, Nippur, Borsippa, Seleucia-Ctesiphon, Uruk, and Kish.³⁸ Unfortunately, most bowls in Western museums and private collections come from illegal excavations via the black market, which significantly complicates scholars’ efforts to contextualise them. The total number of known incantation bowls at the moment is over 2500, of which only around six hundred have been published.³⁹ [23]

Inscribed in several scripts and several dialects of Aramaic, incantation bowls were pro- [24]

34 For a discussion of this phenomenon in the late Roman context, see Simon (1948, 416–31); Lacerenza (2002); Sanzo (2017).

35 *Adv. Jud.* 8.5.6, 8.8.7-9; PG 48:935, 940-941. On synagogues as places of magic-related activities, including healing, see Bohak (2008, 314–22).

36 *Hom.* 79; ed. Brière (1928, 320).

37 For a recent overview of the *status quaestionis* regarding bowls, see Shaked et alii (2013, 1:1–27).

38 A small number of the bowls were also found at the archaeological site of the city of Susa, in the province of Khuzistan in the western part of modern Iran.

39 The main publications include: Montgomery (1913); McCullough (1967); Yamauchi (1967); Isbell (1975); Naveh & Shaked (1993, 1998); Segal (2000); Levene (2003, 2013); Müller-Kessler (2005a); Faraj (2010); Shaked et alii (2013, 2022); Moriggi (2014); Bhayro et alii (2018); Ford & Morgenstern (2020).

duced by ritual practitioners who belonged to different religious communities. About two-thirds of all published bowls are inscribed in the Jewish Aramaic script and Jewish Babylonian Aramaic, the Aramaic dialect in which the Babylonian Talmud is also written. There is also a smaller but still significant number of bowls written in the Mandaic script and language, the language of Mandaeans, a small quasi-Gnostic community of Southern Mesopotamia. The smallest group comprises the bowls written in the Syriac language in two varieties of script. There are also cases of bowls written in the so-called pseudo-script and, possibly, Pahlavi.

Scholars usually assume a close correlation between the script in which bowls are inscribed and the confessional identity of their scribes. Thus, bowls inscribed in Jewish square script are generally considered to be produced by Jewish ritual experts, and those in Mandaic script by Mandaean ones. The case of Syriac bowls with their two types of script is more problematic and is discussed in some details below. As one tries to decipher the religious dynamics underlying any particular specimen or group of incantation bowls, one important point to bear in mind is that the confessional identity of ritual experts who produced them does not necessarily coincide with that of their clients. Cases of Jewish bowls produced on behalf of Christian clients bear witness to this, discussed below, as well as instances when the same household features bowls inscribed by ritual experts from different religious traditions.⁴⁰

After the Babylonian Talmud, incantation bowls constitute the second most important body of textual evidence of the Jewish society of Babylonia during the Sasanian period.⁴¹ It should be noted, however, that while they comprise the majority of the corpus of magical artefacts that were produced by the Jews of Babylonia during Late Antiquity, we know about other apotropaic artefacts being in use. Thus, there are several instances of human skulls inscribed with incantations in Jewish Babylonian Aramaic (Levene 2006), as well as evidence, primarily literary, about amulets that were supposed to be worn (Bohak 2019).

Christians in Jewish Incantation Bowls

Regarding bowls inscribed in Jewish script, there are several instances when such apotropaic artefacts were produced for clients bearing explicitly Christian names.

Thus, one of the Jewish Aramaic bowls from Nippur, published by Cyrus Gordon, is written for the protection of the family of Farrokh son of Arazniš, his wife Aḥata daughter of Qaqay, and their five children. While the parents' names, Iranian and Semitic respectively, are not marked confessionally in an obvious way, one of their daughters bears the explicitly Christian name *Bat-ḥad-šabbā* (בתחדשבת), which could be translated as “daughter of Sunday” (Gordon 1934, 321–22). It is likely that the names of two of her other siblings, sister *Miriam* (מירימ) and brother *Grīgōr* (גריגור), should also be regarded as Christian.

Another female client bearing the same Christian name, albeit spelled in a slightly different manner due to some phonetic changes,⁴² is found in the Jewish Aramaic bowl JBA 99 (MS 2053/73) from the Schøyen Collection, produced to protect the house and bodies of Barānay son of Ḥubbay and his wife *Bat-ḥa-pə-šabbā* (בהחפשבת).⁴³

A masculine counterpart of the feminine Christian name from the previous bowls, i.e., “son

40 For some examples, see Levene (2003, 23).

41 On their importance in that regard, see Bohak (2008, 183–93); Herman (2019a); Gross and Manekin-Bamberger (2022).

42 I.e., the devoicing of *beth* to *pe*; for examples of the preposition *b-* undergoing this shift in Jewish Babylonian Aramaic, see Sokoloff (2002, 886). I thank Alexei Lyavdansky for this reference.

43 Shaked et alii (2022, 2:146–49).

of Sunday,” appears in the protective Jewish Aramaic bowl JBA 36 (MS 2053/110) that was produced on behalf of the couple named *Bar-ḥa-bə-šabbā* (ברחבשבא) son of Ḥatay and Far-rokhoy daughter of Aḥata.⁴⁴

Another Jewish Aramaic bowl, JBA 24 (MS 2053/251), is produced for protection of the female client, named *Mat-Yīšū* (מתיישו) daughter of *Bat-Sāhdē* (בתסהדי), and her husband Drakhtaḳ.⁴⁵ The name of the wife could be translated as “maidservant of Jesus” (with *מת* being a shortened construct form of Syriac ܡܬܐܝܫܘܘܫܐ),⁴⁶ whereas her mother’s name translates as “daughter of martyrs.”

The feminine Christian name “daughter of martyrs” also appears in the Jewish Aramaic bowl JBA 98 (MS 2053/140), produced for the client couple Arday son of Ḥubbay and Zāvīntā daughter of *Bat-Sāhdē* (בתסהדי).⁴⁷

A masculine variant of this name, that is “son of martyrs,” is found in the Jewish Aramaic bowl JBA 27 (MS 1927/16), produced for protection of *Bar-Sāhdē* (ברסהדי) son of Aḥata and his wife Aywi.⁴⁸ There are three additional protective bowls produced for this family: JBA 31 (MS 2053/41), JBA 32 (MS 2053/64), and JBA 42 (MS 2053/190).⁴⁹

A similar situation is reflected in the Jewish Aramaic bowl JBA 116 (MS 1927/50), produced to protect the household headed by the man called *Abd-Īšū* (אבדאישו), bearer of a popular name among Syriac Christians that means “servant of Jesus,” who was married to a woman named Ayyā.⁵⁰

Besides these seven instances of families, some of whose members bore unambiguously Christian Aramaic names, one should take into consideration cases of clients bearing non-Semitic Western names, which even if not marked confessionally in the context of late antique Babylonia were most likely used exclusively by Christians, as in the case of the name *Grīgōr*, i.e., “Gregory,” above. To this group, one should relate two Jewish Aramaic bowls written for clients named “Sergios:”⁵¹ (1) a protective bowl written for *Sargīs* (סרגייס) son of Barandukh, who sought to neutralise aggressive magic directed at him by a woman named Ahat-Ima daughter of Sara;⁵² (2) bowl 33A from the British Museum, written for the protection of the household of “master *Sargīs*” (מר סרגייס) son of Šerah and his wife Saḥ (Segal 2000, 72).

For the sake of completeness, it should also be added that sometimes Christians figure in Jewish bowls not as clients but as enemies of the clients. This appears to be the case of the Jewish Aramaic bowl M163 from the Moussaieff collection, which contains an extended curse aimed against a certain *Išā* (אישה) son of Ifra Hurmiz, apparently a Christian.⁵³ A unique feature of this bowl is that its Jewish scribe makes use of an extended formula that calls upon the Christian Trinity: “By the name of Jesus who conquered the height and the depth by his

44 Shaked et alii (2013, 1:183–84). Cf. also bowl JBA 106 (1928/38), Shaked et alii (2022, 2:182), where one of the members of the clients’ household bears this name, although due to the partial preservation of the text it is unclear whether it is a man or woman.

45 Shaked et alii (2013, 1:137–39). There is another bowl, produced for this family, JBA 46 (MS 2053/249), Shaked et alii (2013, 1:208–10).

46 For a discussion, see Shaked et alii (2013, 1:100).

47 Shaked et alii (2022, 2:142–44).

48 Shaked et alii (2013, 1:160–61).

49 Shaked et alii (2013, 1:169–73, 197–99).

50 Shaked et alii (2022, 2:220).

51 On the prominence of Saint Sergios, after whom these persons were most likely named, through the late antique Syria and Mesopotamia, see Fowden (1999); Scarica (2000); Bevan et alii (2015).

52 First published in Naveh & Shaked (1998, 132–33); republished in Levene (2013, 130).

53 Levene (2013, 110–13); first published in Levene (1999). For a discussion of this bowl, see also Shaked (1999a); Müller-Kessler (2005b); Kiel (2018).

cross and by the name of his exalted father and by the name of the holy spirits forever and eternity,”⁵⁴ presumably because of the Christian identity of the client’s adversary.

Another Jewish Aramaic curse incantation published by Levene on bowl 27 from the collection of Samir DeHays is written on behalf of two Jewish clients, Amitiel son of Mahlapta and Elišebakh son of Šumuni (Levene 2013, 95–105). It is meant to protect them from the curses of their personal enemies, who are enumerated in a long list, an unusual feature not attested in other bowls. It is noteworthy that one of their antagonists is a woman, bearing Christian name: *Bat-Sahdē* (בתסחדה) daughter of Šagli. [37]

It is possible that the incantation in Jewish Babylonian Aramaic on a clay jar published by Émile Puech also belongs to this group. In this specimen of aggressive magic, the name of “Jesus son of Mary” is evoked, whom the scribe calls upon, together with several other human and angelic agents, to attack a certain man named Ḥakam (Puech 2012). [38]

Finally, one should also mention the ambiguous cases of those Jewish Aramaic bowls where the name of Jesus appears, but which are produced on behalf of clients whose names are not explicitly Christian. For instance, in bowl HS 3015 from the Hilprecht Collection, written for the protection of a certain Yōtay daughter of Lālay, “Jesus, the King (of) Healing” is evoked.⁵⁵ [39]

Jewish Imprint on Syriac Incantation Bowls

The initial impression of close ties between the Christians of Sasanian Mesopotamia and the tradition of Jewish magic becomes even stronger when we turn to Syriac bowls. Contrary to the corpora of Jewish and Mandaic bowls, each of which forms a unified body, at least in terms of their script, Syriac bowls are inscribed in two distinctive varieties of the script, Estrangela and the so-called Manichaean script. At the moment, more than sixty such bowls have been discovered and published. Most of the Syriac bowls published before 2012 were conveniently gathered together and re-edited by Marco Moriggi.⁵⁶ His collection comprises 49 bowls (18 in Estrangela and 31 in the Manichaean script). To these, one should add five bowls in the Manichaean script not included by Moriggi in his book⁵⁷ and nine new Syriac bowls published since 2014.⁵⁸ The corpus of magic artefacts produced by Syriac Christians in late antique Mesopotamia was most likely not limited to incantation bowls, and one should consider the possibility that some Syriac amulets written on parchment and other materials were also manufactured during this period.⁵⁹ [40]

At this point, a brief digression regarding the religious identity of the practitioners responsible for producing Syriac bowls is in order. There is an ongoing debate among scholars as to whether these bowls should be regarded as coming out of the hands of Christian ritual [41]

54 Levene (2013, 113, ln. 29-30). It is noteworthy that the name of Jesus is spelled as אִישׁי, without the guttural consonant ‘ayin; the same spelling appears in the composite name אַבְדִּישׁי in the bowl JBA 116, quoted above. This is most likely a result of phonetic spelling. A similar mechanism of distortion of the Christian ritual formula in the process of its oral transmission to the Jewish practitioner who produced this bowl may underline the mention of the “holy spirits” (רוּחֵי קְדִישָׁה) in the third part of the Trinitarian

experts or not.⁶⁰ The main reason for this uncertainty is a surprising, although not total, lack of Christian confessional markers in most of these bowls.⁶¹ While this lack is undoubtedly a phenomenon that needs to be explained, it should be stressed that as far as the sociolinguistic situation of Central and Southern Mesopotamia during the last centuries of Late Antiquity is concerned, no conclusive evidence for the use of the Estrangela script and the Classical Syriac language by members of religious communities other than Christian has been presented so far. Yet even if it might be easier to build an argument that bowls written in Estrangela were produced by Christian ritual experts, those inscribed in the Manichaean script pose a more significant challenge in terms of their confessional classification: Scholars have almost run out of options, ascribing them to Manichaean, Christian, Jewish, or pagan scribes.⁶²

In order to clarify the matter, it is necessary to point out, first of all, that the use of the label “Manichaean” by scholars for describing these bowls is somewhat misleading, since it is based not so much on their actual content as on the formal affinity between their script and the script of the medieval Manichaean documents from Central Asia. As has been noted by Shaul Shaked, the so-called Manichaean Syriac script “was not, as far as we can tell, a script that was exclusively Manichaean in Late Antiquity” (Shaked 2000, 73). To that, one should add that in the whole subgroup of the Syriac bowls written in the Manichaean script that have been published so far, there is not a single specimen featuring an unambiguous Manichaean confessional or religious formula. In this regard, the bowls in the Manichaean script stand in striking contrast with the Jewish and Mandaean bowls, many of which contain explicit confessional formulas and markers. The closest connection with Manichaeism in these bowls is found in the set of three identical bowls, published by Shaked, in which the name of Mani is seemingly mentioned as a part of the evocation of one among several angelic protectors who is referred to as ܡܢܝܢ ܕܥܘܠܝܢܐ, and which feature a *historiola* with an act of magical protection of Seth by his father Adam.⁶³ Yet even these instances of supposed Manichaean influence are tenuous and not beyond dispute. Thus, the form *mānī* in the angelic name could be understood not as the personal name *Mani*, but as a nominal phrase “my vessel” or “my garment,” whereas the *historiola* with Adam and Seth does not in itself convey any specifically Manichaean religious message.

The scenario of Manichaean bowls having been produced by pagan practitioners is likewise

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- evocation, instead of the expected “Holy Spirit”; see the similar formula ܡܢܝܢ ܕܥܘܠܝܢܐ ܡܢܝܢ ܕܥܘܠܝܢܐ ܡܢܝܢ ܕܥܘܠܝܢܐ in the Christian bowl 2 in Moriggi (2014, 28, ln. 9).
- 55 Bowl 10 in Ford & Morgenstern (2020, 53–54). See also the invocation of ܝܫܘܥ in the Jewish bowl published by Harviainen (Harviainen 1981, 5–6), who translates this name as “Jesus”.
- 56 Moriggi (2014). Some of these bowls have been reedited recently by Bhayro et alii (2018) and Ford & Morgenstern (2020).
- 57 One bowl from the *Vorderasiatisches Museum*, Berlin, published by Lidzbarski (1916, 1213–4), and four bowls from the Schøyen Collection published by Shaked (2000).
- 58 One Manichaean bowl in Abousamra (2016); two Estrangela bowls in Bhayro et alii (2018, 57–59, 62–64); two Estrangela and four Manichaean bowls in Ford & Abudraham (2018, 77–99).
- 59 See amulets on leather published by Naveh (1997), Gignoux (2000), and a lead amulet published by Brock (2018).
- 60 The most recent attempt to tackle the issue has been made by Nils Korsvoll, who in his unpublished doctoral dissertation calls for discarding “Christian” as a relevant analytical category in discussing Syriac bowls as a corpus; see Korsvoll (2017, esp. 223–229).
- 61 For their comprehensive inventory and analysis, see Korsvoll (2017).
- 62 For a claim of Jewish origin for some Manichaean bowls, see Epstein (1922, 41–45); for a pagan hypothesis, see Harviainen (1995).
- 63 Bowl MS 2055/24 in Shaked (Shaked 2000, 76, ln. 13, and 77, ln. 41–42). For a discussion of the angelic name, see *Ibid.*, 70–71; on Manichaean parallels to the *historiola*, see Reeves (1999).

problematic. Thus, it should be stressed that the amount and quality of what might be classified as “pagan” material in these bowls does not differ in any significant way from similar material in the bowls produced by scribes of other confessional traditions. An additional argument against the pagan identity of the scribes behind the Manichaean bowls could be made on a linguistic basis. As Lucas Van Rompay sums up in his analysis of the language of Syriac bowls, they “share common Eastern Aramaic features to a certain extent, yet tend to follow the Classical Syriac rules” (van Rompay 1990, 373). It is the indebtedness of their language to the Classical Syriac, shared by both the Estrangela and Manichaean bowls, that makes the theory of their pagan origin unlikely. If the scribes who produced the Manichaean bowls belonged to some native “pagan” population of Babylonia, one might expect their language to betray less dependence, if any, upon Classical Syriac—the northern dialect of Edessa that was brought to the south by Christians, and to be much more akin to the neighbouring Eastern Aramaic dialects of Central and Southern Mesopotamia.

While the whole issue needs to be examined afresh in light of the observations made above and given the fact that several Manichaean bowls feature unambiguous Christian confessional formulas,⁶⁴ I think that to treat all bowls written in both varieties of Syriac script as produced by Christian practitioners would be the most practical approach at the moment. As for the problem of the use of the two different types of writing in Syriac bowls, one explanation of this redundancy could be that in the Christian circles of Babylonia two scripts were current side by side: the older one, developed locally and used by various confessional groups, including Manichaeans,⁶⁵ and the more recent arrival, Estrangela, brought by Christian missionaries from the northwest.⁶⁶ [44]

Turning now to the subject of Jewish influence upon the ritual practitioners behind the Syriac bowls, it can be said that there are a considerable number of motifs and images shared by these incantations and those produced by Jewish experts. [45]

To begin with, one comes across a certain amount of biblical material shared by the two corpora. It includes references to biblical events as well as the use of biblical divine names and names of angels that are mentioned in the Old Testament. As an example of the former, one can point out the mention of the splitting of the Red Sea by Moses (Exodus 14:21),⁶⁷ whereas the latter includes such Hebraisms for divine names as *ehyeh ašer ehyeh* (i.e., “I am that I am” of Exodus 3:14),⁶⁸ *El Šadday*,⁶⁹ *Sabaoth*,⁷⁰ and such angels as Michael and Raphael.⁷¹ [46]

Most of these cases can be explained without recourse to Jewish sources, as a result of independent reliance of the Syriac scribes upon the Peshitta version of the Old Testament that was in use among Syriac Christians, in which these names and phrases occur. Yet for some of them, an argument can still be made about the dependence of the Syriac practitioners on the Jewish tradition of magic bowls. For instance, the divine name Sabaoth in Moriggi’s [47]

64 See invocation of “the power of Christ” in bowl MS 1928/54 in Shaked (Shaked 2000, 75, ln. 5) and bowl 27 in Moriggi (2014, 135, ln. 6); invocation of the Trinity in bowl 2 in Moriggi (2014, 28, ln. 9).

65 For an example of the use of this script by Manichaeans during Late Antiquity, see Syriac Manichaean texts from Kellis in Egypt, published by Franzmann & Gardner (1996).

66 There might be also some intra-Babylonian regional difference in the use of these scripts; see observations in Korsvoll (2017, 222–23).

67 Bowl 6 in Moriggi (2014, 48). Moses is also mentioned in bowl 7. For Jewish bowls, see bowl 39 in Isbell (1975, 95); the same episode is probably referred to in bowl 14 in Montgomery (1913, 183).

68 Bowl in Lidzbarski (1916, 1214); bowl 7 in Moriggi (2014, 53); bowl 2 in Ford & Abudraham (2018, 81, ln. 3).

69 Bowl 18 in Moriggi (2014, 97).

70 Bowls 12, 18, 24 in Moriggi (2014, 72, 97, 121); bowl 2 in Ford & Abudraham (2018, 83, ln. 50).

71 Bowls 2, 6, 47, 48 in Moriggi (2014, 28, 48, 200–201, 206).

bowl 12 appears as a part of the invocatory phrase “in the name of the god who sits upon the brightness of Şebaot,” which finds a close parallel in several Jewish bowls.⁷²

Even more telling are instances when the scribes of Syriac bowls evoke motifs or supernatural figures that are not mentioned in the Bible but occur in Jewish incantation bowls or rabbinic writings. To this category belong such cases as (a) names of such angelic or other supernatural beings as Metatron,⁷³ Shemihaza,⁷⁴ and Shekhina;⁷⁵ (b) such motifs as the signet ring of Solomon⁷⁶ and the seal of Noah;⁷⁷ (c) non-Peshittan Hebraisms such as the title *sar ha-gadol*, “great prince” applied to Archangel Michael.⁷⁸ [48]

The most striking case of Jewish influence in the Syriac bowls is, however, that of a *historiola*, [49] at the centre of which stands the figure of “Rav Yeshua bar Perahia” (ܪܒ ܝܫܘܥ ܒܪ ܦܪܗܝܐ) exorcising demons by writing them a document of divorce (ܪܘܘܬܐܘܢܐ). This *historiola* appears in no less than six Syriac bowls,⁷⁹ which is not an inconsiderable number given the relatively small size of the corpus.

The figure of Joshua ben Perahia is known to us from both rabbinic writings and Jewish incantation bowls. In rabbinic literary sources from Palestine and the Babylonian Talmud, he is presented as a historical individual, a member of the Jewish learned elite who was active in Palestine in the second century BCE and held the office of *nasi*, “patriarch.”⁸⁰ The most famous narrative involving this not particularly prominent figure is arguably the story about the breaking away of Jesus from Judaism. Found in the Babylonian Talmud (*b.Sotah* 47a; *b.Sanhedrin* 107b), it presents this fateful event to be the result of a tragic misunderstanding and unjustifiably harsh treatment of Jesus by his master Joshua ben Perahia.⁸¹ In what concerns Jewish incantation bowls, the figure of Joshua ben Perahia is well represented in this textual corpus as one of the few named Rabbinic authorities explicitly evoked as potent anti-demonic agents. There are no less than eighteen bowls in which his authority is called upon to divorce or excommunicate demons.⁸² [50]

The parallel appearance of Joshua ben Perahia in rabbinic literature of Late Antiquity, [51]

72 For references, see Moriggi (2014, 72). For a discussion of Jewish traditions related to the fallen angels in this bowl, see Paz (2021).

73 Bowl in Lidzbarski (1916, 1214); bowl VA.3383 in Bhayro et alii (2018, 54–55). On this angelic figure, see Schäfer (2013); Paz (2019). For a discussion of Jewish background of the bowl published by Lidzbarski, see Schneider (Forthcoming).

74 Bowl 1 in Moriggi (2014, 23). On this figure whose genealogy goes back to 1 Enoch, see Molenberg (1984); Penner (2014).

75 Bowl 13 in Moriggi (2014, 75). For Jewish bowls, see bowl 14 in Montgomery (1913, 183); bowl 22 in Naveh & Shaked (1993, 130). For Rabbinic literature, see Urbach (1975, 37–65); Ernst (1994).

76 Bowls 6, 28 in Moriggi (2014, 48, 139); bowl T27986 in Ford & Abudraham (2018, 86–87). For Jewish bowls, see bowls 47, 48, 50 in Isbell (1975, 108, 110, 114). On the development of this tradition and on the importance of Solomon in Jewish magic, see Torijano (2002). This motif, however, should be analyzed against the background of the invented trans-confessional tradition of Solomonic magic in Antiquity, discussed in Frankfurter (2019, 737–40).

77 Bowl 28 in Moriggi (2014, 139). For Jewish bowls, see bowl 10 in Montgomery (1913, 165).

78 Bowl 15 in Moriggi (2014, 86); bowl T27986 in Ford & Abudraham (2018, 86–88). The Peshitta version of Daniel 12:1, from which this phrase comes, has ܪܒܐܘܢܐܘܬܐܘܢܐ, “great angel”.

79 Four of them are published: bowls 4, 5, 31, 41 in Moriggi (2014, 37–38, 44, 151, 186). Moriggi (2015, 83, n. 1) refers to two unpublished Syriac bowls that mention Joshua bar Perahia, JNF 236 and JNF 239, being prepared for publication by J.N. Ford. For a discussion, see Moriggi (2015); Bolz (2015).

80 See *m.Avot* 1:6, *m.Hagigah* 2:2, *t.Makhshirin* 3:4, *b.Menahot* 109b, *b.Sotah* 47a, *b.Sanhedrin* 107b; see Neusner (1971b, 1:82–86).

81 For a discussion, see Gero (1994); Rubenstein (2010, 116–49); Jaffé (2018); Naiweld (2018).

82 They have been gathered conveniently in Shaked et alii (2013). For a discussion, see also Shaked (1999b); Frim (2015); Bhayro (2015).

where he does not play any spectacular role except perhaps in the story about his role in the downfall of Jesus⁸³ and in the corpus of incantation bowls, where he looms large, poses some questions about the evolution of his image that are difficult to answer. It has been argued that Joshua ben Perahia first gained popularity as a holy man in the tradition of incantation bowls for some reason, and then as a result was associated with Jesus in the Talmud as a part of anti-Christian polemic waged by the Babylonian rabbis (Ilan 2013, esp. 994-995).

As to the presence of the *historiola* featuring Joshua ben Perahia in the Syriac bowls, there can be little doubt that it is derived from the Jewish tradition of incantation bowls. In his discussion of this *historiola*, Moriggi has singled out one of its variants in Jewish bowls that exhibits a close textual resemblance to its version in the Syriac bowls (Moriggi 2015, 85–86). It also becomes apparent from Moriggi’s discussion of the two versions of the *historiola* that the ritual practitioners responsible for producing Syriac bowls most likely received its text by way of oral transmission. In this process, they did not simply translate the *historiola* from Jewish Babylonian Aramaic into Syriac, but adapted it by omitting or changing some of its too explicitly Jewish elements, such as the references to Moses and Israel, and the technical term *geṭ*, “divorce letter” (Moriggi 2015, 91–93).

It is noteworthy that none of the Syriac bowls featuring the figure of Joshua ben Perahia contain any explicit Christian images and themes. One could thus imagine a possibility that these bowls were produced by Jewish scribes who mastered the Syriac script.⁸⁴ However, against such a scenario speaks the fact that in all the Syriac bowls Joshua’s patronym, i.e., *Perahyah*, is always spelt with the laryngeal consonant *he* and not with the pharyngeal *het*, as in the Rabbinic sources and all the Jewish bowls that mention him. A result of the weakening of the gutturals in Eastern Aramaic dialects,⁸⁵ this mistake is never made by the scribes of Jewish bowls, who followed the standard spelling of the literary tradition. This misspelling, then, demonstrates that the practitioners, responsible for production of the Syriac bowls that mention Joshua ben Perahia, were not trained Jewish scribes.⁸⁶

To complicate the question of confessional preferences and dynamics behind the use of the figure of Joshua ben Perahia in magic bowls even more, it should be added that his name is evoked in several Jewish bowls produced on behalf of Christian clients, i.e., bowls JBA 24 (MS 2053/251), and JBA 27 (MS 1927/16) and three other related bowls mentioned above. At the moment, we can only speculate about the reasons for such popularity of Joshua ben Perahia among Christians, both ritual experts and clients. Thus, it could be related to the close association between him and Jesus in the Babylonian Talmud, enhanced further by the fact that they bear the same name.

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83 Joshua ben Perahia plays an important role in several versions of *Toledot Yeshu*, a Jewish anti-Christian composition attested in Aramaic, Hebrew, Judaeo-Arabic, and several other languages. The dating of this work, however, is beset with many difficulties, and it is very likely that it coalesced into a coherent whole during the post-Talmudic period. For original texts of Aramaic and Hebrew versions, accompanied by English translations, see Meerson & Schäfer (2014). For a discussion of Joshua’s role in one of the earliest versions of the *Toledot*, see Bohak (2020, 84–86).

84 As does Juusola (1999, 89).

85 For examples of the shift from /h/ to /h/ in Jewish Babylonian Aramaic, see Bar-Asher Siegal (2013, 70–71); for examples of the shift from /h/ to /h/ and vice versa in the language of Syriac bowls, see Moriggi (2004, 116–18).

86 This case of phonetic spelling can serve as an additional indication of the oral transmission of Joshua’s *historiola* from Jewish ritual experts to those behind the Syriac bowls.

At the conclusion of this section it should be noted that even though we see Christians seeking the help of Jewish ritual experts in all examples of the Jewish-Christian cooperation in the domain of popular religion discussed above, one should consider the possibility that interactions going on in the opposite direction took place as well. It is unlikely that in this regard the Jews of Sasanian Babylonia were significantly different from their Palestinian coreligionists who did not mind turning to Christian ritual experts for help. This is witnessed by literary sources from late antique Palestine, Jewish as well as Christian, that refer to such interactions. In the corpus of rabbinic literature, one comes across several references to Jews being healed by or seeking healing from Christian practitioners who evoke Jesus' name. For example, the compiler of the Tosefta (ca. third century), while introducing the rule declaring that Jews should refrain from any social interaction with "heretics" (*minim*), including for the purposes of seeking healing, brings, as an illustration, a story about Rabbi Eleazar b. Dama: He was bitten by a snake and was ready to accept the help of the heretic Jacob of Kefar Sama, who came to heal him "in the name of Jesus son of Pantera" (משום ישוע בן פנטרא), a barely disguised reference to Jesus.⁸⁷ A similar account appears later on, in the Palestinian Talmud, where we read about the grandson of Rabbi Joshua b. Levi, who had a choking fit, and an unnamed healer who came to help and whispered over him something "in the name of Jesus Pantera" (מן שמיה דישו פנטרא) and thus saved him.⁸⁸ On the Christian side, the *Life of Peter the Iberian*, written at the very end of the fifth century by John Rufus, tells a story about how this anti-Chalcedonian holy man healed a Jewish fisherman from Jamnia who "fell into the sickness of dropsy" and was brought to Peter by his relatives.⁸⁹ [55]

Concluding Remarks

The religious landscape of Sasanian Mesopotamia was characterized by a situation of multiplicity of authoritative traditions, which included Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, Manichaeism, Mandaeism, and probably some form of indigenous "pagan" religiosity. These circumstances engendered complex dynamics of interaction between various religious communities and between different social groups within them, including in such a heterogeneous and contested domain as popular religion. [56]

The present study has only a limited scope, and more research is required to deepen our understanding of how the domain of magic operated in Sasanian society. As has been demonstrated, a juxtaposition of two different bodies of textual evidence, such as hagiographical works and magic bowls, can offer some insights into this realm, mutually illuminating each other. At the same time, different social sites of these corpora and, resulting from it, their different audience, purpose, and rhetoric impose certain limitations on the outcomes of such a comparison, leaving many questions open. [57]

One such question, for instance, is to what extent denunciations of "sorcery" found in the hagiographical and other literary works produced by Syriac Christians were aimed against the ritual practice represented by magic bowls. In order to answer it, we need a comprehensive study of the vocabulary and rhetoric used to demarcate and describe the field of magic among [58]

87 *t.Hullin* 2.22-23; ed. Zuckerman (1881, 503). See parallel accounts in *y.Shabbat* 14:4 [14d]; *b.Avodah Zarah* 27b. For a discussion of the story, see Boyarin (1999, 34-36); Schäfer (2007, 53-54).

88 *y.Shabbat* 14:4 [14d]; ed. Sussmann (2001, 434, ln. 27-30). See parallel accounts in *y.Avodah Zarah* 2:2 [40d]; *Qohelet Rabba* 10:6.

89 *Life of Peter the Iberian* 170; ed. Horn & Phenix (2008, 246-49).

Syriac Christians of the Sasanian empire, compared to contemporary Jewish and Zoroastrian traditions. Of special interest in that regard would be terms derived from the root *ḥrš*, used in Syriac as well as in Jewish Babylonian Aramaic to refer to reprehensible ritual practices. It is noteworthy that scribes of magic bowls, be they Jews or Christians, never use such terms to describe their practice or the artifacts they produce. They do, however, occasionally resort to such terminology to refer to reprehensible customs of other ethno-confessional traditions. Thus, some of the bowls feature lists of various types of dangerous magic, classified with the help of ethnic labels. One of the longest lists of this kind is found in a Jewish bowl that promises its clients defense from the following types of “sorceries” (*ḥiršin*): “Aramean sorceries, Jewish sorceries, Arab sorceries, Persian sorceries, Indian sorceries, Greek sorceries, sorceries of the Romans, sorceries that are performed in the seventy languages...”⁹⁰ A similar, albeit shorter, list is found in one of the Syriac bowls, meant to protect its client from all possible kinds of “sorcery” (*ḥaršē*): “of the east and of the west, of the north and of the south, of the Jews and of the Aramaeans, of men and of women.”⁹¹ A noteworthy aspect of these two incantations is that they single out Jewish magic as one of the main magical traditions that an inhabitant of late antique Mesopotamia has to beware of.

As I hope to have demonstrated in this article, looking at Jewish-Christian contacts in the domain of magic through the double lenses of Syriac Christian hagiography and incantation bowls enables us to form a fuller and more nuanced picture of how these dynamics unfolded on different levels. The evidence provided by the incantation bowls, both Jewish and Christian, shows that their clients, regardless of which confession they might have identified with, developed multiple strategies to negotiate this religious diversity as they faced a choice regarding which ritual experts to turn to in time of need. Although many clients preferred to seek help from the practitioners of their own confession, some of them saw nothing wrong in resorting to ritual experts from different religious traditions, sometimes more than one at the same time. It shows that the world of simple believers revolved around the notion of efficacy, that is, the ability of religious virtuosi to bring the desired outcome, including solutions to mundane problems such as health, fertility, and economic success. Since they belong to the traditions of the domestic sphere, the incantation bowls bear witness to the household as one of the primary social sites in which interaction between Jews and Christians in the field of popular religion took place in Sasanian Mesopotamia.

Such a situation of unstable confessional loyalties posed a challenge to the religious virtuosi, who had to find a way to maintain their authority vis-à-vis their communities. In the case of Syriac hagiographical works, we see how their authors seek to impress their audience and boost the credentials of Christian holy men by constructing and disseminating stories about their competition and confrontation with ritual experts of other religions, including Jewish ones, in which Christians are always portrayed as gaining the upper hand. These fictional accounts of triumph bear witness that some of the Syriac Christian literati of Late Antiquity perceived Jewish ritual practitioners as possible rivals and made conscious efforts to contain the threat.

Another strategy to win the confidence of simple believers can be recognised in the syncretistic attitude of those Christian ritual experts who were responsible for producing Syriac incantation bowls. As we have seen, they did not hesitate to incorporate a wide range of mo-

90 Bowl D in Gordon (1934, 328); Gordon’s translations is modified and corrected, taking into consideration his later emendation of ܫܚܫܫܫ into ܫܚܫܫܫ, made in Gordon (1937, 106).

91 Bowl 38 in Moriggi (2014, 175). See also Manichaean bowl T27983 in Ford & Abudraham (2018, 77–78).

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tifs and imagery pertaining to the Jewish tradition of magic into their incantations. It appears that by applying this repertoire derived from the more established and prestigious tradition of Jewish magic, Christian practitioners sought to enhance their claim of ritual efficacy. The Syriac magic bowls thus emerge as a site of cultural bricolage in which various elements—first of all, Christian and Jewish, but also “pagan” (be it Ancient Mesopotamian or Iranian material) and Manichaean—were assembled according to the exigencies of a particular household and its inhabitants.

The evidence discussed above provides essential information for forming a basic picture of Jewish-Christian relations in the domain of popular religion in late antique Syria-Mesopotamia. Yet, it has limitations that prevent us from gaining a deeper understanding of the social dynamics that underpin such interactions. One of the serious impediments in this regard is the dearth of evidence on ritual experts of both religious traditions, including those responsible for producing apotropaic artefacts, such as incantation bowls or amulets.

In what concerns Jewish incantation bowls, it has been convincingly argued by Avigail Manekin-Bamberger that it was “scribes,” *soferim*, who were most likely responsible for producing most of them (Manekin-Bamberger 2020). The primary functions of scribes in the Jewish society of the late antique Near East were writing legal documents and Torah scrolls and teaching.⁹² One should not, however, discard the possibility that some of the Jewish bowls were produced by rabbis, more advanced religious experts who occupied a higher level on the social ladder than scribes. Thus, we know that rabbis were expected to know formulas for cursing demons (*b. Shabbat* 67a) as well as to master the art of writing protective amulets, as one can see from the story in *b. Pesahim* 111b.⁹³ In fact, the borders between the two social groups were sometimes blurred. Often enough, scribes are represented in the rabbinic literature as legitimate transmitters of halakhic traditions, that is, as insiders of rabbinic knowledge,⁹⁴ whereas some rabbis are said to work as scribes.⁹⁵

When it comes to drawing a social profile of the Christian practitioners behind Syriac incantation bowls or other channels of ritual power, however, the task becomes more challenging due to a more complex structure of authority in Christianity. Although a comprehensive study of this subject is still a desideratum, a preliminary survey of sources suggests that it was monks and other members of the lower clergy, such as deacons and priests, who performed the task of channeling the authoritative tradition of Christianity to the level of simple believers. In what concerns monks, we see that in the collection of canons ascribed to bishop Rabbula of Edessa (411–435), it is prohibited for them, among other things, to practice text-based sortilege, most likely based on the Bible.⁹⁶ Priests and deacons are chastised for performing these and other magic practices in the Pseudo-Ephremian *Memra on Sorcerers, Charmers and Diviners, and on the End and Consummation* (Beck 1972, 1:20, 24). The East Syrian seventh-century

92 On scribes in Palestinian sources, see Hezser (1997, 467–75).

93 On rabbis as experts in and practitioners of magic, see Bohak (2008, 351–425); Bar-Ilan (1995). On rabbis as clients of incantation bowls, see Shaked (2015).

94 See Hezser (1997, 474). As Hezser summarizes the situation further on (p. 475), “the scribal profession seems to have been partly overlapping with the role of rabbis in that some rabbis were professional scribes and some scribes were considered learned enough to be conversation partners of rabbis.” For Babylonian evidence, see *b. Nazir* 56b, *b. Bava Metzia* 119a, *b. Bava Bathra* 55a, 136a.

95 For Palestinian evidence, see Hezser (1997, 472); for Babylonia, see *b. Bava Bathra* 153a.

96 For the Syriac text, see Phenix & Horn (2017, 98); for a discussion, see Childers (2020, 45), whose translation of the passage (i.e., “Let none of the monks take an answer from a book for anyone”) is preferable to that of Phenix and Horn.

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Chronicle of Khuzistan mentions a deacon performing a ritual that involved the sacrifice of a white rooster (al-Ka'bi 2016, 19–20).

Another group of educated Christians who might occasionally get involved in magic practices was comprised of students. In the sixth century, one of the canons regulating the life of the famous school of Nisibis castigates those of its students who disregard the norms of a monastic way of life to which they were expected to conform, and “slip to take wives or are detected in adultery or in fornication or in stealing or in witchcraft (*ḥarāšūtā*).”⁹⁷ The community’s decision was that such students should be expelled from the school and the city. Similar evidence comes to us from approximately the same period from the Roman empire, where a group of students of the famous law school in Beirut was exposed after a failed attempt to perform a magical ritual involving human sacrifice for the purposes of love magic, according to a detailed description of the affair included by Zachariah of Mytilene in his biography of Severus of Antioch (Ambjörn 2008, 57–72). The wide spread of interest in occult sciences among the students of law is indicated by Zachariah, who, after describing the discovery of a cache of magic manuals in the house of one of the culprits, relates that it was not a unique case and there were many other students “who studied this [*sic*] kind of books in connection with law” (Ambjörn 2008, 68).

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While all categories of Jewish and Christian practitioners of magic mentioned above have literacy as a common characteristic, one should not forget that illiterate laypeople, including women, could also function as ritual experts in certain social sites, especially those related to domestic or agricultural domains.⁹⁸ Further research is needed in order to map the social landscape of Jewish and especially Christian magic in late antique Syria-Mesopotamia with greater precision. This, I believe, will allow us to arrive at a better understanding of how members of the two religious communities interacted in this sphere.

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97 *Canons of Narsai* 3; ed. Vööbus (Vööbus 1962, 75).

98 On the portrayal of women as ritual experts in rabbinic sources, see Fishbane (1993); Kotttek (2010); Lesses (2014).

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