

Moses in the Aramaic Magic Bowls: Scribal Authority and Self-Identification¹

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Abstract

In this contribution, I discuss the references to Moses in the Jewish Aramaic magic bowls, with a view to understanding how and why the Jewish scribes responsible for the bowls laid claim to the legacy of Moses. In order to properly contextualise this, I also consider examples of western groups laying claim to the legacy of Moses, namely the rabbis, the scribes, and the early church, as well as the roles assumed by the scribes within their communities. I then consider the significance of the Moses references in the magic bowls in relation to the crossing of the Red Sea, the wilderness wanderings, the wilderness rebellions, and the revelation at the burning bush. The significance of the rod of Moses is also considered, along with possible representations of it in bowl art.

Introduction

For well over a century, the study of the Jewish Aramaic magic bowls was very much a marginalized field, with the texts themselves either languishing in obscurity or viewed as not being a legitimate expression of late antique Mesopotamian Jewish life.² For a little over

¹ An earlier version of this paper was read on my behalf by Anne Burberry at the “Magic in Late Antiquity: Objects, Texts and Contexts” conference at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 2020. I am grateful to Markham Geller for feedback on an earlier draft and to James Nathan Ford for our very helpful discussions regarding specific points. Unless otherwise stated, all translations of primary sources are my own.

² The exception to this, especially in terms of recognizing the scholarly significance of the magic bowls, is the scholarly dynasty (for want of a better term) of James Montgomery, Cyrus Gordon, and Markham Geller; see, for example, Gideon Bohak, “Babylonian Jewish Magic in Late Antiquity: Beyond the Magic Bowls,” in *Studies in Honor of Shaul Shaked*, ed. Yohanan Friedmann and Etan Kohlberg (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 2019), 70–71.

four decades, from the early 1980s, Shaul Shaked reshaped the field, not simply by expanding the number of published texts and improving the quality of their philological treatment, but also by seeking to properly contextualize them, in respect of both their place in late antique Judaism and what they tell us about interactions between Jews and their non-Jewish neighbors.³ As a result of his efforts, the study of the Jewish Aramaic magic bowls is no longer a marginalized scholarly pursuit, and, consequently, the texts themselves are no longer consigned to the margins of legitimate Jewish life in late antique Mesopotamia. This is due not only to Shaked's own work on the magic bowls, but also to his mentoring of the next generation of scholars who worked on them with him. I was privileged to be mentored by him for twenty-five years, so I am grateful to the editors of this memorial volume for inviting me to contribute to it.

This contribution is the third in a series that seeks to analyze the Jewish Aramaic magic bowls in their late antique Mesopotamian context and with a particular focus on the Jewish scribes responsible for them. In the first paper,⁴ I discuss the scholarly demarginalization of the magic bowls—how we now view the scribes as being well educated, accomplished, respected, and active in the centers of their local Jewish communities.⁵ I then discuss how we need to recontextualize the Jewish Aramaic magic bowls. Instead of the earlier scholarly tendency to treat them in isolation, I argue that they should be properly analyzed in the wider Mesopotamian therapeutic context. Once we do this, we begin to appreciate that, to a large degree, the elevated status and authority of the Jewish scribes lay in the millennia-old Near Eastern institutional structures associated with the scribal craft, something they would have shared with their non-Jewish Mesopotamian scribal colleagues,⁶ and, this being so, they

³ For an excellent account of Shaul Shaked's contributions to the study of Jewish magic, see Yuval Harari, "The Scholarly Oeuvre of Shaul Shaked, 3: Shaul Shaked on Jewish Magic," in Friedmann and Kohlberg, *Studies in Honor of Shaul Shaked*, 19–28. A Hebrew version of Harari's survey opens the Hebrew section of the present volume.

⁴ Siam Bhayro, "The Jewish Aramaic Magic Bowls: How the Magic Worked," *Judaïsme ancien / Ancient Judaism* (forthcoming).

⁵ We are, of course, focusing here on the better-quality products; see note 24 below.

⁶ See also Siam Bhayro, "Performative Elements in the Aramaic Magic Bowls," in *Patients and Performative Identities: At the Intersection of the Mesopotamian Technical*

would have been trusted as medical and magical practitioners. In the second paper,⁷ I discuss how, while they are not rabbinic, the magic bowl texts are nevertheless very Jewish. At the same time, however, there are also multiple examples of continuity from ancient Mesopotamian magic in the Jewish magic bowls. It is clear, therefore, that Jewish scribes adopted and acculturated Mesopotamian magic texts and turned them into Mesopotamian Jewish magic texts that accorded with Jewish principles (most importantly, monotheism). In the first two parts of this series, I thus seek a better understanding of the scribes responsible for the magic bowls and of why clients—both Jewish and non-Jewish—would seek out their expertise regarding a range of problems.

In this contribution, I want to continue this focus on the Jewish scribes responsible for the Jewish Aramaic magic bowls by considering how and why they laid claim to the legacy of Moses. This probably goes beyond a simple assertion of scribal authority and speaks to how the scribes viewed themselves and the validity of their magic. I hope to show that this particular aspect of Mesopotamian Jewish scribal self-identification helps us to explain and to better appreciate the significance of certain features of the bowl texts. Before doing this, I shall first briefly consider other examples of groups laying claim to the legacy of Moses in order to demonstrate that such claims were not unusual; indeed, it would have been strange for the scribes responsible for the Jewish Aramaic magic bowls *not* to lay claim to the legacy of Moses.

Claims to the Legacy of Moses in the West: The Rabbis, the Scribes, and the Early Church

It appears that, in the West, the purview of the rabbis could include activities that we would more readily associate with the scribes. Thus, in a challenging article, Yaakov Elman noted that the distinction between the rabbis and the scribes was apparently more pronounced in the East:

Disciplines and Their Clients, ed. J. Cale Johnson (University Park, PA: Eisenbrauns, 2020), 159–60.

⁷ Siam Bhayro, “The Aramaic Magic Bowls and the Jews of Sasanian Babylonia,” in *Aramaic Incantation Bowls in Their Late Antique Jewish Contexts*, ed. Alexander W. Marcus and Jason S. Mokhtarian (Providence: Brown Judaic Studies, 2025), 373–89.

Moreover, we hardly ever find the Babylonian sages depicted as writing; scribes produced legal documents, not sages. It is noteworthy that, in contrast to the situation in Palestine, where stories and claims of the scribal activities of the Tanna R. Meir, or those of the Amoraim R. Ishmael b. R. Yose and R. Hiyya Rabba (PT Meg 74d), were preserved, we do not find such stories told of any Babylonian Amora. In the Palestinian Talmud, several Amoraim are given the appellation *katova*, “scribe” [...], a phenomenon notably absent in the Bavli.⁸

This observation could explain why the sense of rivalry between these two guilds⁹ was apparently much more pronounced in Palestine than in Babylonia, hence Catherine Hezser’s discussion of the scribes in terms of them being among the rabbis’ competitors (alongside two other groups, the priests and the judges).¹⁰

In such a crowded field, it was essential for the rabbis to establish not simply their own legitimacy in the face of the challenges posed by their rivals, but also the legitimacy of the rabbinic hermeneutic. Thus, in the famous Mishnaic account of the transmission of the Oral Torah through the generations, we read:

M ²Abot

^{1.1} Moses received the Law from Sinai and committed it to Joshua, and Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the Prophets; and the Prophets committed it to the men of the Great Synagogue. They said three things: Be deliberate in judgement, raise up many disciples, and make a fence around the Law.

^{1.2} Simon the Just was of the remnants of the Great Synagogue...¹¹

The chain of transmission then continues with a series of sages, including Joshua b. Peraḥia, Hillel and Shammai, and Gamaliel; and, of course, it climaxes with Judah ha-Nasi. In other words, in this overtly political passage, which is targeting the priests, the legitimacy of the

⁸ Yaakov Elman, “Orality and the Redaction of the Babylonian Talmud,” *Oral Tradition* 14 (1999): 56.

⁹ For want of a better term—I use the word “guild” in the sense of a group of specialists who play a distinct role in the community.

¹⁰ Catherine Hezser, *The Social Structure of the Rabbinic Movement in Roman Palestine* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), 467–89 (especially 467–75 on the scribes).

¹¹ Translation from Herbert Danby, *The Mishnah Translated from the Hebrew with Introduction and Brief Explanatory Notes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1938), 446.

Oral Torah, and thus the rabbinic tradition, is established by laying claim to the legacy of Moses.

Similarly, it appears that the scribes also pressed their own claim to the legacy of Moses. This in itself is quite surprising, given that, in the ancient Near East, the scribes were traditionally an administrative guild rather than an overtly religious one. In the Second Temple Period, however, the scribal purview appears to have expanded somewhat within Judaism to include more religious functions, probably on account of the scribes' expertise with the written Law. Thus, Joachim Schaper states that "the scribal profession underwent a development from a merely technical job—essentially that of a copyist—towards an exegetical occupation of great religious significance."¹² Perhaps ironically, the clearest expression of the scribal claim to the legacy of Moses is found in the New Testament:

Matt 23

¹ Then Jesus spoke to the crowds and to his disciples,

² saying, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on the seat of Moses.

³ All things, therefore, whatever they may tell you to keep, keep and do. But according to their works, do not; for they say and do not.

⁴ For they bind heavy burdens—and hard to bear—and lay (them) on the shoulders of men, but with their own finger they will not move them."

In this passage, Jesus is most likely affirming a claim that the scribes made about themselves. Thus, he refers to the scribes (γραμματεῖς, which is the term used in the Septuagint for the ספרים) as sitting on the seat (καθέδρας; Septuagint for מושב) of Moses. Although there is no mention of the "seat of Moses" in the Hebrew Bible, this passage is evidently referring to the narrative in Exod 18, in which Jethro, Moses's father-in-law, observes Moses spending the whole day seated and tending to the needs of the Israelites (Exod 18:13: יושב משה לשפט אלהים). When questioned about this, Moses explains to Jethro that he has three roles: first, the people come to him to enquire of God (Exod 18:15); second, the people come to him for judgment; and, third, he teaches the people God's laws (Exod 18:16).

¹² Joachim Schaper, "Hebrew and Its Study in the Persian Period," in *Hebrew Study from Ezra to Ben-Yehuda*, ed. William Horbury (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1999), 18.

Jethro advises Moses to retain the first and third roles, but to delegate all but the most serious matters of judgment to others. The seat of Moses, therefore, would appear to refer primarily to the roles of serving as an intermediary between the people and God and of teaching the people God's laws. In this respect, Jesus's affirmation that it is the scribes and the Pharisees, as opposed to the priests, who now possess the legacy of Moses, and who thus perform these roles, most likely reflects the prevailing belief of the time and the claims made by both of these groups. More to the point, in expressing his affirmation in explicitly Mosaic terms, Jesus is probably affirming the scribes' own assertions about their legitimacy and their claim to the legacy of Moses (while condemning their personal conduct).¹³

Support for this assertion is given by the epilogue of the pseudepigraphical text *4 Ezra*, whose writer was responding to the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans.¹⁴ The epilogue (*4 Ezra* 14) presents Ezra the Scribe as a second Moses, who, following the destruction of the First Temple by the Babylonians, receives the lost Torah afresh from God and dictates it to five scribes.¹⁵ In other words, in presenting Ezra in these terms, the first century CE writer was asserting that, just as Ezra the Scribe was Moses in his generation, the scribes are Moses in their generation and will thus play the crucial role in preserving the nation in the midst of its latest calamity. Moreover, in *4 Ezra*, Ezra's priestly status has vanished altogether, and his scribal status is pre-eminent.¹⁶ The writer is thus not simply

¹³ See also Siam Bhayro, "Matthew 5:17–18 in the Light of Qumran Scribal Practice," in *Paratext and Megatext as Channels of Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. August A. den Hollander, Ulrich B. Schmid, and Willem F. Smelik (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 46–47.

¹⁴ See, with further references, K. Martin Hogan, "Ezra, Fourth Book of," in *The Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism*, ed. John J. Collins and Daniel C. Harlow (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 623–26.

¹⁵ For Ezra as the second Moses in *4 Ezra*, see Steven D. Fraade, "Ezra the Scribe and the (Purported) Origins of Targum," in *A Sage in New Haven: Essays on the Prophets, the Writings, and the Ancient World in Honor of Robert R. Wilson*, ed. Alison A. Gruseke and Carolyn J. Sharp (Münster: Zaphon, 2023), 345–46; Juan Carlos Ossandón Widow, *The Origins of the Canon of the Hebrew Bible: An Analysis of Josephus and 4 Ezra* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 131.

¹⁶ Ossandón Widow, *The Origins*, 167.

establishing the status of the scribes; he is also doing so at the expense of the priests.¹⁷

Similarly, the pseudepigraphical text *2 Baruch* was also written as a response to the destruction of the Second Temple and also presents its scribal protagonist as a new Moses.¹⁸ The writer describes how Baruch instructs the priests to surrender the keys to the First Temple to God, while confessing their culpability for its destruction (*2 Bar.* 10:18).¹⁹ In what follows, the roles of Jeremiah and Baruch—in other words, of prophet and scribe—are inverted, thus once again establishing the pre-eminence of the scribes in the wake of the destruction of the Second Temple.²⁰ Such assertions in the face of the destruction of the Second Temple likely attest to the expanding purview of the scribes at the expense of those who traditionally played the more religious roles in the life of the nation, particularly the priests and the prophets.

Just like the rabbis and the scribes, it appears that Jesus and his followers also claimed to possess the legacy of Moses. For example, in the transfiguration narrative (Matt 17:1-9), Jesus is shown to receive the affirmation of both Moses and Elijah, representing respectively the Law and the Prophets as the canon of his day; furthermore, he explicitly situates himself in the tradition of Moses in his own preaching (e.g., Mark 7:10). Interestingly, Jesus passes his authority to his followers in scribal terms in Matt 16:19 and Matt 18:18. In the former reference, this reads:

¹⁷ Rabbinic sources employ a similar strategy in their treatment of Ezra, in which Ezra is placed “within a chronological chain of select learned figures who periodically reestablish the Torah [...], a chain that begins within the Bible and culminates with rabbinic sages,” for example Ezra, Hillel, and R. Hiyya in BT *Sukkah* 20a; see Fraade, “Ezra the Scribe,” 348–49.

¹⁸ Mark F. Whitters justifiably states that “Recognizing the image of Moses in the characterization of Baruch is easy for the reader of *2 Baruch*”; see Whitters, “Baruch as Ezra in *2 Baruch*,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 132 (2013): 570. For a more detailed discussion, see Balázs Tamási, “Baruch as a Prophet in *2 Baruch*,” in *Fourth Ezra and Second Baruch: Reconstruction after the Fall*, ed. Matthias Henze and Gabriele Boccaccini (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 208–11.

¹⁹ See the discussion in Frederick J. Murphy, “The Temple in the Syriac *Apocalypse of Baruch*,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 106 (1987): 681, in which Murphy attempts to argue that the writer is seeking to blame Israel in general, of which the priests are merely representative. I think that this interpretation misses the point of the passage, which clearly wants to single out the priests for a specific condemnation.

²⁰ See, for example, Tamási, “Baruch as a Prophet,” 205.

Matt 16

¹⁹ And I will give to you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

Gustaf Dalman pointed out over a century ago that the pair of verbs used in this verse, δέσῃς and λύῃς, equates to the pair אסיר and שרי, and that these verbs refer respectively to the acts of forbidding and permitting as expressed in the rabbinic tradition.²¹ In the context of Matthew's gospel, however, where both the scribes and the Pharisees are prominent and are often listed together, these terms likely pertain to the scribes as well, reflecting how they performed the first and third roles that were associated with Moses.²² The scribes were thus crucial in helping people to practice their faith in all its day-to-day intricacies. Thus, in Matt 23:34, Jesus is shown to envision his future community of followers as perpetuating the scribal office alongside those of the prophet and the wise man.

It would appear, therefore, that, in the West, multiple groups laid claim to the legacy of Moses, including the rabbis, the scribes, and the early church. The rabbis and the scribes in particular were probably serious rivals, moreover, as each group appears to have encroached on the traditional purview of the other. Their respective claims to the legacy of Moses, therefore, would have been crucial in establishing and protecting their status in the face of their rivals.

The Scribes as Moses's Successors in the East

The above line of argument attempts to establish that, in the West, the scribes, and the communities they served, conceived of the scribes' status, authority, and activities in overtly Mosaic terms—either directly (as in Matt 23:2), or indirectly through the personas of

²¹ Gustaf Dalman, *The Words of Jesus Considered in the Light of Post-Biblical Jewish Writings and the Aramaic Language*, trans. David M. Kay (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1902), 214. Compare also Matt 23:4, quoted above, in which Jesus describes the scribes and the Pharisees as those who bind—δεσμεύουσιν; the verb δεσμεύω is used in the Septuagint chiefly for אסר.

²² Jack Suggs thus comments that these are “essentially scribal functions” that refer to the declaration of legal decisions and the removal or imposition of religious bans; see Suggs, *Wisdom, Christology and Law in Matthew's Gospel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), 120–21.

famous scribes who were imagined as Moses *redivivus* (Ezra and Baruch). The sources we have considered thus far are Western, and they make sense in a context in which, as Elman observed, more encroachment occurred between the purviews of the rabbis and the scribes, thus making their rivalry more apparent.

In the East, however, the distinction between the rabbis and the scribes appears to have been better maintained, hence the absence of Eastern sages practicing the scribal arts noted above, so it is unlikely that the rivalry between these two guilds would have been so pronounced. Be that as it may, as stated above it is also highly unlikely that late antique Mesopotamian Jewish scribes did not also conceive of themselves in Mosaic terms. In attempting to establish this, however, we are confronted with the problem of sources, or the lack thereof. The main source we have for Jewish life in the Sasanian East is the Babylonian Talmud, which is an overtly rabbinic corpus and thus unlikely to be helpful in illuminating the world of the scribes.²³

This is where the Jewish Aramaic magic bowls prove to be very useful, as they are, for the most part, the products of properly trained scribes.²⁴ My working hypothesis is that the scribes responsible for some of the magic bowls, like their Western counterparts, conceived of their status in Mosaic terms and thus saw themselves as intermediaries between the divine and human realms who were able to make magical determinations (often in legal terms)—in effect, they

²³ For example, the rabbis clearly had very little idea why the scribes adopted certain conventions when writing divorce documents; see Siam Bhayro, “Divorcing a Demon: Incantation Bowls and BT Giṭṭin 85b,” in *The Archaeology and Material Culture of the Babylonian Talmud*, ed. Markham J. Geller (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 130.

²⁴ This does not assume that all magic bowls were written by professional scribes. Indeed, there is certainly a variation in quality among the magic bowls, ranging from those that were clearly produced by well-trained scribes to those that were produced by people who could scarcely have claimed to be scribes; see, for example, Avigail Manekin-Bamberger, “Who Were the Jewish ‘Magicians’ behind the Aramaic Incantation Bowls?” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 71 (2020): 237, 244–45.

For the relationship between the Jewish Aramaic magic bowls and the rabbis and the question of whether rabbis commissioned or even wrote magic bowl texts, see, for example, Shaul Shaked, “Rabbis in Incantation Bowls,” in Geller, *Archaeology and Material Culture*, 104 (where Shaked distinguishes between the rabbi who owned the bowl and the scribe who wrote it) and 116 (where Shaked parenthetically allows for the possibility that rabbis may have written bowl texts). For the differences between bowl magic and rabbinic magic, see, with further references, Bhayro, “The Aramaic Magic Bowls,” 385–88.

were able to bind and loose spirits as well as humans, because they possessed the status and authority of Moses.²⁵ By analyzing the references to Moses in the magic bowls, therefore, we should be able to discern how the scribes laid claim to the legacy of Moses, and, in turn, to understand the assumptions and logic underlying some of the bowl spells. We shall now test this hypothesis by means of a close reading of excerpts from several Jewish Aramaic magic bowls.

Moses in the Magic Bowls 1—The Wilderness Wanderings

Several Jewish Aramaic magic bowls make use of the following biblical quotation, from Num 9:23, mostly at the end of the text (or at the end of a distinct spell unit within a larger text), but at least once at the beginning:²⁶

At the commandment of the LORD they encamped, and at the commandment of the LORD they journeyed; they kept the charge of the LORD at the commandment of the LORD by the hand of Moses.

In her analysis of the use of biblical quotations in the Jewish Aramaic magic bowls, Natalie Polzer suggested that this verse was used as a magical, typological precedent; she further suggested that this could relate either to the clients of the bowls, who would enjoy the same protection as the Israelites in the wilderness, or to the evil spirits, who

²⁵ In doing so, the scribes would often appropriate scribal or legal lore and devices from the human realm for use in the spiritual realm; see, with further references, Bhayro, “Divorcing a Demon,” 130.

²⁶ For example, HS 3005:9–10 and HS 3022:7–8, for which see James Nathan Ford and Matthew Morgenstern, *Aramaic Incantation Bowls in Museum Collections, Volume 1: The Frau Professor Hilprecht Collection of Babylonian Antiquities*, Jena (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 19–28, 68–71; JBA 31:10–11 and JBA 42:9–10, for which see Shaul Shaked, James Nathan Ford, and Siam Bhayro, *Aramaic Bowl Spells: Jewish Babylonian Aramaic Bowls Volume One* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 169–71, 197–99; JBA 73:7–8 and JBA 75:7–8, for which see Shaul Shaked, James Nathan Ford, and Siam Bhayro, *Aramaic Bowl Spells: Jewish Babylonian Aramaic Bowls Volume Two* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 40–43, 46–48; for the use of this verse at the start of a bowl text, see Montgomery 26:1–2 in James A. Montgomery, *Aramaic Incantation Texts from Nippur* (Philadelphia: University Museum, 1913), 209–11.

would be similarly driven wherever God wills.²⁷ In making use of this typological precedent, moreover, Polzer further suggested that the scribe was being coercive, issuing an indirect command to God to repeat his prior actions.²⁸

When we place the use of this verse in our scribe-as-Moses paradigm, however, we can offer an alternative suggestion as to why this verse is used and challenge the coercive aspect of Polzer's suggestion. Although Num 9:23 makes use of two body-part idioms—namely, *על־פי יהוה*, “upon the mouth of the LORD,” and *בִּיד־מֹשֶׁה*, “by the hand of Moses”—it seems likely that the scribe is purposefully taking advantage of the nouns “mouth” and “hand” in a significant way that reflects how the scribes are able to act as intermediaries between God and other beings and enact on earth what is also enacted in heaven. Thus, God accomplishes by means of speech, while the scribe accomplishes by means of writing—God uses his mouth, and the scribe uses his hand. The significance of Num 9:23 is that the two are shown to be in perfect accordance, accomplishing the same end in concert with each other. Of course, in the Bible, Moses almost always speaks rather than writes, so this verse is significant because it permits the scribe to focus on the *hand* of Moses. Consequently, in the process of producing a bowl text, while the scribe writes, God thus speaks—and the common end of both God and scribe is achieved. Rather than being coercive, therefore, the scribe is being collaborative, as with Moses and God in the wilderness.

This also helps us to account for something curious that Polzer points out about the Moses traditions in the Jewish Aramaic magic bowls:

This reticence to use a human Biblical figure as a typological precedent is striking when we recall Moses' many magical acts explicitly related in Exodus, and his widespread and commonly accepted reputation as a magician among the educated pagans of antiquity. No magical act wrought through the hands of Moses is ever referred to in the Aramaic bowls.²⁹

²⁷ Natalie C. Polzer, “The Bible in the Aramaic Magic Bowls” (MA diss., McGill University, 1986), 143–44.

²⁸ Polzer, “The Bible in the Aramaic Magic Bowls,” 104–6.

²⁹ Polzer, 100 (compare 129–31).

In view of the above line of argument, it would seem that the reason for this is that the scribes were not interested in Moses as a magician; instead, they were very much invested in Moses as a scribe.

As is well known, Polzer advanced the idea that the biblical quotations that appear at either the beginning or the end of the magic spells functioned as magical seals. Although she referred to this as “but a fanciful hypothesis,” I think it has something to commend it.³⁰ The scribes would be used to finishing a text (or a section of a text) with a statement that signified its effectiveness or the scribe’s authority to produce it. One example of such a scribal indication of effectiveness is the phrase שריר וקיים, “strong and valid,” which is often used in legal documents, but is also appropriated for magical use in some bowl texts.³¹ Indeed, this phrase was also used in non-Jewish scribal circles, which suggests that it was a general scribal device and a commonly recognized guarantee of effectiveness in the Near East.³² The practice of scribes signing legal documents also seems to have been appropriated in two ways in the magic bowls. First, there are examples in which angels are said to sign the text of the bowl.³³ Second, I would reassert Polzer’s “fanciful hypothesis” that, when the scribe invokes the authority of Moses with a verse such as Num 9:23 at the end of a magic bowl text, that biblical verse is serving the same function as the scribe’s signature in a legal document—it is a guarantee of the spell’s effectiveness on account of the identity of the scribe; in this case, as someone with the status of Moses in his day.

The use of Num 9:23 at the end of a text, therefore, would be a very fitting indication of both scribal authority and the spell’s effectiveness, to both the human and spiritual audiences, as it

³⁰ Polzer, 106–7.

³¹ For the use of this phrase in legal documents, see Mordechai A. Friedman, *Jewish Marriage in Palestine: A Cairo Geniza Study. Volume 1. The Ketubba Traditions* (Tel Aviv: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1980), 478. For some examples of its use in the magic bowls, see JBA 7:14, JBA 25:11, JBA 40:6, JBA 55:14, and JBA 61:7 in Shaked, Ford, and Bhayro, *Aramaic Bowl Spells, Volume One*, 74–76, 140–47, 192–94, 245–48, 266–67.

³² See, for example, Siam Bhayro, “Theory and Practice in the Syriac Book of Medicines: The Empirical Basis for the Persistence of Near Eastern Medical Lore,” in *In the Wake of the Compendia: Infrastructural Contexts and the Licensing of Empiricism in Ancient and Medieval Mesopotamia*, ed. J. Cale Johnson (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 154.

³³ See, for example, JBA 21:13 in Shaked, Ford, and Bhayro, *Aramaic Bowl Spells, Volume One*, 129–31.

signifies the accordance between what God speaks and what the scribe writes. Furthermore, other Mosaic verses that occur at the end of bowl spells can be viewed in the same light. For example, bowl HS3022:6–8 has three Mosaic biblical quotations at the end:

The people cried out to Moses, and Moses prayed to the LORD, and the fire was quenched (Num 11:2). At the commandment of the LORD they encamped, and at the commandment of the LORD they journeyed; they kept the charge of the LORD at the commandment of the LORD by the hand of Moses (Num 9:23). And Moses cried out to the LORD, saying, “O God! Please heal her!” (Num 12:13).³⁴

It is worth recalling that, in the narratives of both Num 11 and Num 12, the LORD is angry and the problem that needs remedying is the consequence of his chastisement. Given that bowl HS3022 is for healing, the use of these verses could suggest an analogous pathology on the part of the client and practitioner; they both perceive the client’s ailment as resulting from the anger of God—a typically Babylonian explanation for misfortune.³⁵ In this case, the people crying out to Moses is equivalent to the client crying out to the scribe, and Moses crying out to the LORD on Miriam’s behalf is equivalent to the scribe appealing to God on behalf of the client, albeit in the form of a written spell.

In JBA 42:9–10, the Num 9:23 quotation is followed by a quotation from Num 10:36: “And when it rested, he [i.e., Moses] said, ‘Return, O LORD, unto the many thousands of Israel.’” Thus, in order to invoke the divine presence to protect the client’s household, the scribe used the biblical precedent of Moses invoking the presence of the LORD in order to protect the encamped Israelites. This typological equivalence between the encamped Israelites under the care of Moses and the

³⁴ See Ford and Morgenstern, *Aramaic Incantation Bowls in Museum Collections*, 68–69. Num 11:2 also occurs in VA.2457:1–2, for which see Matthew Peter Bartlett, “Edition and Analysis of Twenty-Seven Unpublished Aramaic Bowl Texts from the Collection of the Vorderasiatisches Museum, Berlin” (PhD diss., University of Exeter, 2021), 145–50. For the use of Num 12:13 at the end of a magic bowl text, see JBA 108:9 in Shaked, Ford, and Bhayro, *Aramaic Bowl Spells, Volume Two*, 190–93.

³⁵ See, for example, Markham J. Geller, *Ancient Babylonian Medicine: Theory and Practice* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 14.

client's household under the care of the scribe probably resulted from a distinctly Jewish Babylonian tradition that equated the Israelites' camp in the wilderness with a "house" that was both established and sustained by Moses's intercessory efforts. This notion probably finds its earliest expression in the Animal Apocalypse of 1 En. 85–90—likely a second century BCE Babylonian Jewish composition that makes use of many Babylonian traditions.³⁶ Moses features prominently in the Animal Apocalypse, which describes how he was transformed into an angel, after which he "built a house for the Lord of the sheep, and made all the sheep stand in that house" (1 En. 89:36). James VanderKam agreed with Devorah Dimant, who convincingly argued that "house" here does not refer to the tabernacle, but to the entire camp of Israel.³⁷ Given this, if the scribe did indeed see himself as acting in Moses's place, then this would make sense of his use of Num 10:36 in JBA 42 in order to protect the client's house.³⁸

³⁶ For the Babylonian background of various parts of 1 Enoch and related Jewish Aramaic texts, see, with further references, Siam Bhayro and Anne Burberry, "The Provenance and Purpose of the Genesis Apocryphon," in *Science in Qumran Aramaic Texts*, ed. Ida Fröhlich (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2022), 190–95. For the date of the Animal Apocalypse, see Daniel C. Olsen, *A New Reading of the Animal Apocalypse of 1 Enoch: "All Nations Shall be Blessed"* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 1, who states that it was written "during the opening years of the Maccabean revolt"; see also Patrick A. Tiller, *A Commentary on the Animal Apocalypse of 1 Enoch* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1993), 61–79, who places the composition of the text to between 165 and 160 BCE.

³⁷ James C. VanderKam, *Enoch: A Man for All Generations* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1995), 80.

³⁸ It is interesting that both Noah and Moses are depicted as being transformed into angels in the Animal Apocalypse (this is expressed in terms of being transformed from an animal into a human). As the introduction to the *Book of Asaph the Physician* (a Jewish medical text of likely late antique Babylonian provenance) demonstrates, Noah is credited as being the recipient of the divine knowledge necessary to found the discipline of medicine; he is, in effect, the Ur-Physician. For the introduction to the *Book of Asaph the Physician*, see Vivian Nutton, "From Noah to Galen: A Medieval Latin History of Medicine," in *Ritual Healing: Magic, Ritual and Medical Therapy from Antiquity until the Early Modern Period*, ed. Ildikó Csepregi and Charles Burnett (Florence: SISMEL Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2012), 53–69. The same idea is also found in the earlier *Jub.* 10:12–14, for which see James C. VanderKam, *The Book of Jubilees* (Leuven: Peeters, 1989), 59–60. It is possible that, in a similar way, Moses was considered to be the Ur-Scribe (I intend to return to this point in a future paper).

Moses in the Magic Bowls 2—The Red Sea Crossing

Several Jewish Aramaic magic bowls contain the following spell unit:

I adjure you and I put you under an oath, you, <list of evil spirits>, by the name of the great Yahoq Yahoq, who pushed his chariot over the Red Sea, that you may <verbs of departure> from <names of client(s)>...³⁹

Even in such a small unit, there are some notable features, such as the writing of the divine name with a final *qoph*—that is, a lengthened *he*—which then results in a poetic link with the accompanying verb: **בשמייה דיהוק יהוק רבה דידחק**. However, the interesting point for our present purpose relates to the function of this unit in the bowl as a whole.

As Polzer asserted, this is a magical typological precedent that shows the salvific power of God. Furthermore, the motif of the Red Sea as an abode of evil spirits is known from a number of sources, including the *Testament of Solomon* and the *Alphabet of Ben Sira*.⁴⁰ Significantly, Polzer remarked that this miracle was “initiated by Moses himself who strikes the waters with his staff.”⁴¹ The bowl scribe, therefore, was not simply employing a typological precedent; he was employing one in which Moses plays the central role in enacting God’s miraculous deliverance. In doing so, he was thus

³⁹ For example, JBA 2:13–14, JBA 4:14, JBA 6:15, and JBA 9:14–15, for which see Shaked, Ford, and Bhayro, *Aramaic Bowl Spells, Volume One*, 59–61, 65–67, 71–73, 79–82; see also Montgomery 14:2 in Montgomery, *Aramaic Incantation Texts*, 183–84. The translation given here follows Shaked’s understanding of this spell unit, although he did add a footnote that allowed for the possibility that the possessive pronoun refers not to Yahoq Yahoq but to Pharaoh; regarding this possibility, however, he added “although the latter is not mentioned in the text”; see Shaul Shaked, “Form and Purpose in Aramaic Spells: Some Jewish Themes (The Poetics of Magic Texts),” in *Officina Magica: Essays on the Practice of Magic in Antiquity*, ed. Shaul Shaked (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 19. In addition to Pharaoh not being mentioned in this text, there are two other reasons for rejecting such an elliptical reading: first, the text reads perfectly well and makes perfect sense if one reads the pronominal suffix as referring back to the great Yahoq Yahoq; second, the text uses the preposition **על** “over,” so the imagery better suits the LORD driving his chariot while leading the Israelites across the Red Sea than Pharaoh riding into it.

⁴⁰ Polzer, “The Bible in the Aramaic Magic Bowls,” 98, 104–5, 117–19.

⁴¹ Polzer, 117.

assuming the role of Moses for his clients and ensuring their successful deliverance.

A similar assumption of Moses's role, with a typological precedent drawn from the biblical account of the Red Sea crossing, is apparent in JBA 116:6–7, which reads:

... he sits with authority and in judgment [...] for thus it is written: "And Israel saw the great power which the LORD wielded against the Egyptians, and the people feared the LORD, and they had faith in the LORD and in Moses his servant" (Exod 14:31). This is the man who indeed imposes a court oath upon you...⁴²

In writing this text, the scribe clearly assumed the role of Moses and used Exod 14:31 in an overt attempt to instill his client with confidence in his status and hence in the effectiveness of the text. In the biblical quotation, therefore, "Israel" and "the people" refer to the clients, "the Egyptians" refers to the evil spirits, and "Moses" refers to the bowl scribe. Immediately following this, "the man," therefore, is not simply the scribe, but the scribe who "sits with authority and in judgment," just as Moses did in Exod 18.

In addition to the Red Sea crossing, the rod of Moses is significant in a number of other narratives in the Bible. Given this, we should probably reassess our understanding of a type of image that occurs a number of times in the Jewish Aramaic magic bowls. Consider the following three examples:⁴³

⁴² Shaked, Ford, and Bhayro, *Aramaic Bowl Spells, Volume Two*, 220–23.

⁴³ These examples are taken from Naama Viložny, "Figure and Image in Magic and Popular Art: Between Babylonia and the Land of Israel in the Roman and Byzantine Periods" [Hebrew] (PhD diss., Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2010), 69, 119, 122. This has since been published as Naama Viložny, *Lilith's Hair and Ashmedai's Horns. Figure and Image in Magic and Popular Art: Between Babylonia and the Land of Israel in Late Antiquity* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 2017).



Figure for Text 4 from Montgomery, *Aramaic Incantation Texts*, pl. IV.



Drawing from MS 1928/34, from Viložny, “Figure and Image,” 119.



Drawing from Viložny, “Figure and Image,” 122.

At present, such images are interpreted as depicting the magician holding a spear or a branch. Moreover, this type of image is often related back to ancient Near Eastern imagery of palm branches or sacred trees and suchlike.⁴⁴ There is indeed ample evidence for the motif of the exorcist's rod in Mesopotamian magical traditions, and it is highly likely that this imagery was appropriated by the late antique Jewish scribes who wrote the magic bowls.⁴⁵ This appropriation would also have involved a degree of acculturation. We can compare, for example, how the historic Mesopotamian spell that invokes the presence of various deities around the exorcist became a prayer for angelic protection on all sides within its new Jewish context.⁴⁶ In light of the significance of the rod of Moses, therefore, I would suggest that, once this imagery had been appropriated by the Jewish magic bowl scribes, it was reconceived as depicting the scribe holding the rod by which he, as Moses, was able to perform acts of wonder.

In this regard, consider the following sentence from MS 1927/3:4:

בחוטריה דמשה דבזע בה ימא דכבש וכביש בה כל מרורין דשידין דשיפטין דפלגין
דפנעין דרוחין

By the rod of Moses, with which he parted the sea, with which he suppressed and subdued all bitter things of demons, of afflictions, of apoplexies, of affliction demons, (and) of spirits.

As we saw above, the Red Sea was considered to be an abode of evil spirits. The parting of the Red Sea is therefore linked with the suppression of various evil spirits, and both actions were accomplished by means of the rod of Moses.⁴⁷ In this light, the above

⁴⁴ See, for example, Naama Vilozy, "Lilith's Hair and Ashmedai's Horns: Incantation Bowl Imagery in the Light of Talmudic Descriptions," in Geller, *Archaeology and Material Culture*, 147–50.

⁴⁵ See, for example, James Nathan Ford, "The Ugaritic Incantation against Sorcery RIH 78/20 (KTU² 1.169)," *Ugarit-Forschungen* 34 (2002): 169–72.

⁴⁶ See, for example, Dan Levene, Dalia Marx, and Siam Bhayro, "'Gabriel Is on Their Right': Angelic Protection in Jewish Magic and Babylonian Lore," *Studia Mesopotamica* 1 (2014): 185–98.

⁴⁷ See also the references to the rod of Moses in NYPL 190, published in Gideon Bohak, *A Fifteenth-Century Manuscript of Jewish Magic: MS New York Public Library, Heb. 190 (Formerly Sassoon 56), Introduction, Annotated Edition and Facsimile* [Hebrew], 2 vols. (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2014). This motif was adopted into Syriac magical texts; see, for example, the references to the rod of Moses in

type of image could therefore be seen to serve as yet another indication of the scribe's Mosaic authority and the efficacy of the bowl text.

Moses in the Magic Bowls 3—The Wilderness Rebellions

The following spell unit refers to the narrative of the rebellion of Korah and his allies against Moses and Aaron (Num 16):

I put you under an oath, the fires of Gehenna that brought down to the abyss those of the house of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram.⁴⁸

In this spell unit, the scribe has combined the two divine punishments of Num 16—the earth swallowing the main rebels and fire consuming the rest—into one entity,⁴⁹ which is then invoked in support of the overall purpose of the bowl text. The narrative of Num 16 involves the LORD choosing between two opposing sides, both of whom claim his favor. In Num 16:15, Moses appeals directly to the LORD to intervene on his side against his opponents. This biblical precedent is particularly appropriate for the purpose of the bowls that contain the above spell, as expressed in their opening line, “This is a countercharm to overturn the sorceries and vows from <name of client>....” The scribe's client was convinced that he had been cursed by an opponent and that this needed to be reversed. In order to do this, he sought to ensure that divine favor rested with him rather than with his opponents. Therefore, it makes sense that, in such circumstances, the scribe would appeal to the narrative of Num 16 and invoke the precedent of divine intervention in a dispute between rivals on his client's behalf. In making such an invocation, the scribe

Hermann Gollancz, *The Book of Protection* (London: Oxford University Press, 1912), xlv, xlviii, lxiv, 22–23, 46 (Codex A, §§35 and 38; Codex B, §5). I would like to thank James Nathan Ford for bringing these references to my attention.

⁴⁸ VA 2509:5–6, for which see Dan Levene, *Jewish Aramaic Curse Texts from Late-Antique Mesopotamia* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 30–34; BM 91763:3–5 (041A), for which see Judah Benzion Segal, *Catalogue of the Aramaic and Mandaic Incantation Bowls in the British Museum* (London: British Museum Press, 2000), 83–85 (see also Levene, *Jewish Aramaic Curse Texts*, 121–22).

⁴⁹ See, with further references, the discussion in Anne Burberry, “Edition and Analysis of Twenty-Five Unpublished Aramaic Magic Bowl Texts in the Collection of the Vorderasiatisches Museum (Berlin)” (PhD diss., University of Exeter, 2020), 194–99.

effectively placed himself within the narrative, specifically as Moses in Num 16:15, and thus invoked divine intervention against the other side.

Moses in the Magic Bowls 4—The Revelation at the Burning Bush

Several Jewish Aramaic magic bowls contain an invocation that quotes Exod 3:15. In its simplest form, this invocation reads:

I put you under an oath [...] by “This is my name for ever,” by “This is my memorial unto all generations.”⁵⁰

It could be that this is simply an invocation by means of a powerful name; in this case, a biblical verse associated with the revelation of the divine name to Moses at the burning bush.⁵¹ The more complex version of this invocation, however, makes it clear that there is more to this:

I put you under an oath [...] by “This is my name, Moses,” by “This is my memorial unto all generations.”⁵²

Another variant occurs in JBA 15:12, as follows:

I put you under an oath [...] by “This is Moses [...] by “This is my name for ever,” by “This is my memorial unto all generations.”⁵³

In referring to Moses by name, these latter two versions show that the point here is to focus on Moses as the recipient of the divine name at the burning bush.⁵⁴ In other words, in the narrative of the third

⁵⁰ For example, JBA 60:8–9, for which see Shaked, Ford, and Bhayro, *Aramaic Bowl Spells, Volume One*, 263–65.

⁵¹ This is certainly how this verse is used in other magic bowl texts, for example, JBA 65:7, JBA 67:4, JBA 95:12, JBA 98:17, and JBA 101:17, for which see Shaked, Ford, and Bhayro, *Aramaic Bowl Spells, Volume Two*, 19–21, 25–27, 129–36, 142–45, 154–56.

⁵² For example, JNF 205:10 and Montgomery 8:12, for which see the note in Shaked, Ford, and Bhayro, *Aramaic Bowl Spells, Volume One*, 111.

⁵³ See Shaked, Ford, and Bhayro, *Aramaic Bowl Spells, Volume One*, 110–13.

⁵⁴ In this regard, compare also Gordon Text H:16–17, which reads: “By the Lord [...] and YaHWaH, the ineffable name that was revealed to Moses in the bush”; see Cyrus H. Gordon, “Aramaic and Mandaic Magical Bowls,” *Archiv Orientalní* 9

chapter of Exodus, Moses received special, hitherto hidden, knowledge regarding the name of the LORD—knowledge that he then brought to the Israelites. And, as it happens, a lot of the magic of the Jewish magic bowl texts relates to the use of special names.⁵⁵ The above invocation, therefore, represents an assertion on the part of the scribe that he possesses the necessary (and otherwise hidden) knowledge that enables him to invoke names of power in the writing of a bowl text.

Summary

I am sure that, over time, more examples will come to light, but I think that the point is well established that Moses does not appear in the Jewish Aramaic magic bowls just because he is Moses. Rather, Moses appears because he is Moses the scribe, and the scribe, when he wrote the magic bowl text, was writing as Moses in his own day with the accompanying authority that resulted from the scribal claim to the legacy of Moses. When we examine the examples adduced above from this perspective, therefore, we gain a better understanding of the logic underlying the magic; that is, of how the magic works.⁵⁶

(1937): 86–90. In her discussion of this reference, Polzer very much focuses on the divine name aspect of this invocation and minimizes the significance of the reference to Moses, stating that “it is clear that the agent of power invoked through this reference is not Moses, but the Ineffable Name revealed in the bush”; see Polzer, “The Bible in the Aramaic Magic Bowls,” 131. Of course, Polzer did not have access to the wealth of data we now have; indeed, Gordon Text H contained the only known reference to Moses in the corpus of magic bowls that was available at the time. With the data we now have, we can more fully understand the significance of the reference to Moses in Gordon Text H and the scribe’s rationale for its use.

⁵⁵ For which see the analysis in Anne Burberry, “Toward a Classification of and Rationale for the Invocation of Names in Jewish Aramaic Magic Bowls,” in Marcus and Mokhtarian, *The Aramaic Incantation Bowls*, 221–71.

⁵⁶ Although this contribution has focused on the Jewish Aramaic magic bowls, the general approach could be expanded to take into account the Moses traditions that are preserved in other magical/mystical traditions. Consider, for example, how 3 *Enoch* describes Metatron as revealing to Moses a list of divine names to be used for healing, thus initiating another chain of transmission that parallels the one in *m. ʿAbot* 1; see Michael D. Swartz, *Scholastic Magic: Ritual and Revelation in Early Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 178–81.