

Babylonian Incantation Bowls

What are they?

Almost 3,000 ceramic bowls, inscribed with Aramaic spells and incantations, decorated with images of demons and other objects, dating to the late and post-Talmudic period in Babylonia (5th through 7th centuries CE). Although the range of the bowls is broad and much of the texts are poorly understood, it appears that these were primarily home-based prophylactic devices, buried in key spots in the home to ward off the pernicious activity of various demons. The texts frequently invoke the reputation of holy Rabbis, existing in a world rich in both angels and demons, and these incantations were intended to serve as protections for the families who purchased these artifacts of folk religion.

Why are they important for Jewish history?

The bowls demonstrate the vitality of a decidedly non-Rabbinic, popular religious culture circulating among Babylonian Jews for centuries, apparently alongside the literary, legalistic religious hierarchy as described in the Talmud. The Talmud describes life from the perspective of the Rabbis, describing human failings and aspirations as they understood the dictates of the Torah. The Babylonian Incantation Bowls, on the other hand, give us insight into how Jews understood life for themselves, regardless of what the Rabbis wished them to believe. An illustration of the French proverb (a favorite of my father, ת"ע): plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose, "the more it changes, the more it stays the same."

Why are they controversial?

Scholars differ as to the overall significance of the disregard for Rabbinic authority evidenced by the Babylonian incantation bowls. The sheer number of artifacts signify widespread adoption, but many key questions remain, like for example who actually bought these bowls? Should we assume they were Jews simply because the content of the texts are indisputably Jewish? Think of how many Americans of European descent get kanji tatoos when they can't read a single Chinese ideogram. Is it possible that Jewish scribes cornered the market on incantation bowls, and sold them widely in the general population? Of course it's quite possible that Rabbinically illiterate Jews purchased these items—think of how many non-Hasidic homes contain artistic representations of dancing Hasidim, as if they represent the quintessence of Judaism for Jews who wouldn't know the difference between a *kvittel* and a *klipah*.

Also interesting (discussed in Gross/Manekin-Bamberger article): who is writing these bowls, anyways? They are pretty learned. Rabbis? Renegade Rabbis? And what does that mean for the cohesion of Babylonian Jewish society?

Fun Facts

1. Kids, you can try this at home? Kenyon College experiments with art projects, having students create their very own incantation bowls:
<https://www.ancientjewreview.com/read/2020/8/19/incantation-bowls-and-embodied-knowledge>

Resources

1. [Wikipedia](#) is actually way ahead of even Encyclopedia Judaica on this one, which only has a few passages relating to the bowls buried in other entries like “Magic.”
2. Nice brief article (longer treatment in folder) by Avigail Manekin-Bamberger:
<https://web.archive.org/web/20180522202313/http://thegemara.com/naming-demons-the-aramaic-incantation-bowls-and-gittin/>
3. Research on the Penn collection of the bowls.
<https://penntoday.upenn.edu/news/penn-researchers-unearth-stories-ancient-incantation-bowls-tell>
4. Summaries of a few bowls in the National Library of Israel:
https://blog.nli.org.il/en/magical_bowls/