

CORPUS OF THE ARAMAIC
INCANTATION BOWLS

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by

Charles D. Isbell

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By Isbell, Charles D
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PREFACE

This dissertation is a collection of all the published Aramaic magic bowls. I am thus indebted to all the scholars who have previously worked on these bowls and wish to express my thanks to them in writing here. But two people in particular merit a special word of thanks for the help they have given me in my studies and in the preparation of this dissertation.

Dr. Harvey E. Finl y of the Nazarene Theological Seminary (Kansas City, Missouri) was my first Semitics teacher and it was he who in large part inspired me to do further graduate work in the field to which he brings such devotion and mastery.

Dr. Cyrus H. Gordon gave patient and wise counsel as my thesis advisor and through three years at Brandeis, the inspiration of his teaching and scholarship have been matched by his friendship and fatherly interest in me.

I wish also to thank the University of Massachusetts for a special Faculty Research Grant allocation to cover the expense involved in the final typing of this manuscript.

Finally, I express appreciation and admiration for typist Judith Stark who learned the Hebrew alphabet in order to be able to type the Aramaic and Hebrew portions and did a superb job in all aspects of a difficult project.

לאשתי

ישלם יהוה פעלך וחהי משכרתך שלמה מעם יהוה
אלהי ישראל אשר באת לחסות תחת כנפיו (רות ב:יב).

ABBREVIATIONS AND SYMBOLS

AASOR	<i>Annual of the American Schools of Oriental Research.</i>
AJSLL	<i>American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures.</i>
AOR	<i>Archiv Orientalní.</i>
BDB	Brown, Francis; Driver, S. R.; and Briggs, Charles A. <i>A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament.</i>
EH	Biblical Hebrew.
Comptes-rendus	<i>Comptes-rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres.</i>
Dictionary	Jastrow, Marcus. <i>A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature.</i>
Dictionnaire	Jean, Charles F., and Hoftijzer, Jean. <i>Dictionnaire des Inscriptions Sémitiques de l'Ouest.</i>
Discoveries	Layard, Austen. <i>Discoveries In the Ruins of Nineveh and Babylon.</i>
IDB	Buttrick, George Arthur (ed.). <i>The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible.</i>
JAOS	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society.</i>
Jeruzalmi	Jeruzalmi, Isak. <i>Les Coupes Magiques Araméennes de Mésopotamie.</i>
JMIB	McCullough, W. S. <i>Jewish and Mandaean Incantation Bowls.</i>
JNES	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies.</i>
JPOS	<i>Journal of the Palestine Oriental Society.</i>
Judaism	Moore, George Foot. <i>Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era.</i>
Mandaic	Yamauchi, Edwin Masao. <i>Mandaean Incantation Texts.</i>
Minoan	Gordon, Cyrus H. <i>Evidence for the Minoan Language.</i>

<i>Nights</i>	Burton, Richard F. <i>The Book of a Thousand Nights and a Night.</i>
PSBA	<i>Proceedings of the Society of Biblical Archaeology.</i>
RA	<i>Revue d'Assyriologie et d'Archéologie Orientale.</i>
<i>Revue</i>	<i>Revue des Études Juives.</i>
TSBA	<i>Transactions of the Society of Biblical Archaeology.</i>
UT	Gordon, Cyrus H. <i>Ugaritic Textbook.</i>
ZA	<i>Zeitschrift für Assyriologie und verwandte Gebiete.</i>
ZK	<i>Zeitschrift für Keilschriftforschung.</i>
(...)	Explanation.
[...]	Restoration.
{ ... }	Scribal Plus.
< ... >	Scribal Omission.
(?)	Uncertain Reading or Translation.
Inferior Point (N)	Uncertain Letter.
' -- K	L -- 𐤋
B -- 𐤁	M -- 𐤌
G -- 𐤂	N -- 𐤍
D -- 𐤃	S -- 𐤔
H -- 𐤄	C -- 𐤕
W -- 𐤅	P -- 𐤖
Z -- 𐤆	S -- 𐤗
H -- 𐤇	Q -- 𐤘
T -- 𐤈	R -- 𐤙
Y -- 𐤉	S -- 𐤚
K -- 𐤊	T -- 𐤛

INTRODUCTION

Almost sixty years have passed since the publication of James A. Montgomery's definitive work on the Aramaic magic bowls, *Aramaic Incantation Texts From Nippur*,¹ a work which has been the starting point for every student of the bowls since its appearance in 1913. Professor Montgomery's student, Cyrus H. Gordon, was able to say in 1941 that Montgomery's book "remains the unrivaled authoritative work on the subject,"² an evaluation which would still be true today. But, although Professor Montgomery's 1913 book is the best, it is certainly not the only work on the subject.

Published in journals and periodicals of many different countries are "over one hundred complete texts plus numerous partial fragments."³ These one hundred plus include bowls in Mandaic,⁴ Syriac,⁵ and what has been called "Jewish Babylonian

¹James A. Montgomery, *Aramaic Incantation Texts From Nippur* (Philadelphia: The University Museum, 1913). Cited hereafter as Montgomery.

²*Orientalia* X, 1941, p. 116.

³William H. Rossell, *A Handbook of Aramaic Magical Texts* (New Jersey: Shelton College, 1953), p. 7. Cited hereafter as Rossell, *Handbook*.

⁴The definitive work on Mandaic texts is Edwin Masao Yamauchi's *Mandaean Incantation Texts* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, Inc., 1964), a dissertation done in the Department of Mediterranean Studies at Brandeis University under Cyrus H. Gordon. It contains a full introduction to Mandaic studies, a complete grammar of Mandaic (with chapters on Orthography, Phonetics, the Numerals, Pronouns, Nouns, Particles, Paradigms, Verbs, and Syntax), fifty-two texts transcribed into the Hebrew alphabet and translated into English, glossaries, and an extremely helpful bibliography. A revised edition is now published: *Mandaic Incantation Texts* (American Oriental Series 49; New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1967).

⁵The definitive work on Syriac bowls is Victor Hamilton's *Syriac Incantation Bowls*, a dissertation done in the Department of Mediterranean Studies at Brandeis University under Cyrus H. Gordon.

Aramaic."⁶ The present dissertation is concerned only with those texts which were written in Aramaic, texts which have been described by Professor Gordon as follows:

The texts under discussion come from Sasanian Babylonia before and after 600 A.D. These inscriptions are written spirally on terra-cotta bowls; usually on the inside of the bowl, sometimes on the outside, and sometimes on both sides.⁷

A complete bibliography of the previously published Aramaic bowls is unnecessary here, for that task has been handled by several other scholars,⁸ but a word is needed about the exclusion of some, the inclusion of other texts among the seventy-two which comprise the bulk of this dissertation. Most of the publishers of texts failed to include either a photograph or a hand copy of the bowls they translated and explained. Their work is omitted in the present dissertation because of the fact that there is no way of checking their readings, and consequently their translations and comments. Only those bowls which could be read by photograph or by a facsimile have been included, and their number happens to total seventy-two.

⁶Rossell, *Handbook*, p. 7.

⁷Cyrus H. Gordon, *Adventures In the Nearest East* (London: Phoenix House Ltd., 1957), p. 161. Cited hereafter as Gordon, *Adventures*.

⁸Montgomery, pp. 13-22, cites all material known in 1913. Franz Rosenthal (*Die aramäistische Forschung*, Leiden, 1939) includes the bowls in his bibliographies of the various fields of Aramaic studies (pp. 34-35, 218-223, 233-235) and he omits only P. Lacau's article, "Une Coupe d'Incantation" in *Revue d'Assyriologie*, II, 1894, pp. 49-51. Edwin Masao Yamauchi (*JAOS*, 85, 1965, pp. 511-513) includes a "Survey of Research" done on the Aramaic bowls to the year 1965. These lists cite all the Aramaic bowls published with the exception of those handled by Isak Jeruzalmi in a Sorbonne dissertation (1964) entitled *Les Coupes Magiques Araméennes de Mésopotamie*. Material published since 1965 is included in the bibliography.

For the bowls published by Ellis in the volume by Layard, *Discoveries in the Ruins of Nineveh and Babylon*, Montgomery (followed by Rossell and Yamauchi) is incorrect in citing the pages as 509-523. Correct to 434-448.

Also, in the Yamauchi (*JAOS* 85 [1965] 512) citation of Halévy's article in *Comptes-rendus*, V, correct pages 228-233 to 288-298.

Three other Aramaic incantation bowls should be mentioned. In 1967, W. S. McCullough published two bowls inscribed in Aramaic and three in Mandaic.⁹ Of the two Aramaic bowls, "Bowl B"¹⁰ is "badly written" and "badly preserved," as McCullough notes¹¹ and little could be accomplished by repeating his work here. "Bowl A"¹² is very clear and legible, and there is little to add to McCullough's transcription, translation, or commentary on it. It does contain several proper names not attested elsewhere among the bowls as well as four new vocabulary words: חלו, "to gird, bind"; מרר, Afel-- "to afflict"; ארר, BH "ghost"; ירושלמאי, "the Jerusalemite."

The third bowl worthy of note was published by Stephen Kaufman.¹³ The bowl does not contain an Aramaic incantation, but is "nothing more than a collection of quotations"¹⁴ from Scripture or from the Targum to a Scripture verse.

Previous Publications Pertaining to the Bowls

The first Aramaic incantation bowls were published in 1853.¹⁵ In the years following that first publication, a variety of opinions about the bowls have been expressed. Ellis, in 1853, declared of the seven bowls which he translated that "the subject of these inscriptions are amulets or charms against evil spirits, diseases and every kind of misfortune."¹⁶ And Ellis was certain that the writers of the bowls were Jews, because "sometimes pure Hebrew sentences are found mixed with the Chaldee, especially in No. 5;¹⁷ and the

⁹ JMIB.

¹⁰ JMIB, pp. 6-10.

¹¹ JMIB, p. 6.

¹² JMIB, pp. 1-5.

¹³ S. A. Kaufman, "A Unique Magic Bowl From Nippur" (JNES, 32, 1973, pp. 170-174).

¹⁴ Kaufman, "A Unique Magic Bowl," p. 171.

¹⁵ In Layard's *Discoveries*, pp. 434-448, by Thomas Ellis.

¹⁶ *Discoveries*, p. 435.

¹⁷ Number fifty-nine in this dissertation.

words 'Halleluiah' and 'Selah' occur in nearly every one of them."¹⁸ Layard adopted the view of Ellis about the Jewish authorship of the bowls, asserting that the Jews, "like the Chaldaeans, amongst whom they dwelt, appear to have been celebrated for their skill in the art of writing charms."¹⁹

As to the use of the bowls, Layard noted the conjecture of Ellis "that the writing was to be dissolved in water, to be drank (sic) as a cure against disease, or a precaution against the arts of witchcraft and magic."²⁰ But he justifiably raised the following objection to the theory of Ellis: "they could not have been used for that purpose, as the writing upon them is perfectly fresh, and it is essential that it should be entirely washed into the water to make the remedy efficacious."²¹ And, having rejected the theory of Ellis, Layard added his own:

As they were found at a considerable depth beneath the surface in mounds which had undoubtedly been used as place of sepulture, I am rather inclined to believe that they were charms buried with the dead, or employed for some purpose at funeral ceremonies, and afterwards placed in the grave.²²

Such then were the views of Ellis and Layard in 1853. Sixty years later, Montgomery judged the views of Ellis to be "wild" and his facsimilies "unreliable."²³ In short, in the opinion of Montgomery, Layard's publication "did little more than attract the attention of scholars to a fresh field of philology and religious lore."²⁴

¹⁸*Discoveries*, p. 435.

¹⁹*Discoveries*, p. 446.

²⁰*Discoveries*, p. 447.

²¹*Discoveries*, p. 447.

²²*Discoveries*, pp. 447-448. It is obvious that such a theory could not be true for all the bowls, as text two of the dissertation demonstrates. The first half of text two is written by "Kupitai" for the benefit of "'Abuna" while the second half is written by the same "'Abuna" for the benefit of "Kupitai." Two men would hardly be exchanging funeral incantations.

²³Montgomery, p. 16.

²⁴Montgomery, p. 17. Montgomery also cites in this place two articles by M. A. Lévy: *Über die von Layard aufgefundenen*

Some twenty-four years after the appearance of the volume edited by Layard, M. Halévy published some "Observations sur un vase Judéo-Babylonien du British Museum"²⁵ in which he noted two different opinions about the bowls among scholars:

Les uns y voient des coupes à divination dont il est déjà fait mention dans l'histoire de Joseph (Genèse, xliv, 5); les autres supposent que ce sont des coupes consacrées et dont l'eau qu'elles renfermaient était censée imprégnée d'une vertu mystérieuse capable de guérir les maladies.²⁶

The theory connecting the bowls with the divining cup of Joseph had been advanced in 1873 by one J. M. Rodwell, in an article entitled "Remarks Upon A Terra-Cotta Vase."²⁷ This idea Halévy rejected because the text of the inscription "porte un caractère plutôt prophylactique que curatif."²⁸ The second theory is that which had been given by Ellis in the Layard volume. Halévy deemed it equally false for two reasons:

L'eau devait avoir pour effet d'effacer l'écriture à la longue. L'épaisseur du bord est telle, d'ailleurs, qu'on ne pouvait aisément se servir de la coupe pour boire.²⁹

chaldäischen Inschriften auf Topfgefäßen. Ein Beitrag zur hebräischen Paläographie u. z. Religionsgeschichte, published in 1885 in *Zeitschrift d. Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*; and "Epigraphische Beiträge Zur Geschichte der Juden," published in 1861, in *Jahrbuch für die Geschichte der Juden*. Both articles treat bowl number one of Ellis, using his facsimile. Lévy's work was "the first scientific treatment of this new material" according to Montgomery (p. 17). However, his transcription of the bowl was very imperfect, as a comparison of his readings with those given in text eighteen of this dissertation will show.

²⁵ *Comptes-rendus*, iv, Vol. V, pp. 288-293. Halévy's article deals with the same bowl published in 1873 by J. M. Rodwell (*TSBA*, ii, 1873, pp. 114-118). Rodwell's attempts at decipherment were very unsuccessful, the fact which first prompted Halévy to take up the same text. In this dissertation, the Rodwell-Halévy text is number sixty-five.

²⁶ *Comptes-rendus*, V, p. 288.

²⁷ *TSBA*, II, 1873, pp. 114-118 and one plate.

²⁸ *Comptes-rendus*, V, p. 288.

²⁹ *Comptes-rendus*, V, pp. 288-289.

Having rejected the opinions of both Rodwell and Ellis,³⁰ Halévy proceeded to voice his own theory about the function of the bowls:

Il paraît donc plus probable que ces vases étaient de simples amulettes, destinés à préserver la famille contre les démons et les maladies dont ces êtres étaient réputés les auteurs. En d'autres termes, c'étaient des talismans de famille.³¹

Halévy placed the approximate date of the bowl which he was editing "vers le neuvième siècle après notre ère."³² Since the time of Montgomery the date has been pushed back by about two or three hundred years.³³

The work of Halévy was followed in 1885 by the publication of an article entitled "Sur un vase judéo-babylonien de musée Lycklama de Cannes (Provence)"³⁴ written by Henri Hyvernât. Although he did include several points of interest in his article, "the photographic reproduction in Hyvernât's publication is not clear enough to warrant emendations of his

³⁰ Strangely, Halévy does not even mention Layard's own opinion about the funerary function of these bowls. Nor does he acknowledge the earlier works of M. A. Lévy, who, for example, in 1861, had already rejected Layard's idea and declared that the bowls were simply "Bannsprüche, welche schädliche Geister aus dem Hause vertreiben sollten" (*Jahrbuch*, II, p. 267).

³¹ *Comptes-rendus*, V, p. 289.

³² *Comptes-rendus*, V, p. 292. When the date of the bowls is set this late, room is made for the theory of Halévy about *Dallallah*. It is, he argued (pp. 292-293), composed of two elements: *Dall*, "porte" and *Allâh*, "Dieu." But by assuming that the element *Allâh* could have been represented by a pagan god during the Babylonian period, Halévy posits an original *Dall-Ani*, or "(petite) porte de Anou," the analogue of *Bâb-ili*, or "(grande) porte de Il." This name was later changed to *Dall-Allâh* by the Arabs, "au point de vue du monothéisme." Subsequent reading of this text, which is number sixty-five in the present dissertation, shows the reading of *Dall-Allâh* to be incorrect and Halévy's arguments unnecessary.

³³ Montgomery, pp. 102-105. He is followed by Gordon (*Adventures*, p. 161), Obermann (*JSLL*, 1940, p. 2), Rossell (*Handbook*, p. 10), Yamauchi (*JAOS*, 85, 1965, p. 511), and McCullough (*JMIB*, pp. xi-xii).

³⁴ *CK*, II, 1885, pp. 113-146 plus two plates.

transcription."³⁵ But in his work, Henry Hyvernats followed Halévy in the citation of some Talmudic parallels to the magic bowl which he published,³⁶ explaining such parallels in the following terms:

Les exilés de la Palestine n'acceptèrent donc jamais la religion de leurs conquérants et c'est pourquoi ils eurent plus d'une fois à souffrir leurs persécutions. Mais le sentiment du merveilleux se développa à l'excès chez eux et leur esprit contracta une tendance bien marquée à la superstition. Cette tendance présida à la composition des livres Talmudiques.³⁷

In spite of the early recognition of such similarity between the bowls and certain parts of the Talmud, very little has been written beyond sparse comments by various men who have published some of the bowls. A full treatment of this subject would be extremely useful.

The phrase "the signet-ring of Solomon" occurs in Hyvernats's bowl³⁸ and evokes from him the following interesting explanation:

Les légendes judéo-musulmanes nous parlent de quatre pierres précieuses qui furent données à Salomon par quatre anges envoyés de Dieu pour lui conférer la toute puissance sur la création. La première lui donnait l'empire sur les vent, la deuxième, sur les animaux; la troisième, sur la terre ferme et sur les mers; et la quatrième sur le monde des esprits. Une courte inscription gravée sur chacune d'elles rappelait à Salomon qu'il tenait de Dieu seul sa puissance merveilleuse. Le roi fortuné réunit ces quatre pierres et en forma le fameux anneau.³⁹

³⁵ Cyrus H. Gordon in *Archiv Orientalní*, VI, 1934, p. 331. Two parallel texts to the one treated by Hyvernats were published with facsimiles by Gordon (AOR, VI, 1934, pp. 331-334) and they are numbers fifty and fifty-one in this dissertation.

³⁶ Halévy's article in *Comptes-rendus*, V, 1877, p. 291, portrays the purpose of the *Kol Nidre* prayer to be similar to that of some of the bowls. Cf. also the treatment of Hyvernats in *ZK*, II, 1885, pp. 117-119.

³⁷ *ZK*, II, 1885, pp. 118-119.

³⁸ And in many other bowls now known. Cf. the texts in the body of this dissertation for the frequent occurrences of forms of *KNPY/K*.

³⁹ *ZK*, II, 1885, pp. 124-125.

In concluding his article, Hyvernat spoke briefly about the purpose of the bowl, its "caractère paléographique,"⁴⁰ and its date. Concerning its purpose, Hyvernat proposed the idea that "c'était une croyance populaire chez les Juifs que l'on pouvait emprisonner les esprits nuisibles dans les vases."⁴¹ This idea has been rejected by Gordon, who remarks aptly that "the last thing the ancients wished to do was to trap on their own property the demons which might subsequently escape and work mischief on the spot."⁴²

Concerning the date of his bowl, Hyvernat, in viewing the opinions of several who had previously expressed themselves on the subject,⁴³ found himself at last in agreement with the conclusions of M. A. Lévy who had written "que son inscription ne saurait être antérieure à l'invasion arabe c.a.d. au VII^e siècle."⁴⁴ The main thrust of Lévy's arguments⁴⁵ depended upon the use of the Yodh as a *mater lectionis*, the use of \aleph as well as of π to indicate the emphatic state of nouns,⁴⁶ and especially on the final forms of η , δ , γ , ϵ , and φ at the end of words. These final forms were vestiges of an older alphabet, of Chaldean origin. As Hyvernat summarizes the argument, "Mr. Lévy croit . . . que l'absence ou la présence des lettres

⁴⁰Hyvernat simply points out the fortunate circumstance of his bowl's letters being generally written the same way in each place they occur, a fact which gives his bowl an advantage over those in the British Museum (ZK, II, 1885, p. 139). He then includes (p. 146) "un alphabet calqué avec le plus grand soin sur l'original lui-même."

⁴¹ZK, II, 1885, p. 138. Montgomery (pp. 41-42) follows Hyvernat with modifications. His view will be treated in full on pages 13-15.

⁴²Gordon, *Adventures*, p. 162.

⁴³Among them Ellis and Layard.

⁴⁴ZK, II, 1885, p. 141.

⁴⁵Developed in full in his "Epigraphische Beiträge" cited in note twenty-four above.

⁴⁶Although π pointed to an earlier date, the repeated use of \aleph seems to indicate a date somewhat earlier. However, as Montgomery (p. 27) has noted, Lévy had at his disposal "rather scanty epigraphical resources," i.e., only the one bowl. By 1913, Montgomery (p. 29) realized the fact that \aleph was used more often than was π in the bowls.