

# *Jesus of Nazareth Revisited: Markham J. Geller's Apotropaic Jesus Forty Years Later*

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In 1978 Morton Smith published his (in)famous *Jesus the Magician*, where he combined descriptions of Jesus in Roman and Jewish sources to argue that Jesus appeared to his contemporaries as a magician and trickster.<sup>1</sup> Whereas Smith's polemical tone met with mixed responses,<sup>2</sup> seeing Jesus through sources outside Christian tradition coincided well with the ongoing third quest in historical Jesus research. Several studies had already, and have since, pointed to invocations of Jesus in amulets from Late Antiquity.<sup>3</sup> However, after Smith's work scholars began to read these invocations in light of the descriptions of Jesus' ministry in the New Testament and discussions on Jesus in rabbinic

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<sup>1</sup> Morton Smith, *Jesus the Magician* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1978).

<sup>2</sup> See David E. Aune, "Magic' in Early Christianity and Its Ancient Mediterranean Context: A Survey of Some Recent Scholarship," *Annali di storia dell'esegesi* 24 (2007): 274-281; Graham H. Twelftree, *Jesus the Exorcist: A Contribution to the Study of the Historical Jesus* (WUNT 54; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1993), 192–194 for discussions on Smith's contribution.

<sup>3</sup> Theodore de Bruyn and Jitse H. F. Dijkstra offer the following, useful description of ancient amulets: "In the Graeco-Roman world amulets were commonly used to invoke divine power for healing from sickness, protection against harm, malediction of adversaries, and success in a variety of affairs. These amulets were prepared by specialists who often followed pre-existing models. They were rendered effective by writing, recitation, and other rituals, and were then worn on one's body or fixed, displayed, or deposited in some place. Numerous examples of such amulets have been preserved on papyrus, parchment, potsherds (ostraka), wood, metal, stone, and other materials ("Greek Amulets and Formularies from Egypt Containing Christian Elements: A Checklist of Papyri, Parchments, Ostraka, and Tablets," *The Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists* 48 [2011]: 164). See also Christopher A. Faraone, *The Transformation of Greek Amulets in Roman Imperial Times* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).

sources.<sup>4</sup> Among those scholars was Markham J. Geller, who argued that invocations of Jesus in the so-called Mesopotamian incantation bowls contribute to evidence that suggests a broad, common apotropaic tradition in the Near East centred on Jesus.<sup>5</sup> The bowls, which I consider to be a form of amulet,<sup>6</sup> are generally thought to have been made and used outside of a Christian context. So, when they invoke Jesus, Geller took them to be traces of an apotropaic Jesus-figure that transcended religious boundaries because of his “success as a healer, and the reputation which Jesus’ name acquired for authority over demons in contemporary folklore.”<sup>7</sup>

Incantation bowls are ceramic bowls measuring between 15 and 20 cm in diameter and approximately 8 cm in height, and they typically have an incantation, a ritual text or “spell,” written in ink on the inside of the bowl. Most bowl-incantations are apotropaic, and they are sometimes accompanied by drawings. Scholars still debate how the bowls were used and understood, and there is as of yet no real consensus on this.<sup>8</sup> Incantation bowls are not mentioned

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<sup>4</sup> See for instance David E. Aune, “Magic in Early Christianity,” in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* II 23.2, ed. Hildegard Temporini and Wolfgang Haase (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1980), 1507–1557; Theodore de Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian: Artefacts, Scribes, and Contexts*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Francois Bovon, “Names and Numbers in Early Christianity,” *New Testament Studies* 47 (2001): 278; Peter Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 59.

<sup>5</sup> *Apotropaic*, from the Greek *apotrepein* “to turn away” or “to avert,” describes rituals, practices, or artefacts that are meant to protect the performer or owner.

<sup>6</sup> There is some debate in the field on this, but I maintain that they compare with the description laid out by de Bruyn and Dijkstra in note 3.

<sup>7</sup> Markham J. Geller, “Jesus’ Theurgic Powers: Parallels in the Talmud and Incantation Bowls,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 28 (1977): 154–155. See also idem, “Joshua b. Perahia and Jesus of Nazareth: Two Rabbinic Magicians,” Ph.D. Dissertation (Brandeis University, Ann Arbor, 1971); idem, “Two Incantation Bowls Inscribed in Syriac and Aramaic,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 60 (1976): 422–427. Late antique amulets are known for their eclectic invocations, calling upon a variety of deities, figures, and narratives for healing and protection (Walter M. Shandruk, “Christian Use of Magic in Late Antique Egypt,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 20 [2012]: 33).

<sup>8</sup> See for instance James A. Montgomery, *Aramaic Incantation Texts from Nippur*, vol. 3 in Publications of the Babylonian Section (Philadelphia: The University Museum, 1913); Shaul Shaked, James Nathan Ford, and Siam Bhayro, *Aramaic Bowl Spells: Jewish Babylonian Aramaic Bowls* (Magical and Religious Literature of Late Antiquity 1; Leiden: Brill, 2013); Marco Moriggi, *A Corpus of Syriac Incantation Bowls: Syriac Magical Texts*

in historical sources, but the large number of examples that have survived to our time suggests that it was a common practice.<sup>9</sup> Comparatively few have been found in controlled excavations, but those that have come from central and southern Iraq and were deposited upside down under domestic buildings.<sup>10</sup> The stratigraphy of these sites suggests that they were used in the sixth and seventh centuries, and, with a few exceptions, this dating has been extended to the entire corpus.<sup>11</sup> Still, most incantation bowls lack a known provenance, which means that we do not know where and how they were found, or how they were acquired. This poses a significant challenge for the study of this corpus both when it comes to potential forgeries and to illegal trade or looting.<sup>12</sup> The incantations are written in different Aramaic dialects and scripts, which reflect the varied composition of the population of Sasanian Mesopotamia at this time, and there is an extensive, ongoing discussion on the religious or cultural background of the bowls.<sup>13</sup> Shaul Shaked, one of the leading scholars in the field,

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*from Late-Antique Mesopotamia* (Magical and Religious Literature of Late Antiquity 3; Leiden: Brill, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> Neil Brodie recently proposed that there are approximately two thousand incantation bowls in various museums and collections around the world (“Aramaic Incantation Bowls in War and in Peace,” *Journal of Art Crime* 11 [2014]: 10).

<sup>10</sup> J.P. Peters, *Nippur: Explorations and Adventures on the Euphrates: The Narrative of the University of Pennsylvania Expedition to Babylonia in the Years 1888-1890 II* (London, 1897), 153; Erica C. D. Hunter, “Combat and Conflict in Incantation Bowls: Studies on Two Aramaic Specimens from Nippur,” in *Studia Aramaica: New Sources and New Approaches. Papers Delivered at the London Conference of the Institute of Jewish Studies, University College London, 26th–28th June 1991*, ed. M. J. Geller, J. C. Greenfield, and M. P. Weitzman (Journal of Semitic Studies Supplement 4; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 61–75.

<sup>11</sup> Peters, *Nippur*, 153; Montgomery, *Aramaic Incantation Texts*, 14; Shaked, Ford, and Bhayro, *Aramaic Bowl Spells*, 1.

<sup>12</sup> 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 (IJS Studies in Judaica 4; Leiden: Brill, 2005), 21; Brodie, “Aramaic Incantation Bowls,” 9–14; idem and Morag M. Kersel, “Wikileaks, Text, and Archaeology: The Case of the Schøyen Incantation Bowls,” in *Archaeologies of Text: Archaeology, Technology, and Ethics*, ed. Matthew T. Rutz and Morag M. Kersel (Joukowsky Institute Publication 6; Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2014), 198–213.

<sup>13</sup> See Erica C. D. Hunter, “Incantation Bowls: A Mesopotamian Phenomenon?,” *Orientalia* NS 65 (1996); idem, “Aramaic-Speaking Communities of Sasanid Mesopotamia,” *ARAM* 7 (1995); Shaul Shaked, “Popular Religion in Sasanian Babylonia,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 21 (1997); idem, “Jews, Christians and Pagans in

cautions that a clear answer may never be found, as the incantation bowls are simultaneously “not in any sense heretical or sectarian, [yet] they are also not part of mainstream Judaism, Christianity, Manichaeism or Mandaeism.”<sup>14</sup> It is, then, against this diverse background that Geller examined the invocations of Jesus and found them to be evidence of a wider, apotropaic discourse connected to Jesus.

Although not as notorious as Smith’s, Geller’s work has been an important point of reference for subsequent discussions on the reception of Jesus beyond the early church. Simultaneously, there has been significant theoretical advancement, for instance concerning the term “magic” and more recently with regard to reception and transmission in biblical studies.<sup>15</sup> Also, there are new approaches to the use of different religious elements in late antique amulets,<sup>16</sup> and the field expands regularly through the publication of new specimens.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, current studies, especially in Jewish cultural history, continue to open up and nuance how we see the religious landscape and interaction in the late antique Mediterranean and Near East. So also when it comes to the figure of Jesus, where amulets, according to Theodore de Bruyn, present “an opportunity to study Christology as it was received and applied in popular practices at the local level.”<sup>18</sup> Here, I employ the above-mentioned

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the Aramaic Incantation Bowls of the Sasanian Period,” in *Religions and Cultures: First International Conference of Mediterraneanum*, ed. Adriana Destro and Mauro Pesce (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 2002).

<sup>14</sup> Shaked, “Form and Purpose,” 2.

<sup>15</sup> See for instance Bernd-Christian Otto, “Historicizing ‘Magic’ in Antiquity,” *Numen* 60 (2013): 308–347; Aune, “‘Magic’ in Early Christianity,” 231–274; Brice C. Jones, *New Testament Texts on Greek Amulets From Late Antiquity* (Library of New Testament Studies 554; London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016); Peter T. Lanfer, “Why Biblical Scholars Should Study Aramaic Bowl Spells,” *Aramaic Studies* 13 (2015): 9–23.

<sup>16</sup> See for instance de Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*; Joseph E. Sanzo, *Scriptural Incipits from Late Antique Egypt: Text, Typology, and Theory* (Studien und Texte zu Antike Christentum 84; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014); Gideon Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Amulets: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<sup>17</sup> See for instance Marvin Meyer and Richard Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic: Coptic Texts of Ritual Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Joseph Naveh and Shaul Shaked, *Amulets and Magic Bowls: Aramaic Incantations of Late Antiquity* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1985).

<sup>18</sup> Theodore de Bruyn, “Ancient Applied Christology: Appeals to Christ in Greek Amulets in Late Antiquity,” in *From Logos to Christos: Essays on Christology in Honour of Joanne McWilliam*, ed. Ellen M. Leonard and Kate Merriman (Editions SR 34; Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2010), 4.

developments in scholarship to expand on and update Geller's study from the late seventies and discuss the Jesus that we find in the Mesopotamian incantation bowls. I begin with a short summary of Geller's argument, and then I trace the influence of his proposal in ongoing debates on interaction and exchange between Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity. Next, I present some new theoretical discussions on invocations in Greek and Coptic amulets, which grapple with many of the same questions as Geller, before I finally reassess the evidence in the incantation bowls, including some new cases, in light of these. I conclude that there is indeed, as Geller argues, a common cross- or non-sectarian apotropaic use of the figure of Jesus. However, this use still draws on language and imagery from Christian worship and practice.

### **Geller's Jesus of Nazareth**

Geller combined the stories of healing and exorcism in the New Testament with descriptions of Jesus in rabbinic texts, and then compared these with invocations of Jesus in amulets and incantation bowls: "As for Jesus' reputation as a master-magician, all of our sources agree that Jesus was a sorcerer who healed and performed magic in the rabbinic manner of the Talmud and magic bowls."<sup>19</sup> Today, the characterisation 'magic' is generally thought unhelpful, but Geller's point is that these sources portray Jesus as acting just like contemporary healers or exorcists.<sup>20</sup> He makes this observation by tracing parallel terminology and ritual structure in the different sources. For instance, Geller compares Jesus' exorcism of a man in the synagogue at Capernaum (Luke 4:34–36) with R. Simon's exorcism of the demon Ben Tmalion from a daughter of the Roman emperor (*Me'il* 17b):

Like Jesus, R. Simon engaged in a dialogue with a demon, which he then exorcised. The philological parallels of the two exorcisms are significant: Jesus' command to 'get out' (ἐξέλθε) corresponds closely to R. Simon's command to Ben Tmalion to 'go out' (שׁ). Afterwards, the Gospel says that the demon

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<sup>19</sup> Geller, "Joshua b. Perahia," 230. Jesus is mentioned in three corpora from late antique Judaism: Talmudic literature (the Mishnah, Tosefta, various midrashim, and both Talmuds), *piyyutim* (liturgical poems that require further studies, but are generally polemical in their references to Jesus), as well as the amulets (Michael D. Swartz, "The Magical Jesus in Ancient Jewish Literature," in *Jesus among the Jews: Representation and Thought*, ed. Neta Stahl [Routledge Jewish Studies Series; London: Routledge, 2012], 19).

<sup>20</sup> There is disagreement concerning this; see for instance Aune, "Magic in Early Christianity," 1507–1557; idem, "'Magic' in Early Christianity," 231–274.

‘went out’ (ἐξῆλθεν), while the Talmud says that Ben Tmalion ‘departed’ (נפך).<sup>21</sup>

I will not go into further details or the full extent of Geller’s analysis — the above is meant as an example — but he finds a number of such parallels in scenes of exorcism and healing in the New Testament and rabbinic texts, as well as in certain incantation bowls.<sup>22</sup> Geller concludes that Jesus’ feats of healing and exorcism are described according to a shared, apotropaic discourse, not Christian soteriology, and he therefore proposes the presence and use in late antique societies of an apotropaic *Jesus of Nazareth*, in distinction to Jesus Christ.<sup>23</sup>

In support of these parallels, Geller presents rabbinic traditions that describe Jesus as a sorcerer who tricked people, as well as stories that associate him with well-known exorcists among the rabbis.<sup>24</sup> The most famous story, perhaps, is from the Babylonian Talmud, where Jesus is cast as a disciple of the reputed rabbi Joshua bar Peraḥya. Here, Joshua rebukes Jesus and excommunicates him for improper comments about an innkeeper. After this, the story continues, Jesus proceeded to practice “sorcery and deceived and led Israel astray.”<sup>25</sup> Other rabbinic traditions point to Christians as potent miracle workers, operating through the (fraudulent and unlawful) name and authority of Jesus:<sup>26</sup>

[R. Yehoshua ben Levi’s] grandson swallowed (something). A certain man came and murmured over him in the name of Jesus the son of Pantera and he was healed.

When he left, [R. Yehoshua] said to him, ‘What did you murmur over him?’ He said, such-and-such a word. He said to him. ‘It would have been better if he had died.’<sup>27</sup>

In sum, Geller concludes that the “exorcisms of the N.T., Talmud, and magic bowls form a single genre of magical literature.”<sup>28</sup> However, he immediately

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<sup>21</sup> Geller, “Jesus’ Theurgic Powers,” 142.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 141-155; idem, “Joshua b. Peraḥya,” 172–206.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 228.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 228–236; idem, “Jesus’ Theurgic Powers,” 141–146.

<sup>25</sup> Swartz, “The Magical Jesus,” 25.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 21–24; Geller, “Jesus’ Theurgic Powers,” 146–149.

<sup>27</sup> Y. AZ 2:2 (40d–41a); y. *Shab.* 14:4 (14d–15a), in Swartz, “The Magical Jesus,” 23. “The word ‘murmur’ used here translates the word *laḥash*, a common term for a magical incantation” (ibid).

<sup>28</sup> Geller, “Jesus’ Theurgic Powers,” 155.

concedes that “the N.T. and Talmud only cite the barest essentials of exorcisms,” in contrast to the elaborate incantations in the amulets.<sup>29</sup> In fact, the parallels that Geller finds across the different corpora are quite generic — ritual structures and idiom that are common to exorcism and healing very broadly in late antique society — and this makes it difficult to argue for a positive identification of a specific tradition centred on a Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>30</sup> And here the question has remained, with scholars using Geller’s observations to argue both for and against his proposal.

### **Recent Discussions on a Broader Jesus Tradition**

The past decades have seen extensive study and discussion of the development of and interaction between Judaism and Christianity in the first centuries of the common era. Summarising the developments, Michael D. Swartz observes that scholars “have concluded, based on subtle analyses of midrashic and legal texts, that both communities forged their identities through the robust dialogues between them.”<sup>31</sup> Yet, concerning the figure of Jesus Swartz detects more nuance: On the one hand, there are no systematic tractates on Jesus in early rabbinic sources, indicating a minor role in Jewish thought. On the other hand, Jesus is mentioned or referred to, albeit in brief comments or snippets, throughout early rabbinic sources, and a number of these take up recognizable topics from the Gospels.<sup>32</sup> An interesting note, especially here, is that these references are often connected in some way with magic. In addition to the Joshua bar Perahya-story I presented above, the Palestinian Talmud for example mentions a Ben Stada several times, who learnt magic in Egypt. The Babylonian Talmud identifies this figure as Jesus ben Pantera, who is again identified as

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> David E. Aune, for instance, has argued that there are several features of Jesus Christ’s miracles in the Gospels that are specific to the New Testament (“Magic in Early Christianity,” 1507–1557).

<sup>31</sup> Swartz, “The Magical Jesus,” 18. As an example, see for instance Elchanan Reiner, “From Joshua to Jesus: The Transformation of a Biblical Story to a Local Myth: A Chapter in the Religious Life of the Galilean Jew,” in *Sharing the Sacred: Religious Contacts and Conflicts in the Holy Land. First-Fifteenth Centuries CE*, ed. Ariele Kofsky and Guy G. Stroumsa (Jerusalem: Yad Ishak Ben Zvi, 1998), 248–253; idem, “From Joshua through Jesus to Simeon bar Yohai: Towards a Typology of Galilean heroes,” in *Jesus among the Jews: Representation and Thought*, ed. Neta Stahl (Routledge Jewish Studies Series; London: Routledge, 2012), 97–102.

<sup>32</sup> Swartz, “The Magical Jesus,” 20.

Jesus in later rabbinic texts and by Celsus.<sup>33</sup> In these texts, Ben Stada/Jesus ben Pantera is a deviant who fooled people through magic and sorcery.

Peter Schäfer, in his authoritative *Jesus in the Talmud*, considers these mentions and stories “deliberate and highly sophisticated counternarratives to the stories about Jesus’ life and death in the Gospels — presupposing a detailed knowledge of the New Testament.”<sup>34</sup> By extension, he continues, the rabbinic thought — “in concordance with the New Testament — that he [Jesus] was a potent magician.”<sup>35</sup> Now, following Schäfer’s argument, which draws on a wide range of sources and studies along the lines of what Geller did, this observation rings true. However, the identification of Ben Stada/Jesus ben Pantera as Jesus from the Gospels is disputed, since several of the traditions that make this connection are late, some medieval. Several scholars therefore question Schäfer’s conclusions, which rely on the positive identification of Jesus ben Pantera with Jesus Christ, and instead consider his sources “a disparate combination of folktales, rumors, and polemical stories.”<sup>36</sup> Moreover, Swartz cautions that the discussions of this potential Jesus-figure in rabbinic literature are “a veritable drop in the sea of Talmud.”<sup>37</sup> Indeed, their limited scope “may be a surprise for those of us used to thinking of Jesus the Magician as a major image in the history of religion in the ancient Mediterranean.”<sup>38</sup>

Nevertheless, the debate has also been taken up by several New Testament scholars,<sup>39</sup> perhaps most enthusiastically by Craig A. Evans. He

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 20–21. For further details and stories, see also Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud*, 56–57; Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic*, 399; Adam Gregerman, “Celsus’ Jew and the Theological Threat from Christianity,” in *Jesus among the Jews: Representation and Thought*, ed. Neta Stahl (Routledge Jewish Studies Series; London: Routledge, 2012), 46–47.

<sup>34</sup> Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud*, 8. See also pages 34–40; idem, “Jesus’ Origin, Birth, and Childhood According to the Toledot Yeshu and the Talmud,” in *Judaea-Palaestina, Babylon and Rome: Jews in Antiquity*, ed. Benjamin Isaac and Yuval Shahar (Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism 147; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 139–161; Reiner, “From Joshua to Jesus,” 256–261; Peter Schäfer, Michael Meerson and Yaacov Deutsch (ed.), *Toledot Yeshu (“The Life Story of Jesus”) Revisited: A Princeton Conference* (Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism 143; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011).

<sup>35</sup> Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud*, 61.

<sup>36</sup> Swartz, “The Magical Jesus,” 20.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 29.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> See for instance Graham H. Twelftree, *In the Name of Jesus: Exorcism among Early Christians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007); Craig A. Evans, “Jesus, Healer and Exorcist: The Non-Christian Archaeological Evidence,” in *A City Set on a Hill: Essays in Honor of James F. Strange*, ed. Daniel A. Warner and Donald D. Binder (Mountain



recently discussed the rabbinic stories together with evidence from precisely the incantation bowls, and other amulets, and concluded that these sources demonstrate “Jesus’ fame as healer and exorcist (...) both Christian and non-Christian.”<sup>40</sup> I have a concern with his study, however, and that is that Evans interprets several ambiguous names in the amulets as positive identifications of Jesus, even though they are uncertain and disputed. For example, he suggests that the name Joshua bar Peraḥya in the incantation bowl CBS 16019 points to Jesus.<sup>41</sup> This proposal ignores several earlier studies that have discounted such an identification, as well as the fact that Joshua bar Peraḥya is an important figure in his own right and is called upon more often than Jesus in the incantation bowls.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, opposite to Evans, Graham H. Twelftree promotes reticence in reading incantations or amulets too closely in connection with literary sources on Jesus. He maintains that “if ancient magic carried the memory of Jesus as an exorcist it was only very faint at best.”<sup>43</sup> As Geller already noted, the parallels and similarities across the different corpora are quite basic, even generic, so it is difficult to establish a definitive link between the Jesus in the literary sources and the figure(s) invoked in the amulets. In other words, the discussion remains more or less where Geller left it forty years ago. This is why I now propose to adopt some of the recent insights from the theoretically more advanced field of Greco-Egyptian and Coptic amulets to reassess the invocations of Jesus in Mesopotamian incantation bowls.

### **New Approaches to Invocation in Late Antique Amulets**

Invocation is a common strategy in late antique amulets, and the principles behind it have been scrutinized ever since ancient amulets came to the attention of modern scholars. A long-running debate concerning the efficacy of invocations asks whether they reference the personae invoked, or if they simply call on powerful names — that is, names that do not carry any further

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Home, AR: BorderStone Press, 2014), 55–77; Graham N. Stanton, “Jesus of Nazareth: A Magician and a False Prophet Who Deceived God’s People?” in *Jesus of Nazareth, Lord and Christ: Essays on the Historical Jesus and New Testament Christology*, ed. Joel B. Green and Max Turner (Grand Rapids, M.I.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 164–180.

<sup>40</sup> Evans, “Jesus, Healer and Exorcist,” 55.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>42</sup> See Moriggi, *A Corpus*, 44–45.

<sup>43</sup> Graham H. Twelftree, “Jesus the Exorcist and Ancient Magic,” in *A Kind of Magic: Understanding Magic in the New Testament and its Religious Environment*, ed. Michael Labahn and Bert Jan Lietaert Peerbolte (Library of New Testament Studies 306; London: T&T Clark, 2007), 79.

significance for the clients beyond their assumed power.<sup>44</sup> Late antique amulets are full of invocations from a multitude of traditions, and many scholars hold that names often function as generic *loci* of power irrespective of their supposed cultural or religious origin: “Indeed, the multifarious divine invocations of the so-called Greek Magical Papyri should make it sufficiently clear that efficacy was drawn from any source that the practitioner deemed as having legitimate power.”<sup>45</sup> To identify which is which, in Jewish amulets, Gideon Bohak distinguishes between invocations where figures are treated as “independent and powerful entities with their own myths, rituals and iconography” and invocations where names are “mere words of power, as meaningless to their Jewish users as all the other abracadabra words at their disposal.”<sup>46</sup> This debate, and the attempts at formulating criteria for discerning what (non)references lie behind an invocation, are relevant for my investigation, since I ask what narratives or conceptions lie in the invocations of Jesus in Mesopotamian incantation bowls. Moreover, several of the points of contention regarding Geller’s proposal, and its later reception, concern whether the invocations do in fact point to Jesus Christ, or Jesus of Nazareth (or someone else).

In de Bruyn’s new study of Greco-Egyptian amulets with Christian content, he assesses their incantations by whether they include terms derived from Christian liturgy and worship, or if they use phrases hailing from traditional, Greco-Egyptian apotropaic tradition.<sup>47</sup> When it comes to invocations of Jesus, he finds three overarching categories in his corpus. First, there are incantations that call on Jesus as one powerful name among many. Here, his name is often part of a list of names and it stands without any accompanying epithets or storylines to further contextualise it.<sup>48</sup> These lists compare with Bohak’s “mere words of power,” and de Bruyn finds it unlikely that the practitioners or scribes here “knew much, if anything, about the deity or the name being invoked.”<sup>49</sup> “Still,” he continues, “it is noteworthy that ‘Jesus’ has entered the repertoire of powerful names in a Graeco-Egyptian milieu,”

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<sup>44</sup> See for instance Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic*, 256; de Bruyn and Dijkstra, “Greek Amulets,” 179; Richard Gordon, “Shaping the Text: Innovation and Authority in Graeco-Egyptian Malign Magic,” in *KYKEON: Studies in Honour of H. S. Versnel*, ed. H. F. J. Horstmanshoff, H. W. Singor, F. T. van Straten and J. H. M. Strubbe (*Religions of the Graeco-Roman World* 142; Leiden: Brill, 2002), 77.

<sup>45</sup> Shandruk, “Christian Use of Magic,” 33.

<sup>46</sup> Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic*, 257. See also pages 254–256.

<sup>47</sup> De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 236.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 70–71.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

demonstrating that the name or figure was not alien to this setting.<sup>50</sup> Such a category of apparently meaningless powerful names is, however, contested by Joseph E. Sanzo. Discussing the use of and meaning behind invocations of Jesus in Greco-Egyptian and Coptic amulets, he argues that

the name Jesus Christ can only offer a meaningful precedent—by definition—in relation to specific events or settings. To invoke Jesus Christ, therefore, is not simply to invoke a name or even the person/divinity (in an abstract sense), but also to summon authoritative precedents—connected with the name—that have analogical value for the present situation.<sup>51</sup>

Drawing on both his own research, and the work of other scholars, he stresses that invocations must carry a reference in order to be effective.<sup>52</sup>

Moving on, Sanzo’s challenge is less pressing for de Bruyn’s second category, which is also, according to de Bruyn, by far the most numerous in the amulets: Short acclamations or mottoes like “Jesus Christ is victorious” (Ἰησοῦς Χριστός νικᾷ) or “Jesus Christ help us!” (Ἰησοῦ Χριστέ βοήθη ἡμῖν).<sup>53</sup> The brief P.Oxy. VIII 1152 is a good example, which combines the traditional, Greco-Egyptian “hor hor phor phor”-formula with the well-known “help-formula”: “Hôr. Hôr, Phôr, Elôei, Adônai, Iaô, Sabaôth, Michaël, Jesus Christ! Help us and this house. Amen.”<sup>54</sup> Such short acclamations or mottoes are not only found in amulets, but

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Joseph E. Sanzo. “The Innovative Use of Biblical Traditions for Ritual Power: The Crucifixion of Jesus on a Coptic Exorcistic Spell (Brit. Lib. Or. 6798[4], 6796) as a Test Case,” *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 16 (2015): 88–89. Among Sanzo’s examples is P. Haun. III 51, which works through an explicit simile between Christ’s life and the fever it meant to cure: “Christ was born, amen. Christ was crucified, amen. Christ was buried, amen. Christ rose, ame[n]. He was woken to judge the living and the dead. Flee also you, fever with shivering, from Kale, who wears this phyl[actery]” (idem, *Scriptural Incipits*, 66).

<sup>52</sup> See also Fritz Graf, “Prayer in Magical and Religious Ritual,” in *Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion*, ed. Christopher A. Faraone and Dirk Obbink (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 189; David Frankfurter, “Narrating Power: The Theory and Practice of the Magical *Historiola* in Ritual Spells,” in *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power*, ed. Marvin Meyer and Paul Mirecki (Religions of the Graeco-Roman World 129; Leiden: Brill, 1995), 457–476.

<sup>53</sup> De Bruyn, “Ancient Applied Christology,” 5.

<sup>54</sup> Ra’anan Boustán and Joseph E. Sanzo, “Christian Magicians, Jewish Magical Idioms, and the Shared Magical Culture of Late Antiquity,” *Harvard Theological Review* 110

also occur inscribed on buildings, tombstones, in texts, and sometimes even in liturgy,<sup>55</sup> so de Bruyn takes them to demonstrate a connection or reference to Christian ritual and practice.<sup>56</sup> And the final, third category of invocations even more so, as it consists of longer narrative excerpts or creedal statements that explicitly evoke Christian liturgy and/or soteriology.<sup>57</sup> These invocations are fewer in number, but there are still some recurring topics such as the legendary *Letter to Abgar*, the trinitarian formula, the Lord's Prayer, the *incipits* of the four Gospels, and the *Sanctus*.<sup>58</sup> In sum, then, the two latter categories show how practitioners combine elements from both Christian and traditional apotropaic practices in their attempts to deal with day-to-day struggles and cares through amulets.<sup>59</sup>

De Bruyn's analytical criteria of idiom and structure are helpful to further assess and categorise invocations in amulets, adding nuance to the discussion of their supposed context. However, they imply a dichotomy between Greco-Egyptian versus Christian culture or background that is increasingly being challenged in late antique studies.<sup>60</sup> Sanzo again joins the fray here, presenting and elaborating on amulets where biblical stories or figures are combined or conflated with stories or figures from other traditions: For instance, there is one incantation where Jesus engages with a unicorn, and another where he performs a miracle on the banks of the Euphrates.<sup>61</sup> Amulets such as these, Sanzo argues, show that *biblical* or *Christian* tradition must be considered

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(2017): 217. Greek: Ὁρ Ὁρ φωρ Ἐλωεὶ Ἀδωναὶ Ἰάω Σαβαώθ Μιχαήλ Ἰεσοῦ Χριστέ βοήθι ἡμῖν καὶ τοῦτω οἴκω ἀμύν.

<sup>55</sup> See for instance William K. Prentice, "Magical Formulae on Lintels of the Christian Period in Syria," *American Journal of Archaeology* 10 (1906): 137–150; Malcolm Choat, *Belief and Cult in Fourth-Century Papyri* (Studia Antiqua Australiensia 1; Turnhout: Brepols, 2006).

<sup>56</sup> De Bruyn and Dijkstra, "Greek Amulets," 181.

<sup>57</sup> De Bruyn, "Ancient Applied Christology," 5–8. For a full discussion, see idem, *Making Amulets Christian*, 139–233.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 153–157.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 235–237.

<sup>60</sup> See for instance Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic*, 284; Bousthan and Sanzo, "Christian Magicians," 218–220; Ra'anan Bousthan and Michael Beshay, "Sealing the Demons, Once and For All: The Ring of Solomon, the Cross of Christ, and the Power of Biblical Kingship," *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 16 (2015): 101.

<sup>61</sup> Sanzo, "The Innovative Use," 85. See also David Frankfurter, "The Great, the Little, and the Authoritative Tradition in Magic of the Ancient World," *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 16 (2015): 11–30.

expansive categories when it comes to amulets, and not indicative of one specific or set religious tradition or practice.

As ‘magical’ artifacts and monastic literature teach us, popularity and significance do not necessarily enshrine a tradition or its original meaning, but may actually increase a tradition’s susceptibility for reinterpretation and even creative reimagining—albeit within socially contingent frameworks.<sup>62</sup>

Together with Ra‘anan Boustán, Sanzo therefore calls on new research to “move beyond simply labeling elements based on their presumed historical or linguistic origins to consider the fluctuating nature of religious idioms and communal boundaries.”<sup>63</sup> This, they continue, can be done by studying how incantations treat elements “rhetorically, graphically, or otherwise,” in an analysis that “emphasizes the dialectical processes of indigenization and exoticization” that take place in an amulet.<sup>64</sup> Their idea is that one cannot determine an amulet’s context based on its content alone, but that scholars must consider how the various figures or stories are cast and incorporated into each distinct amulet. For example, they present amulets where Jewish divine names, such as *Iao*, *Sabaoth*, or *El* are used in trinitarian invocations, to demonstrate how names from Jewish tradition have become indigenized into a Christian ritual phrase and are therefore not indicative of a Jewish practice.<sup>65</sup> As I proceed with my reassessment of the invocations of Jesus in Mesopotamian incantation bowls I will not follow their ideal of a fully realised ‘thick description’ of each bowl. However, I will take up their notion of indigenization and exoticization in comparison with de Bruyn’s criteria.

### **Invocations of Jesus in Mesopotamian Incantation Bowls**

Here, I revisit the four invocations of Jesus in incantation bowls that Geller discussed, and then expand on these by bringing in six other bowls that have

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<sup>62</sup> Sanzo, “The Innovative Use,” 90.

<sup>63</sup> Boustán and Sanzo, “Christian Magicians,” 219.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 227–228. For a case of exoticization, one may look to the famous incantation in the Great Magical Papyrus of Paris (PGM IV 3007–86, l. 3019–20) that invokes “the God of the Hebrews, Jesus.” This somewhat unorthodox identification may be a play on the reputed mystical knowledge of Judaism in Antiquity, or an antagonistic label, but in either case the invocation constructs an authority that would be foreign and exotic to almost any audience (de Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 71–73. See also Pieter W. van der Horst, “The Great Magical Papyrus of Paris [PGM IV] and the Bible,” in *A Kind of Magic*, ed. Labahn and Peerbolte, 177–183).

been published since his thesis. Unfortunately, most of these latter bowls lack a known provenance, and several were published after the two Gulf Wars brought many looted antiquities from Iraq into circulation.<sup>66</sup> There are valid arguments for why scholars should abstain entirely from working on such unprovenanced material,<sup>67</sup> but I choose to nevertheless include them here since they are part of the current scholarly discussion on the use and reception of Jesus in incantation bowls.<sup>68</sup> However, in my analysis I will consider the uncertainty that a lack of provenance presents.

The first case Geller discusses is a bowl known as Gordon C. It was found, alongside the majority of bowls that have been scientifically excavated, at the University of Pennsylvania's 1888/89 expedition at ancient Nippur in central Iraq, and it was among the artefacts from this excavation that were gifted to the sultan in Istanbul.<sup>69</sup> Still, although coming from an excavation, the reports from the expedition present little archaeological information about the bowls beyond what I already noted.<sup>70</sup> In the incantation on Gordon C, Jesus appears in a sequence of names: "(2) ... Atros, p (?), Batros, (3) Petrus (?), Mithras, Jesus (??) [y'wss], Abyssos (?), Byssos, Bythos, and Hermes."<sup>71</sup> The text is written in a Jewish dialect and script, but Geller proposes that the name Jesus (y'wss) comes from the Greek Ἰησοῦς. The common Aramaic spelling of Jesus is yšw', and Geller argues that the uncommon position of the 'ālep suggests that it is a

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<sup>66</sup> Neil Brodie, "The Plunder of Iraq's Archaeological Heritage, 1991-2005, and the London Antiquities Trade," in *Archaeology, Cultural Heritage, and the Antiquities Trade*, ed. Neil Brodie, Morag M. Kersel, Christina Luke & Kathryn Walker Tubb (Cultural Heritage Studies; Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006), 206–226.

<sup>67</sup> Brodie, "Aramaic Incantation Bowls," 12–13.

<sup>68</sup> For instance Evans, "Jesus, Healer and Exorcist," 55–77; James Nathan Ford, "'Jesus the Physician' (ישוע אסיא) in the Jewish Magic Bowls," *EASJ Congress 2014*, Paris, 21.07.2014; Dan Levene, idem, "'... and by the name of Jesus...' An Unpublished Magic Bowl in Jewish Aramaic," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 6 (1999): 283–308; Christa Müller-Kessler, "Of Jesus, Darius, Marduk ...: Aramaic Magic Bowls in the Moussaieff Collection," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 125 (2005): 232; Nils H. Korsvoll, "Reconsidering 'Christian': Context and Categorisation in the Study of Late Antique Syriac Amulets and Incantation Bowls" (Ph.D. Diss, MF Norwegian School of Theology, 2017), 87–135.

<sup>69</sup> Cyrus H. Gordon, "Aramaic Magical Bowls in the Istanbul and Baghdad Museums," *Archiv Orientalní: Journal of African and Asian Studies* 6 (1934): 319.

<sup>70</sup> Peters, *Nippur*, 153.

<sup>71</sup> Gordon, "Aramaic Magical Bowls," 326–327. See also Geller, "Joshua b. Perahiya," 194–197; idem, "Jesus' Theurgic Powers," 150–151.

transcription of the Greek *eta*.<sup>72</sup> Hence, Jesus appears here as one name among many, without further stories or epithets to contextualize him, and in the traditional structure of a list — just like the cases in de Bruyn’s first category of simple powerful names.

After Geller’s publications there have been two more examples of possible Jesus-names in such lists. First, the so-called Borsippa-bowl, which according to its publisher Tapani Harviainen was acquired by a private person in Borsippa/Birs Nimrud in 1973, and it remains in private possession.<sup>73</sup> Its extensive incantation closes with the invocation “your God, Sariah, Yahwe, Jesus [*ysws*], the Ho(ly) Gho(st) (?), the idol-spirits and the ishtars,” which then includes another possible Jesus-name that appears to be transcribed from the Greek.<sup>74</sup> The second bowl is part of the private Moussaieff collection, and its publisher Dan Levene writes that there is no known provenance — but he argues that its authenticity is suggested by its form and content.<sup>75</sup> The bowl, M155, includes the name *qrystws* in a list of names at the closing invocation of the bowl, and Levene proposes that it is a transcription of *Χριστός*.<sup>76</sup> Hence, these two bowls are both like Gordon C in that Jesus/Christ is one of several names in a traditional, apotropaic list, and in that they are spelled as if transcribed from the Greek. According to de Bruyn’s interpretation of his first category, when Jesus appears in such lists he is a powerful figure fully integrated into the universe of those who made the bowls, although without necessarily any overt connections to Jesus in the literary sources. Geller, however, argues that the Hellenised versions of the name indicate precisely a connection between the incantation bowls and the Greek literature in the Gospels and their reception.<sup>77</sup> Yet again, the transcriptions from the Greek may also have, in the Aramaic context that these bowls operated, evoked someone alien or exotic, if not exoticized. Especially *qrystws* in M155 presents a strong contrast, since the common Aramaic version of ‘Christ’ is *mšyh*. These lists then demonstrate how Boustan and Sanzo’s criteria may give a different impression of the same invocation and why they are an interesting complement to Geller’s original analysis.

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 151.

<sup>73</sup> Tapani Harviainen, “An Aramaic Incantation Bowl from Borsippa: Another Specimen of Eastern Aramaic ‘Koiné,’” in *Studia Orientalia* 51/14 (1981): 3.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 6. Christa Müller-Kessler recently offered a new reading of this section, where she challenges some of Harviainen’s readings but not the name Jesus (“Of Jesus,” 232).

<sup>75</sup> Dan Levene, *A Corpus of Magic Bowls: Incantation Texts in Jewish Aramaic from Late Antiquity* (London: Kegan Paul, 2003), 1.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 112–115.

<sup>77</sup> Geller, “Jesus’ Theurgic Powers,” 151.

Returning to Geller, he proceeds to discuss an invocation of Jesus in a Syriac bowl, CBS 9012. This specimen belongs to the University of Pennsylvania and was among the bowls that were brought back after the 1888/89 excavations at Nippur.<sup>78</sup> The invocation here is somewhat more elaborate than those above, calling on Jesus the healer (yšw ' 'sy') as one of its propitious agents:

By virtue of the power of Jesus the healer, by virtue of the power of the mighty 'hny, bound is the dwelling and the tent and the house and the wife and the sons and the daughters of myhrhwrmyzd who is called 'son of m 'my'.<sup>79</sup>

Some early studies proposed that this formula in fact calls on Joshua bar Peraḥya, whom I mentioned above, but this interpretation never gained much momentum.<sup>80</sup> Geller, however, proposes that yšw ' 'sy' is the Aramaic form for Ἰησοῦς σωτήρ ('Jesus Saviour').<sup>81</sup> He then takes this name, in combination with a Christian-looking client's name further down in the incantation, to suggest a syncretic context where Jesus of Nazareth is invoked.<sup>82</sup> Following de Bruyn's criteria, both the idiom and the structure here are traditional, apotropaic rather than Christian. Even though Jesus appears with an epithet that compares with the stories and traits ascribed to a Jesus of Nazareth, or Jesus Christ for that matter, "healer" is again an epithet given to many figures in apotropaic practices.<sup>83</sup> Concerning its structure, I think it is significant that Jesus the healer is invoked in a dual appeal together with 'the mighty 'hny,' who has until now escaped further identification, implicitly putting the two figures on a par with each other. This clashes with Christian doctrine and seemingly disqualifies an identification as Jesus Christ. Both the epithet and the structure then present Jesus the healer as integrated in and indigenous to the broader apotropaic tradition in the Near East. This invocation is also Geller's prime case for arguing that there was an apotropaic Jesus of Nazareth, precisely because of this explicit indigenous framing and phrasing.<sup>84</sup> I, however, would caution that the framing

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<sup>78</sup> Moriggi, *A Corpus*, 47. Again, however, there is no further or specific archaeological information about this bowl.

<sup>79</sup> Moriggi, *A Corpus*, 48.

<sup>80</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, "Syriac Incantation Bowls" (Ph.D. Diss., Brandeis University, 1971): 96 and 139.

<sup>81</sup> Geller, "Jesus' Theurgic Powers," 152–153.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 153–154.

<sup>83</sup> Montgomery, "Aramaic Incantation Bowls," 233.

<sup>84</sup> Geller, "Jesus' Theurgic Powers," 152–155.



and phrasing may indeed be so common that it is generic, and therefore difficult to tie to any specific literary figures or traditions, even Jesus of Nazareth.

CBS 9012 also differs from the former bowls in that it is written in Syriac, an Aramaic dialect that, among other things, marks a sub-corpus within the Mesopotamian incantation bowls.<sup>85</sup> As part of my doctoral dissertation I analyse an invocation of Jesus in two other Syriac incantation bowls that were published after Geller's work; BLMJ 0070 and MS 1928/54.<sup>86</sup> BLMJ 0070 is currently at the Bible Lands Museum Jerusalem, but before its first publication by Joseph Naveh and Shaked in 1993 it was owned by the Aaron Gallery in London. Its origins beyond this point are unknown.<sup>87</sup> MS 1928/54, which belongs to the Schøyen collection, awaits a comprehensive publication, but is available in a preliminary translation by Shaked.<sup>88</sup> He does not address provenance here, and the online catalogue of the collection simply lists its origin as "Near East."<sup>89</sup> They both have the same incantation, the same text, and end with the formula: "May the power of Christ arise and help. + *charaktêres*."<sup>90</sup> This closing invocation appears more like the mottoes in de Bruyn's second category, as its idiom, using the Syriac *mšyḥ* for Christ — which is also the name used in the Syriac churches — points toward a Christian, soteriological Jesus Christ. Yet its structure, as a closing invocation and more importantly its combination with so-called *charaktêres* at the end,<sup>91</sup> again follows quite traditional, apotropaic conventions. Hence, it is difficult to say whether the name or motto is

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<sup>85</sup> Moriggi, *A Corpus*.

<sup>86</sup> Korsvoll, "Reconsidering 'Christian'," 103–105.

<sup>87</sup> Moriggi, *A Corpus*, 134; Joseph Naveh and Shaul Shaked, *Magic Spells and Formulae: Aramaic Incantations of Late Antiquity* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1993), 121.

<sup>88</sup> Shaul Shaked, "Manichean Incantation Bowls in Syriac," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 24 (2000): 58–92.

<sup>89</sup> "Christian Incantation Bowl," at The Schøyen Collection: Manuscripts from Around the World Spanning 5000 Years of Human Culture and Civilisation, consulted 19.02.2019: <https://www.schoyencollection.com/palaeography-collection-introduction/aramaic-hebrew-syriac/4-6-15-manichaeen/ms-1928-54>.

<sup>90</sup> Moriggi, *A Corpus*, 135 (BLMJ 0070). For MS 1928/54, see Shaked, "Manichean Incantation Bowls," 63–64 and 75–76; Marco Moriggi, *La lingua delle coppe magiche siriache* (Quaderni di Semitistica 21; Firenze: Dipartimento di Linguistica, 2004), 279–280.

<sup>91</sup> *Charaktêres*, or *Brillenschrift*, are letter-like symbols that appear in amulets and magical texts throughout Antiquity. Scholars continue to discuss whether they are alphabetic letters or symbolic icons; if they represent a secret language or if they are improvised by the practitioners (see for instance Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic*, 250–251; Gordon, "Shaping the Text," 90).

indigenous or exotic to the practitioner here. Indeed, Naveh and Shaked note in their publication of BLMJ 0070 that the text is “curious” and challenging to translate due to several uncommon features and phrases.<sup>92</sup> Commonly, a parallel like MS 1928/54 would be taken to affirm the authenticity of the unconventional language, but as both bowls have unknown provenances this cross-referencing lends less certainty.

Returning to Geller, he mentions another Syriac bowl briefly, Semitics/ICOR Collections H156.<sup>93</sup> The bowl is owned by The Catholic University of America, at Washington D.C., which received it as part of a private legacy that listed it as a gift received from an inhabitant of Basra in 1889.<sup>94</sup> It is special, or uncommon, in that it ends with a trinitarian formula:

In the name of *šwrn*. In the name of the Father, in the name of the Son and the Living and Holy Spirit. (10) This is the seal which sealed it, the seal [...] the sanctified house. Amen, amen [...]<sup>95</sup>

Geller does not venture into an analysis of this bowl, but I discuss it in my doctoral dissertation together with another trinitarian formula from the recently published IBC 3: “In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. ’’ *bbggdd hh ww zz h h̄tt̄ yy kk llm [m nnn] ss ‘pp̄s̄s̄ qq̄rr šštt̄.*”<sup>96</sup> IBC 3 is held at the Bibliothèque Centrale de l’Université Saint-Esprit de Kaslik in Lebanon, which according to Gaby Abousamra acquired the bowl from among the influx of artefacts following the 2003 war in Iraq.<sup>97</sup> If this is the case, the acquisition violates the 1990 UN Security Council Resolution 661 that prohibits trade in cultural material from Iraq, and scholars should be wary of working on such artefacts.<sup>98</sup> I still include it here, but with mixed feelings. In both IBC 3 and Semitics/ICOR Collections H156, their trinitarian formulae appear at the end of

<sup>92</sup> Naveh and Shaked, *Magic Spells and Formulae*, 121.

<sup>93</sup> Geller, “Jesus’ Theurgic Powers,” 154. He also proposes that the name *br mswsy*, in another incantation bowl first presented by Moise Schwab, is an anagram for *br ’m ysww*, “son of the mother of Jesus.” However, this suggestion has not been followed up on since his publication and I am not convinced by the interpretation myself since there are few other known examples of similar anagrams.

<sup>94</sup> Moriggi, *A Corpus*, 27.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 209. Such lists of the alphabet, as follows the trinitarian formula here, are common at the end of late antique incantations, both from Mesopotamia and Egypt.

<sup>97</sup> Gaby Abousamra, “Coupe de prière syriaque chrétienne,” *Parole de l’orient* 35 (2010): 23.

<sup>98</sup> Brodie, “The Plunder,” 207.

the incantation, and as a concluding or framing phrase alongside other apotropaic elements or invocations.<sup>99</sup> Hence, the structure is again traditional while the idiom of the formula appears to come from Christian liturgy or practice. However, it is difficult to decide whether the formula represents a more conscious use and reference than the simple invocations of Jesus in the Greco-Egyptian amulets. On the one hand, it is difficult to see a trinitarian formula as anything other than a reference to Christian practice and belief. Yet on the other hand, de Bruyn has warned that these common, liturgical phrases could easily have been borrowed into apotropaic texts and then passed on with only the barest familiarity with their origins.<sup>100</sup> The traditional structure of the incantation as a whole, and the seemingly seamless combination with the other elements, suggests at least to me that the formula is considered an indigenous element to the apotropaic tradition here.

The final case, which also appeared after Geller's articles, is a curious invocation of Jesus in what appears to be a Jewish incantation bowl.<sup>101</sup> The bowl, M163, is also part of the Moussaieff collection and does not have a known provenance.<sup>102</sup> It caught the attention of scholars because of its extensive concluding doxology that ends with:

By the name of I-am-that-I-am **yhwš šb'wt**, and by the name of Jesus, who conquered the height and the depth by his cross, and by the name of his exalted father, and by the name of the holy spirits for ever and eternity. Amen amen selah.<sup>103</sup>

Although irregular in form and idiom, there is what I choose to call a trinitarian intent here, as well as traces of Christian soteriology in the qualities ascribed to Jesus. Levene sees the invocation as a mark of Syriac, Christian influence. For one, the uncommon spelling of Jesus, 'yšw, could be "a transcription of the Christian Syriac form not as it is spelled, **yšw**,' but rather, as it is pronounced,

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<sup>99</sup> Rendering letters or lists of the alphabet, as in IBC 3, was another common element in ancient amulets and magical texts (see for instance David Frankfurter, "The Magic of Writing and the Writing of Magic: The Power of the Word in Egyptian and Greek Traditions," *Helios* 21 [1994]: 200–201).

<sup>100</sup> De Bruyn, "Ancient Applied Christology," 9; de Bruyn and Dijkstra, "Greek Amulets," 181.

<sup>101</sup> Levene, *A Corpus*, 120–138; idem, "and by the name of Jesus," 283–308; Shaul Shaked, "Jesus in the Magic Bowls: Apropos Dan Levene's '...and by the name of Jesus...'," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 6 (1999): 309–319.

<sup>102</sup> Levene, *A Corpus*, 1.

<sup>103</sup> Idem, "and by the name of Jesus," 290.

ܐܝܫܐ ܥܘܢܐܝܢܐ.<sup>104</sup> Shaked, in a commentary, agrees with Levene's suggestion and adds that the victim's name,<sup>105</sup> Isha son of Ifra-Hormiz, appears to be Christian. Shaked proposes that this invocation, in an incantation otherwise dominated by Jewish names and elements, can be the work of a Jewish practitioner who adopted a Christian formula in order to use the victim's own god(s) against him.<sup>106</sup> Shaked proceeds, however, to warn that the invocation is too much of an anomaly to draw any general conclusions about interreligious contact in the incantation bowls from it.<sup>107</sup> Although I hesitate to accept his explanation, I agree with Shaked's caution that the example is rare, and the bowl moreover lacks a known provenance. Still, it could also be notable as precisely an intriguing abnormality: The content of the invocation suggests Jesus Christ, while the structure and idiom is mixed and at least not directly copied from a Christian rite.

### Discussion

First, it is important to note that invocations of Jesus are rare overall in the Mesopotamian incantation bowls.<sup>108</sup> Moreover, several of the more recently published incantation bowls have unknown provenances. Still, the invocations I have presented nevertheless show some correspondence with the patterns in de Bruyn's Greco-Egyptian material, even if I disregard the unprovenanced bowls. There are cases that compare with the first category, where Jesus is mentioned only by name in lists of powerful figures. Specific to these incantation bowls, which are in the Jewish dialect, is that the Jesus-names are transcribed from the Greek. This may signify a cultural distance or exoticization, which according to Boustan and Sanzo means that Jesus appears alien to or far removed from the practitioner or users of these bowls. Then, the closing invocation in BLMJ 0070 and MS 1928/54, and the trinitarian formulae in Semitics/ICOR Collections H156 and IBC 3, compare with the mottoes in de Bruyn's second category. They are brief, framing phrases that follow a traditional structure but use a Christian idiom. As such it is difficult to determine what specific context they would belong to, and they also differ from the first group in that they are written in Syriac. The final Syriac example, however, the appeal to Jesus the healer in CBS 9012, is traditional both in structure and idiom. This may then point to a Jesus

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid, 301. His emphasis.

<sup>105</sup> This incantation bowl is somewhat uncommonly a curse, and the person(s) targeted in curses are conventionally termed victim(s).

<sup>106</sup> Shaked, "Jesus in the Magic Bowls," 313–316. Schäfer also recounts and subscribes to this explanation when he refers to this bowl (*Jesus in the Talmud*, 38–39).

<sup>107</sup> Ibid, 316. See also Swartz, "The Magical Jesus," 28–29.

<sup>108</sup> Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic*, 278.

of Nazareth rather than a Jesus Christ, and it is also the amulet that Geller discusses most thoroughly in his study. In the end, the atypical invocation in M163 compares best with de Bruyn's third category, with its explicit trinitarian and soteriological content. It may not have been used or made by a Christian; it may present a foreign figure and authority; but the reference still seems to be Jesus Christ and the Christian economy of salvation.

To summarize, most of the invocations are in or point to a Christian idiom, while also being fitted into a traditional apotropaic incantation. The powerful names in the Jewish bowls are all spelled in a manner suggesting transcription from the Greek, and the incantation bowls invoking Jesus in short mottoes evoke parallels in Christian practice. These latter examples are all also in Syriac, an Aramaic dialect normally associated with Christianity in Mesopotamia, which could then suggest a closer proximity and susceptibility to Christian rites and phraseology. However, most of these bowls also lack a known provenance, so they make an uncertain foundation for such broader claims. Still, both the lists of names and the mottoes, read within the larger incantations that they are part of, follow traditional, apotropaic patterns. Even the trinitarian intent in M163, despite its singularity and lack of provenance, is formulated in an alternative structure that makes a liturgical origin unlikely. Thus, although there are traces of Christian background or influence in most of these invocations, which could hint towards an identification as Jesus Christ, the invocations are almost all cast in a traditional, more general apotropaic frame (which Geller took to show his Jesus of Nazareth).

Having come this far I then reach the same impasse as Geller, but to press beyond it I return to Boustan and Sanzo's criteria of indigenization and exoticization: Although the idiom in most of the invocations is Christian, or at least hints at this, the traditional form of the overarching ritual structure indicates that common, apotropaic practice is the primary context for these bowls. The Christian idiom can in turn be explained as something that has been indigenized into it. Even in the Jewish bowls, where the transcriptions from the Greek may have had an alienating or exoticizing effect, the lists into which the Jesus-names are incorporated are in themselves a common, traditional feature of apotropaic incantations. Thus, Boustan and Sanzo's criteria show how elements could travel and be used in different contexts and with different implications, irrespective of their purported origin. The trinitarian invocation, for instance, is a theologically dense phrase that may have travelled and been used detached from its specific content, even though it owes its popularity and potency to its

firm form and initial status as a ritual unit.<sup>109</sup> Consequently, despite the traces of Christian idiom, I understand the lists and mottoes invoking Jesus to belong within traditional apotropaic practice. But does this in turn mean, as Geller argued, that they refer to a Jesus of Nazareth?

### Conclusion

In this article, I have presented and expanded on Markham J. Geller's proposal that the Gospels, several rabbinic sources, and numerous late-antique amulets bear witness to a broad, apotropaic discourse centred on Jesus of Nazareth, master healer and exorcist. Since Geller's publications in the seventies, more amulets have been published, providing further examples of invocations of Jesus; new approaches to study the amulets and their cultural and/or religious context have been developed; and there have been further debates on Jewish-Christian relations in Late Antiquity, as well as the figure of Jesus in this interaction. On this last topic there are different opinions, with some scholars describing many possible points of contact and exchange, while others favour caution and assert that many of the quoted sources are both fragmented and vague — and, in fact, not so numerous.

Examining new amulets through new approaches, I find that most of the invocations of Jesus appear in traditional, apotropaic formats, albeit with several cases where the invocation itself borrows from or includes terms or phrases hailing from Christian piety or practice. I ended the previous section by saying that I take this to show that these invocations do not function as an appeal to Jesus Christ in a soteriological sense. Yet, does it follow that the invocations are of a Jesus of Nazareth? From the above examples, perhaps apart from Jesus the healer in CBS 9012, I would say no. The idiom in both mottoes and lists suggests that the reference is still somehow to a Christian practice or tradition, but perhaps it is to its rituals or prayers rather than its literary canon or theological debates.<sup>110</sup> Hence, rather than following Geller's use of the Gospels and rabbinic texts to understand the invocations in the incantation bowls, I would instead look to early Christian ritual practices and popular devotion for parallels and context. My aim for this would not be to place the incantation bowls within a Christian community in a narrow sense, but to illustrate how phrases and figures in certain genres or artefacts travel across religious and cultural boundaries.

<sup>109</sup> De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 234.

<sup>110</sup> De Bruyn also makes this suggestion and explores it in the Greco-Egyptian material in the last chapter of his book (*ibid*, 184–234).