

“AND THE IMPURE AND ABOMINABLE PRIESTS FLED FOR HELP TO THE NAMES OF THE DEVILS”

AMULETS AND MAGICAL PRACTICES IN
SYRIAC CHRISTIAN CULTURE BETWEEN
LATE ANTIQUITY AND THE MODERN
WORLD.¹

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ABSTRACT

Starting from a memrā probably authored by Ishāq of Antioch (5th century), the paper illustrates how evidence of the magical practices referred to in its text may be found in contemporary incantations featured on Syriac incantation bowls. Magic texts subsequently found their way into the Syriac Christian amulets, which incorporate

¹ This article is the outcome of a very stimulating discussion which took place on the second day of the workshop “Studying Ancient Magic: Categorisation – Comparison – Materiality” (10th-11th June 2015, MF Norwegian School of Theology, Oslo). The author is grateful to Prof. Liv Ingeborg Lied and Mr Nils Hallvard Korsvoll (MF Norwegian School of Theology) for their kind invitation to take part in the workshop. The anonymous reviewers of Hugoye provided references and insightful comments, for which the author expresses his gratitude. Any misreading is solely responsibility of the author. Thanks are due to Dr Ruth Anne Henderson (Università di Torino) for English language counselling.

*liturgical utterances, prayers, and references to the Gospels, saints, and articles of the Christian faith. The paper addresses the problem of how the texts evolved from Late Antiquity to the present day and what role the Christian clergy (according to the *memrā* deeply involved in magic practice since Late Antiquity) played in this transmission and transformation of texts.*

In a contribution published in 1948, Erik Peterson refers to a *memrā* allegedly attributed to Ephrem (but probably by Ishaq of Antioch, who presumably died in the second half of the 5th century A.D.), which describes the persistence of pagan religious tradition in both the clergy and the laity of the Christian communities of the time.² This *memrā* was edited first by Lamy in 1886, with accompanying Latin translation, and has been subsequently re-edited by Beck in 1972 with a German translation. The text first deals with the return of the clergy and laity to the ancient paganism and then describes their final destiny in the context of Judgment Day. Among the most significant issues of this return to paganism, the author emphasizes the magical practices and the use of amulets, which he describes as frequently attested in the everyday life of priests and deacons.

² E. Peterson, “Die Zauber-Praktiken eines syrischen Bischofs” (Lateranum 14:1-4 [1948]), 102. The article mainly concerns divination and does not deal with “magic” in the sense intended here. As to the authorship of this *memrā* (“On sorcery and incantations and oracles and on the End of the World”), see Th. J. Lamy, ed., *Sancti Ephraem Syri Hymni et Sermones*, II (Mechliniae: H. Dessain, 1886), cols. 393-394 (Ephrem); A. Baumstark, *Geschichte der syrischen Literatur* (Bonn: A. Marcus & E. Weber, 1922), 65 (Ishaq); E. Beck, ed., *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Sermones III*, CSCO 321/Syr. 139 (Louvain: Secretariat du CorpusSCO, 1972), vii (an author later than Ephrem); S. P. Brock, “Ephrem,” in *Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage*, ed. S. P. Brock, A. M. Butts, G. A. Kiraz, L. Van Rompay (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2011), 145 (refers to Beck). Peterson accepts the position of Baumstark. See further E. G. Matthews, “A Bibliographical *Clavis* to the Corpus of Works attributed to Isaac of Antioch” (Hugoye 5:1 [2002]), 11.

I provide here an English translation of some of the passages of this *memrā* which are most relevant for our analysis:³

1) Magical ablutions and the use of amulets (vs. 33-66)

33/34	ܡܠܟܬܐ ܕܠܝܠܐ ܡܠ ܢܦܬܐ ܠܡܬܝܢܐ, ܡܠ ܡܬܝܢܐ	The world returned to its vomit / to the ancient paganism. ⁴
35/36	ܡܬܝܢܐ ܕܡܬܝܢܐ ܡܬܝܢܐ ܠܡܬܝܢܐ ܡܬܝܢܐ	In Christ, in name alone, / and (actually) in the service of Satan (they are).
37/38	ܡܬܝܢܐ ܡܬܝܢܐ, ܡܬܝܢܐ ܠܡܬܝܢܐ ܡܬܝܢܐ	They laid aside the holy armour / and they put on the one of sin.
39/40	ܡܬܝܢܐ ܡܬܝܢܐ ܡܬܝܢܐ ܠܡܬܝܢܐ ܡܬܝܢܐ	They left the faithful Church / in which is the heavenly Healer,
41/42	ܡܬܝܢܐ ܡܬܝܢܐ ܡܬܝܢܐ ܠܡܬܝܢܐ ܡܬܝܢܐ	and they run to the house of the sorcerers / the haven of all Evil.
43/44	ܡܬܝܢܐ ܡܬܝܢܐ ܡܬܝܢܐ ܠܡܬܝܢܐ ܡܬܝܢܐ	To the Church come the saints / multitudes of fire and Spirit
45/46	ܡܬܝܢܐ ܡܬܝܢܐ ܡܬܝܢܐ ܠܡܬܝܢܐ ܡܬܝܢܐ	and near the sorcerers are found / all the devils of the Creation.
47/48	ܡܬܝܢܐ ܡܬܝܢܐ ܡܬܝܢܐ ܠܡܬܝܢܐ ܡܬܝܢܐ	In place of the benedictions of the saints / the incantations of sorcerers,
49/50	ܡܬܝܢܐ ܡܬܝܢܐ ܡܬܝܢܐ ܠܡܬܝܢܐ ܡܬܝܢܐ	and instead of the Holy Cross / the writings of demons they bear.
51/52	ܡܬܝܢܐ ܡܬܝܢܐ ܡܬܝܢܐ ܠܡܬܝܢܐ ܡܬܝܢܐ	Today they come to the Baptism / and they dress with the Holy Spirit
53/54	ܡܬܝܢܐ ܡܬܝܢܐ ܡܬܝܢܐ ܠܡܬܝܢܐ ܡܬܝܢܐ	and tomorrow they go to

³ Syriac text published in E. Beck, ed., *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers Sermones III*, CSCO 320/Syr. 138 (Louvain: Secretariat du CorpusSCO, 1972), 12-27. The edition by Lamy, *Sancti Ephraem Syri II*, cols. 393-426 has been compared with Beck's and only small differences have been detected. The English translation is by the present author and was maintained as literal as possible.

⁴ See Proverbs 26: 11 (ܡܠܟܬܐ ܕܠܝܠܐ ܡܠ ܢܦܬܐ).

	ዓሳሳዊ ልብዓት ስርዓት	(magical) ablutions / and they are stripped and are naked.
55/56	ላይ ላይ ያለውን ልብዓት ስርዓት ላይ ላይ ያለውን ልብዓት ስርዓት	Above the waters of the Baptism / the Holy Spirit is settled
57/58	ላይ ላይ ያለውን ልብዓት ስርዓት ላይ ላይ ያለውን ልብዓት ስርዓት	and over the springs of (magical) ablutions / settles the spirit of Satan.
59/60	ላይ ላይ ያለውን ልብዓት ስርዓት ላይ ላይ ያለውን ልብዓት ስርዓት	The common people come to the Church / and (they are) driven there by Satan,
61/62	ላይ ላይ ያለውን ልብዓት ስርዓት ላይ ላይ ያለውን ልብዓት ስርዓት	and (he is) borne at their necks / like the necklaces of regal dignity.
63/64	ላይ ላይ ያለውን ልብዓት ስርዓት ላይ ላይ ያለውን ልብዓት ስርዓት	This one bears him on his head / and the other one (on the other end) at his neck,
65/66	ላይ ላይ ያለውን ልብዓት ስርዓት ላይ ላይ ያለውን ልብዓት ስርዓት	and the young boy who does not know anything / comes bearing the names of the devils.

2) Angelic names in incantations - active participation of priests and deacons in the magical practices (vs. 81-100)

81/82	ላይ ላይ ያለውን ልብዓት ስርዓት ላይ ላይ ያለውን ልብዓት ስርዓት	And the impure and abominable priests / fled for help to the names of the devils.
83/84	ላይ ላይ ያለውን ልብዓት ስርዓት ላይ ላይ ያለውን ልብዓት ስርዓት	<i>Rwp'y/l</i> and <i>Rpwp'y/l</i> / servants of the Adversary,
85/86	ላይ ላይ ያለውን ልብዓት ስርዓት ላይ ላይ ያለውን ልብዓት ስርዓት	are celebrated in the books / of the Church, the Bride of Christ.
87/88	ላይ ላይ ያለውን ልብዓት ስርዓት ላይ ላይ ያለውን ልብዓት ስርዓት	May <i>Rwp'y/l</i> be execrated / and <i>Rpwp'y/l</i> together with his fellows
89/90	ላይ ላይ ያለውን ልብዓት ስርዓት ላይ ላይ ያለውን ልብዓት ስርዓት	and <i>Trtyws</i> together with his troop / in the deep abyss of the Earth may he descend!
91/92	ላይ ላይ ያለውን ልብዓት ስርዓት ላይ ላይ ያለውን ልብዓት ስርዓት	The deacons expel demons / from within the faithful Church,
93/94	ላይ ላይ ያለውን ልብዓት ስርዓት ላይ ላይ ያለውን ልብዓት ስርዓት	but the sons of the Church

	וְלֹא יִשְׁתַּחֲוּ וְלֹא יִשְׁתַּחֲוּ	keep them / and do not let them depart.
95/96	וְהַכְּסֵי הַכְּסֵי הַכְּסֵי הַכְּסֵי וְהַכְּסֵי הַכְּסֵי הַכְּסֵי הַכְּסֵי	The Church's gates are then open / but no one comes to the prayer,
97/98	וְהַכְּסֵי הַכְּסֵי הַכְּסֵי הַכְּסֵי וְהַכְּסֵי הַכְּסֵי הַכְּסֵי הַכְּסֵי	because the shepherds, together with the flock, / run to the gate of sorcerers.
99/100	וְהַכְּסֵי הַכְּסֵי הַכְּסֵי הַכְּסֵי וְהַכְּסֵי הַכְּסֵי הַכְּסֵי הַכְּסֵי	The chiefs of the priests of the Church / abandon them to the sorcerers.

3) Books of magic in the hands of priests and deacons (vs. 123-128)

123/124	וְהַכְּסֵי הַכְּסֵי הַכְּסֵי הַכְּסֵי וְהַכְּסֵי הַכְּסֵי הַכְּסֵי הַכְּסֵי	The priests abandoned God / and the Holy Gospel,
125/126	וְהַכְּסֵי הַכְּסֵי הַכְּסֵי הַכְּסֵי וְהַכְּסֵי הַכְּסֵי הַכְּסֵי הַכְּסֵי	and they bear lot-books / because of the love for money. ⁵
127/128	וְהַכְּסֵי הַכְּסֵי הַכְּסֵי הַכְּסֵי וְהַכְּסֵי הַכְּסֵי הַכְּסֵי הַכְּסֵי	Magic knots and oracles and incantations / they brought and proposed (them) to us by means of books.

4) Priests and deacons judged as sorcerers in the Judgment Day - Divination, neck-amulets, magical ablutions, writing and signing incantations with blood (vs. 421-444)

421/422	וְהַכְּסֵי הַכְּסֵי הַכְּסֵי הַכְּסֵי וְהַכְּסֵי הַכְּסֵי הַכְּסֵי הַכְּסֵי	And what will they do at that time / the priests who were sorcerers?
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⁵ Lot-books are part of the paraphernalia handled by magicians in Late Antiquity and beyond. In this case it seems likely that they were used to predict the destiny of people and / or the success of their enterprises. The diffusion of these texts, "even among magicians living in villages in remote regions," is witnessed by the data provided in G. Lacerenza, "Jewish Magicians and Christian Clients in Late Antiquity. The Testimony of Amulets and Inscriptions," in *What Athens Has to Do with Jerusalem. Essays on Classical, Jewish, and Early Christian Art and Archaeology in Honor of Gideon Foerster*, Interdisciplinary Studies in Ancient Culture and Religion 1, ed. L. V. Rutgers. Leuven: Peeters, 2002, 407-408.

423/424	ܐܬܝܢ ܕܢܚܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ	And in what place will they lie in hiding, / as Satan knows his own?
425/426	ܕܥܬܝܢ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ	Deacons who become crazy and followed / magic knottings and incantations,
427/428	ܐܬܝܢ ܕܢܚܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ	where will they go at that time / as they are in the midst of demons?
429/430	ܐܬܝܢ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ	The priest who gave an oracle / and caused the flock of Christ to err,
431/432	ܐܬܝܢ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ	together with the sorcerers they count him / and he is not separated from the diviners.
433/434	ܐܬܝܢ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ	Everyone who hung a slip of writing / of the unclean demons on his neck,
435/436	ܐܬܝܢ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ	stands there and it is borne by him / as it were to him like a charge.
437/438	ܐܬܝܢ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ	He who bathed in sources / and springs after he was baptized,
439/440	ܐܬܝܢ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ	they put him among the pagans / and he is not separated from the Jews.
441/442	ܐܬܝܢ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ	Everyone who, with the blood of his body / wrote a <i>yod</i> and signed in a script, ⁶
443/444	ܐܬܝܢ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ ܕܡܪܝܬܐ	stands together with Jannes and Jambres / very famous sorcerers. ⁷

⁶ The Syriac term ܡܪܝܬܐ (pl. of ܡܪܝܬܐ, name of the letter *yod*) is attested with the meaning “amulets” in some texts, see C. Brockelmann, *Lexicon Syriacum* (Hildesheim, Zürich and New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 1995 [Reprint of Halle an der Saale: Max Niemeyer, 1928]), 299, and M. Sokoloff, *A Syriac Lexicon. A Translation from the Latin, Correction, Expansion, and Update of C. Brockelmann's Lexicon Syriacum* (Winona Lake, IN and Piscataway, NJ: Eisenbrauns and Gorgias Press, 2009), 568.

⁷ On these two famous magicians, whose names frequently recur in magical literature, see now S. Bhayro, “On Early Jewish Literature and the

5) Priests and deacons mixed with all evildoers (sorcerers) in final Judgment (vs. 619-624)

619/620	ܕܠܟܝܢ ܕܠܟܝܢ ܕܠܟܝܢ ܠܬܝܬܝܢ ܠܬܝܬܝܢ ܠܬܝܬܝܢ	They come and enter in like manner / all the multitudes of sorcerers,
621/622	ܕܠܟܝܢ ܕܠܟܝܢ ܕܠܟܝܢ ܕܠܟܝܢ ܕܠܟܝܢ ܕܠܟܝܢ ܕܠܟܝܢ ܕܠܟܝܢ ܕܠܟܝܢ	and are together with them the priests of the Church / and the deacons of sin
623/624	ܕܠܟܝܢ ܕܠܟܝܢ ܕܠܟܝܢ ܠܬܝܬܝܢ ܠܬܝܬܝܢ ܠܬܝܬܝܢ	mixed, mingled with one another / all the evil doers.

As stated above, it is quite clear that a good deal of the “return to ancient paganism” the writer is denouncing is made up of magical practices, all formally prohibited by Church authorities, but all tolerated and even practised by the clergy themselves.

The picture painted in the quoted passages is reflected in recent studies about the use of magical objects in Christian communities of the Near East in both Late Antiquity and later medieval and modern periods.

Starting from the magical ablutions (vs. 51-58; 437-440) and the use of amulets (vs. 59-66; 433-436) recorded by the author of the *memrā*, one may easily connect the first to the tradition witnessed by Abousamra in contemporary northern Lebanon (Qadisha valley),⁸ where “a tradition is still alive today [...]: small children are dipped in the spring of Mar Asia [...], because these waters have the power of healing, especially for children who stop developing and are referred to as ‘makbous.’”⁹ As for amulets, Abousamra has provided evidence from the same geographical context for the use today of paper amulets enclosed in fabric

Aramaic Magic Bowls” (Aramaic Studies 13 [2015]), 57-63 and literature quoted there. As to quotations of their names in Syriac magic texts, see e.g. Codex A, § 51 in H. Gollancz, ed., *The Book of Protection. Being a Collection of Syriac Charms* (Amsterdam: Philo Press, 1976 [Reprint of London and Oxford: Henry Frowde and Oxford University Press, 1912]), 30 (Syriac text), lv (English translation).

⁸ UNESCO World Heritage List ref. no. 850.

⁹ G. Abousamra, “Two Syriac Amulets from Hadath Grotto (Qadisha)” (Parole de l’Orient 38 [2013]), 219.

envelopes, which are in turn sewn to children's clothing.¹⁰ Dandini witnessed this practice already among the Maronites in the late 16th century.¹¹ Furthermore, scholars are familiar with the phenomena of both Syriac incantation bowls and Syriac amulets on leather strips, dated to Late Antiquity and the early Islamic periods.¹²

Following the text of the *memrā*, the reader encounters other peculiarities of the condemned magical practice: it is based on texts quoting the names of angels such as *Rwp'yl* and *Rpnp'yl* (vs. 83-84; 87-88), it is operated by means of books where incantations are listed (vs. 127-128),¹³ and these incantations also contain the letter *yod* and magic signatures put down with human blood (vs. 441-444). Again, angelic names are often found in both the Syriac exorcistic texts of Late Antiquity and recent magical recipe-books, the latter being the offshoot of a flourishing production of written magic devices of the modern period.¹⁴

In fact, if we consider the *memrā* to have been composed by Ishāq of Antioch instead of Ephrem, the text presents us with an amazing diffusion of some magical practices among the Christian people during the 5th century. This is the very period when

¹⁰ Abousamra, "Two Syriac Amulets," 214, 227 (photographs nos. 2-3).

¹¹ Ibidem, where further references to analogous uses reported by Badger (1852) for the Nestorians of Kurdistan are found.

¹² On Syriac incantation bowls see M. Moriggi, *A Corpus of Syriac Incantation Bowls. Syriac Magical Texts from Late-Antique Mesopotamia*, Magical and Religious Literature of Late Antiquity 3 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014). As to Syriac amulets of Late Antiquity, see Ph. Gignoux, *Incantations magiques syriaques*, Collection de la Revue des Études Juives (Louvain: Peeters, 1987); J. Naveh, "A Syriac Amulet on Leather" (JSS 42 [1997]), 33-38.

¹³ On these books of magic formulae and incantations, see Lacerenza, "Jewish Magicians and Christian Clients," 407-408. On the debate about the oral and / or written transmission of magic texts, see C. G. Häberl, "Aramaic Incantation Texts between Orality and Textuality," in *Orality and Textuality in the Iranian World*, ed. J. Rubanovich and Sh. Shaked, Leiden: Brill, 2015, 365-399.

¹⁴ The name of *Rwp'yl* is quoted in some Syriac incantation bowls, see Moriggi, *A Corpus of Syriac Incantation Bowls*, 253. Among Syriac modern magic recipes, the best known are those included in Gollancz, *The Book of Protection*.

incantation bowls were in use in Mesopotamia (Babylonia) and when the amulets studied by Gignoux and Naveh were produced (6th-7th century).¹⁵ Furthermore, strong parallels from the point of view of the typology and use of the amulets may be singled out between the description found in the *memrā* and some objects and practices witnessed in contemporary Christian communities of the Near East.

Following the description of the contents of these significant sections of the *memrā* dealing with magic, together with ancient and modern links, it is to be stressed that, in all but one passage, priests and deacons are explicitly accused of believing in magic and going (or even running) to the house of sorcerers in search of help. Even more significant is the datum that priests and deacons are themselves involved in magic and witchcraft and actually:

- they use the names of the devils for help (vs. 81-82);
- they drive the flock of Christians to the gate of sorcerers (vs. 97-100);
- they bear lot-books and induce people to incantations, oracles and magic knots, after having abandoned God and the Holy Gospel (vs. 123-128);
- they are counted with diviners and demons in the final Judgment, as they have become sorcerers (vs. 421-428);
- they will be punished together with all evildoers (= magic practitioners) (vs. 619-624).

It goes without saying that both the tone and the contents of this *memrā* are well known to this kind of texts when addressed to specific social categories, i.e. they are parts of the genre of polemics. Nevertheless the picture drawn in the *memrā* may be taken as depicting, at least partly, existing phenomena and cultural behaviours of the Christian communities in the Upper Euphrates/northern Mesopotamian area in the 5th century.

On the other hand, the contamination of “official” religious practice and magic in the wider sense may also be witnessed in its

¹⁵ See Gignoux, *Incantations magiques syriaques*, 2. Even though Naveh, “A Syriac Amulet,” 33, does not indicate a precise period, he states that the amulet he is studying is “written [...] in the dialect characteristic of the Syriac incantation texts of late antiquity” and he often refers to Syriac bowls elsewhere in the article.

outcomes, some of which have reached us from Late Antiquity and later periods.

A late-antique example could well be the Syriac incantation bowl no. IBC 3 (Bibliothèque Centrale de l'Université Saint-Esprit de Kaslik, Lebanon), featuring "a prayer, quite complex as for style and content, with direct references to both specific articles of the Christian faith and features of Christian liturgy."¹⁶

The text reads as follows:¹⁷

(1) In front of you, physician and living healer and the one who performs (acts of) goodness, (2) he who came with the announcement of heaven and brought life to men. (3) Put on them your holy hands, filled of mercies and supplied with grace, give strength (4) to their interior man and healing which is from all external pains of the fleshs which they are dressed with, dress them (5) of your divine arms, in order that they will be on their right (and) left sides, put on their heads helmets of life, by means of which it is abolished the strength of evil (6) and the preparation of the Gospel which is of peace, may it be in the form of a wall raising against all darts of evil, and heal and strengthen (7) and protect and accomplish and establish and by means of your many mercies may the name of your majesty and of your divinity be praised from now and forever and ever. Amen. (8) In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. *”bḡḡdd ḥḥ ʾww ʿz h ḥtt ʿy kēk llm [m nnn] ss ʿppss qqrr šštt*

In this case what we are faced with is evidently a magic re-use of a text the components of which were in all probability originally

¹⁶ Moriggi, *A Corpus of Syriac Incantation Bowls*, 208. Due to its phraseology, which is very different from the usual utterances of incantation bowl texts in general, it may be supposed that this bowl is a modern forgery. The present author does not agree with this hypothesis, as at least two other parallel texts are housed in two different private collections to be published by James Nathan Ford.

¹⁷ Moriggi, *A Corpus of Syriac Incantation Bowls*, 209.

conceived for an “official,” duly uttered, prayer. Even if nearly half a millennium later than the Syriac bowl quoted above, the amulet of David son of Yasmine (late 13th century) edited by Abousamra testifies to the same practice, as it quotes “God the Ever Living” together with saints, is aimed at healing a child, and is based on the outline of a prayer.¹⁸ The continuity of this praxis is well documented by other amulets, such as the amulet of Mar ‘Abdisho’ (late 13th century), where another common element of late-antique and modern Syriac magic is found: the *historiola*, i.e. a short narrative featuring the evil being against which the spell is intended and an agent who struggles against it and wins on behalf of the client who ordered the incantation.¹⁹ An analogous example is represented by the text of a scroll published by Hunter, where again a “liturgical” introduction and some prayers are flanked and mingled with an *historiola* and, on the verso, a priest named Joseph signs the spell.²⁰

The evidence supplied until this point is enough to confirm the picture of the *memrā* from which our study began. A good deal of magic material, especially dating from the late-medieval and modern periods, is clearly based upon liturgical texts and/or prayer books. It is still to be completely clarified whether, especially for earlier – late-antique – periods, this datum directly implies a widespread involvement of the clergy in the production and use of this material, as the *memrā* claims. As regards more recent periods, we have various data supporting an affirmative answer to this question: from the signature of the priest in the scroll published by Hunter (see above) to the present day practices of Christians in Lebanon, witnessed by Abousamra. As to older periods, some caution may of course be used. Considering what Bhayro concludes as regards the context of Jewish communities in late-antique Mesopotamia, where “it seems likely that the same scribes who would be employed to write Jewish legal documents, such as deeds of divorce, were able to supplement their income by writing incantations, often for non-Jewish clients” and the “professional magicians should probably be identified with the scribal guild that

¹⁸ Abousamra, “Two Syriac Amulets,” 215-216.

¹⁹ Ibidem, 220-223.

²⁰ E. C. D. Hunter, “A Scroll Amulet from Kurdistan” (Aram 5 [1993]), 249-253.

was located at the centre, rather than on the periphery, of the Jewish communities of Talmudic Babylonia,”²¹ a likely involvement of Christian clergy of late-antique Christian communities in magical practices cannot be excluded. This is indirectly suggested by incantation texts on the one hand and polemically described by the *memrā* and similar compositions on the other. The “contamination” of liturgical texts by magic traits would thus be, as in the Jewish Mesopotamian context, the consequence of all the texts being produced in the very same *scriptoria* by a clergy who were in the same way aware of articles of Christian faith but whose cultural background embraced issues coming from old pagan traditions, older or contemporary religious movements (e.g. Manichaeism), Jewish tradition, etc. The clergy may themselves have thus indulged in the magical practice as it was a crucial component of its cultural milieu as well as of the laity. While Church authorities tried to eradicate magic practice and condemned it in solemn homilies, the priests and deacons may have started a process of “Christianization” of texts and users, in order not to let the laity continue to believe in magic outside Christianity. As long as all coexisted in the cultural milieu of local clergy, older magical traditions lost their late-antique effectiveness, magic issues were incorporated as fossils in increasingly stereotyped formulae, which, under a Christian “re-painting,” reached the present day and are still recognizable to scholars. Thus in recent times the clergy did not apparently feel uncomfortable with these issues and used them quite extensively, after having received them in an already Christianized form.

²¹ S. Bhayro, “Divorcing a Demon. Incantation Bowls and BT Giṭṭin 85b,” in *The Archaeology and Material Culture of the Babylonian Talmud*, ed. M. J. Geller, Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015: 130-131. As to the Mandaic context, one must bear in mind that “many Mandaean priests, in spite of the Ginza’s prohibition of such practices, derive part of their income from the writing of amulets, and from sorcery, when legitimate fees are insufficient for their needs.” E. S. Drower, *The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran. Their Cults, Customs, Magic, Legends, and Folklore*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937: xviii.

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