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Jewish Curse Tablets?

Abstract

Relatively few curse tablets have been uncovered in the area covering late-antique Syria-Palaestina. Among these (with one recent exception from Antioch), none display signs of having been inscribed by Jews: they do not employ the languages associated with Judaism – Hebrew or Aramaic – nor have any of them been uncovered in locations specifically associated with Judaism, for instance in a Jewish tomb. Even though recipes found in Jewish magic manuals indicate that Jews were aware of the use of metal tablets for erotic and aggressive magical ends, the finds from Syria-Palaestina (and, incidentally, elsewhere), suggest they were not among the producers of such artefacts. Nonetheless, the notion of cursing was not alien to Judaism (intriguing resemblances exist between imprecations in the Hebrew Bible and Greco-Roman 'prayers for justice'), and cursing actions may be encountered in a variety of sources. One wonders, then, whether the typical defixiones found different modes of expression in the context of late-antique Judaism. My article asks whether there are any Jewish counterparts to typical curse tablets, and if so, how they differ from the latter: in form or also in essence? Additionally, can one identify reasons for the absence of Jewish curse tablets and for the preference for other magical means?

Keywords: Jewish magic, curse tablets, defixiones, amulets, Cairo Genizah

1 Introduction

The word 'curse', whose manifestations form the focus of this volume, has a spectrum of meanings, depending on its cultural context, as well as its chronological and geographical settings. Furthermore, it encompasses different concepts, ranging from aggression and retribution, harm and defence, to right and wrong. A broad survey indicates that written curses – conveyed in the form of curse tablets – were a common and ubiquitous feature of the Greco-Roman world. A closer look, however, would dispute this statement. Curse tablets are missing from some cultural settings, and their absence, as well as their possible replacements, will be the focus of this article.[1]

1 In this article the term 'curse' will be understood as an aggressive speech-act (oral or

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While Jews living in ancient Palestine and throughout the Roman Empire were largely incorporated in the surrounding Greco-Roman culture, they are not discernible in the sphere of curse tablets use and production. The apparent absence of curse tablets from the Jewish magical horizon gives rise to several questions, building a useful framework for the present article. To begin with, how does one ascertain this absence? Secondly, are there any Jewish counterparts to typical curse tablets? If so, how do they differ from the latter, in form or also in essence? And lastly, can one identify reasons for the absence of Jewish curse tablets and for the preference for other magical means?

The geographical framework of the article will broadly cover the Roman province of Syria-Palaestina, which, on the one hand, was part and parcel of the Mediterranean Greco-Roman world, but also had its own idiosyncratic religious-cultural features, derived from its large monotheistic populations, Jewish and Christian. Chronologically, my discussion will focus on Late Antiquity, since this is the period where most of the textual data derives from, yet I will also look for comparanda in earlier periods, more specifically, in biblical texts, as well as journey forward in time to the medieval period, where some Jewish manuscripts preserve older data. My sources are primarily textual, and consists both of magical texts (recipes and actual curses) and non-magical sources, such as the rabbinic literature that was composed roughly in the same period.[2]

2 No Jewish curse tablets?

The first question to be addressed when discussing the absence of Jewish curse tablets is whether, in fact, no such items have been uncovered to date. It is thus important to distinguish between several categories that can qualify

written) that aims at harming or controlling another person. Consequently, ‘curse tablets’ will refer to a form of curses inscribed on (usually metal) tablets, and aiming at the above. These include both curses intended to inflict damage (e.g., ‘Lay him low with suffering and death and headaches’), as well as binding spells intended to force an individual to act according to the wishes of the spell beneficiary (e.g., ‘I … nail down the tongue, the eyes, the wrath, the ire’), or further control their body and emotions for erotic ends (e.g., ‘may she remember no one but me alone’). These definitions conform to the terminology employed in the present volume, but differ from those I usually apply to Jewish magic, e.g., in Saar 2017, 62–63. Typically, I limit ‘curse’ to harmful contexts, and regard spells aiming at achieving control over body and emotions differently.

2 For two excellent surveys of Jewish magic in antiquity and in the medieval period, see Bohak 2008 and Harari 2017. For a concise introduction with rich bibliography, see Bohak 2019.

as Jewish curse tablets: (a) a tablet produced by a Jew (either a professional practitioner or a lay individual); (b) a tablet whose beneficiary (meaning the user or commissioner) was a Jew; (c) a tablet produced according to a Jewish magical recipe, but not necessarily by or for a Jewish person. Subsequently, one needs to establish criteria to recognise the 'Jewishness' of any such items. These criteria may be linguistic, meaning a curse tablet written in Jewish Aramaic or in Hebrew; they may be contextual, namely a tablet that was found in an archaeological context clearly defined as Jewish; they may be onomastic, containing distinctly identifiable Jewish names; or they may be content-based, referring to specific Jewish cultural and religious hallmarks. One further criterion to consider would be iconographic, yet only few curse tablets sport a graphic design, and when they do, it does not reflect a particular religious affiliation (as opposed to amulets, where the presence of a cross or a *menorah* could point towards a Christian or Jewish background).

Looking at the data derived from late-antique Syria-Palaestina it becomes clear that there are no curse tablets that conform to the linguistic criterion, with the exception of a single lead tablet from the circus in Antioch.[3] This item, inscribed in Jewish Aramaic and containing at least one biblical allusion, is exactly the exception that confirms the rule. To date, no other Aramaic or Hebrew inscribed tablets of this sort are known, not only from Syria-Palaestina but also from elsewhere in the Greco-Roman world.[4] An examination of the contextual criterion yields a similar result: no typical curse tablets can be shown to derive from a securely identified Jewish archaeological context (but see below, the bronze *lamella* from the Meroth synagogue). Again, this situation holds not only for Syria-Palaestina, but for other geographical locations as well. Coming now to the onomastic criterion, it may be said that it confirms the absence of Jewish curse tablets, since no typical Jewish names, such as Judah, Elijah, or Salome appear as beneficiaries on any of the tablets published so far.[5] However, this criterion is quite limited. Many Jews in Late Antiquity bore Greek and Latin names, and it is not possible to pinpoint names that were used exclusively by Jews

3 See Elitzur-Leiman and Folmer forthcoming.

4 For the absence of curse tablets that can be clearly identified as Jewish, see also Bohak 2008, 154–155. For Jewish (or Samaritan) funerary inscriptions resembling 'prayers for justice', see the stelae of Heraklea and Martina from the island of Rheneia, dated to the second or first century BCE. The text (nearly identical on both stelae) is written in Greek, but contains several religious allusions that indicate the Jewish or Samaritan identity of its composers. See Salvo 2012, 237–245, with references to past editions.

5 The name Ioudan, a parallel of Judah, appears among the targets of a curse tablet from Beit Shean; see Youtie and Bonner 1937, 75–77. The editors state that the name may have been Christian.

in this period, as Christians and sometimes also polytheists would employ originally Jewish names. Lastly, a content-based identification, interesting as it may be, is highly complex. One needs to determine which content can be said to point to 'Jewishness', as opposed to Jewish content that would have been available to members of other religions, either due to their familiarity with the Hebrew Bible or merely by association with Jewish magical practitioners. A good example is the much-discussed lead tablet from Hadrumetum, seeking to secure the love of a man named Urbanus for a woman named Domitiana.[6] Although referring, for instance, to 'the god of Abraan' (Αβρααν) and the 'Iao of Iacos' (Ιακου), it is clear that the person who inscribed the tablet lacked sufficient familiarity with the Jewish names and biblical narratives to have been a Jew. A broad survey of published curse tablets indicates that no exclusive Jewish content appears on any of them.

The absence of Jewish curse tablets can hardly be attributed to a chance distribution of archaeological discoveries.[7] Such a scenario would be intriguing, since the region of Judaea and Syria has yielded several dozens of metal *lamellae* that have been used and produced by Jews, and more such items derive from other regions, such as Egypt, Iraq, and Georgia.[8] These *lamellae*, however, aim (almost) exclusively at apotropaic, healing, and other favourable goals. In other words: they are metal amulets, not curses. On the other hand, excavations in Syria-Palaestina brought to light quite a few lead curse tablets, most of which are yet unpublished.[9] The ones that have been published belong to the following categories, well known from the world of Greco-Roman magic:

1. juridical curses[10]
2. curses related to competitions in the hippodrome and circus[11]
3. economic curses[12]
4. erotic curses[13]
5. curses aiming to physically harm another individual, but stating no motivation[14]

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6 Audollent 1904, no. 271. See further Saar 2017, 45 (with previous literature), 253.
7 Saar 2017, 256–257.
8 For a recent survey, see Eshel and Leiman 2010 and Elitzur-Leiman forthcoming.
9 The total number of these items seems to be over one hundred.
10 E.g., from Beit Shean, see Youtie and Bonner 1937, 43–72, and *SGD* no. 164; from Jerusalem, see Ben Ami, Tchekhanovets and Daniel 2013.
11 E.g., from Antioch, see Hollmann 2003; from Caesarea, see Daniel 2011a.
12 E.g., from Caesarea, see Daniel 2011b.
13 Unpublished, from Caesarea.
14 E.g., from the Hebron region, see Lifshitz 1970, 81–83, and *SGD* no. 163; from Antioch, see Hollmann 2011.

And yet, among these magical products one finds no explicitly Jewish material. None of them contains words in Aramaic or Hebrew (not even transliterated ones), they do not derive from archaeological contexts related to a Jewish milieu, nor do they contain identifiable Jewish names. As far as content is concerned, a few of them include allusions to Jewish topoi, referring, for instance, to 'the one who bound the quadruped of Pharaoh'[15] or to Iao who 'struck the chariot of Pharaoh' and 'cut down the firstborn of Egypt'.[16] Such Biblical stories, however, were by that period known to non-Jews as well, and the allusions are sufficiently general as to derive from a Christian and even polytheistic source.[17] To conclude, none of the five criteria which I proposed to identify a curse tablet as Jewish rendered any results.

A cautionary note is, however, necessary: maybe there *are* Jewish curse tablets among those found in Syria-Palaestina and at other places throughout the Roman Empire, but they cannot be identified as such. If a Jew were to visit a non-Jewish magician and request their service in producing a curse tablet, there would be no way of distinguishing it from those inscribed for a non-Jewish client: it would be written in Greek or Latin, appealing to the pervasive Greco-Roman supernatural entities, and the beneficiary's name would probably not appear on it to begin with. And even if it did appear, it might still be undistinguishable from the surrounding onomasticon. Consequently, such a Jewish curse tablet would remain undetected. Yet to this cautionary note one ought to add a counter-caveat. Assuming that the above scenario is correct, and the absence of clearly identifiable Jewish curse tablets stems from the fact that Jews resorted to non-Jewish magicians for this enterprise, one still needs to ask: why? Why would Jews, who certainly had a prosperous network of Jewish magical practitioners – those who produced the metal amulets and composed the magic manuals – prefer to enlist the services of non-Jews for producing written curses and binding spells?

To conclude, returning to the three categories that can qualify curse tablets as Jewish, it seems that: no clear-cut evidence could be found for category a; category b cannot be proven; and for category c there is only ambiguous evidence. Thus, the answer to the question 'Are there no Jewish curse tablets?' is: 'None that we can identify so far'.

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15 Daniel 2011b, line 2: ὁ συνδήσας τὸ τετράπουν τοῦ Φαραώ.

16 Hollmann 2011, side A, lines 11–12: ὡς ἔβαλες τὼ ἅ<ρ>μα τοῦ Φαραῶνος; line 14: ὡς ἐξέκωψης τὰ πρωτότυκα τῖς Ἠγύπτου.

17 For additional examples, see Van der Horst 2006.

3 Jewish, but not curse tablets

It appears that late-antique Syria-Palaestina has yielded Jewish magical texts inscribed on metal tablets, as well as curses inscribed on metal tablets, yet the two groups never overlap. Or almost never. There are several exceptions that rest on the threshold between typical curse tablets and magical artefacts of a different form. It is these borderline items that will be discussed below.

The first exception that may count as a Jewish curse tablet consists of a thin strip of metal, originally rolled, that was discovered during archaeological excavations at the synagogue of Meroth (Ḥorvat Marish) in Galilee (fig. 1).[18] This tablet or *lamella* is made of bronze and dated to the first half of the seventh century CE. It contains a text in Hebrew and Aramaic covering twenty-six lines. Its beneficiary was a man named Yose son of Zenobia, who wished to suppress his townspeople:[19]

> Just as the sky is suppressed before God, and the earth is suppressed before human beings, and human beings are suppressed before death, and death is suppressed before God, so may the inhabitants of this town be suppressed and broken and fallen before Yose son of Zenobia.

The rolled tablet was found buried beneath the threshold of the eastern entrance to the synagogue, ensuring contact with – and consequently impact on – every person who entered the building. This text may be classified under more than one heading: it is first and foremost a subjection or suppression spell (כבוש), similar to those encountered in the *PGM*.[20] Additionally, I believe it may be viewed as a spell for grace and favour (חן וחסד), although this term does not appear explicitly in the text. From the fact that the text targets all 'the inhabitants of this town' rather than specific individuals, it would seem that Yose wished to obtain social success with the members of his community. A thin line divides the aspiration 'may my word and my hearing be imposed on them' from the hope that one would be regarded favourably by one's peers.[21]

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18 Ilan 1989; Naveh 1985; Naveh and Shaked 1993, Amulet 16 (IAA 84–317). See also Bohak 2009.

19 Naveh and Shaked 1993, Amulet 16 (IAA 84–317), lines 11–20:
הך מה דשמיה כבישין קודם אלהא וארעה כבישה קודם בני אנשה ובני אנשה {כבישין} כבישין קודם מותה
ומותה כביש קודם אלהא כדין יהוון עמה דהדה קרתא כבישין ות[ב]ירין ונפילין קודם יוסי בר דזינביה

20 See, e.g., *PGM* VII.459–461, VII.925–939, or X.36–50, in which the practitioner or beneficiary need to step upon an inscribed metal tablet, thus physically emphasising the act of suppression. The first among these is an erotic curse, while the other two are defined as 'subjection spells' (ὑποτακτικόν). I thank Christopher Faraone for suggesting these parallels.

21 Lines 10–11: יהווי מימרי ומשמעי עליהון. Naveh and Shaked translated משמעי as 'my obe-

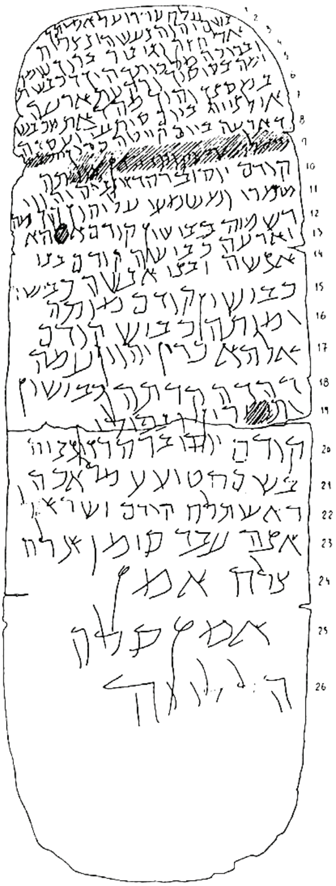

Fig. 1: Bronze tablet from Meroth. Drawing by Ada Yardeni. After Naveh and Shaked 1993 (Amulet 16).

dience', but I prefer the translation of Sokoloff 1990, 335, since 'hearing' is more suitable in this context. See also the partial parallel adduced by Naveh 1985, 374, from the Genizah recipe T-S K 1.143: היבו לי חנה וחנה ושפרה באפי כל מן דחמי לי ושמע קל מימרי, 'bring me grace and grace (sic) and beauty in the eyes of all who see me and hear the sound of my word'. In addition to the spells discussed in Naveh 1985, the Cairo Genizah has yielded a medieval amulet displaying some similarities to the Meroth *lamella*. T-S K 1.165 (unpublished) was written on behalf of a man named Eleazar ha-Cohen, son of Nathan and Gania and sought to provide him with grace and favour in the eyes of all, and especially in the eyes of *Qadi* (judge) Abu al-Futuḥ Ibn Ḥurriah Ibn Abu al-Faḍal Ismail. The text employs, among other sources, a recipe for subjection containing the words 'suppressed as the earth is suppressed under the sky and as the sand under the sea', כבישין כמא דארעא כבישה תחות שמיה וכחלא תחות ימה (verso, lines 56–58). It also seeks to have all men 'as dust under his feet', כעפרא תחת רגליו (verso, lines 20–21).

Another Aramaic bronze tablet, derived from the ‘small’ (lower) synagogue of Bar’am in Galilee, is sometimes regarded as an exception to the absence of Jewish curse tablets.[22] As opposed to the fully preserved text from Meroth, this *lamella* is fragmentary (five lines are missing or illegible), but the preserved words make its intention clear: ‘guard the […] of Judan son of Nonna against the speech of the mouth and the singing […]’.[23] Although the aim of the text may resemble silencing curses, its focus is different. The surviving lines do not require binding the mouths of Judan’s (specific) opponents, but merely protecting him from evil speech. The initial invocation of angels (Gabriel, Naḥamel) again contrasts with the typical addressees of curse tablets. Thus, while Bohak 2008, 156, includes this *lamella* in a discussion of ‘writing an aggressive magical text intended to subdue or silence one’s opponents’, I believe there is no reason to regard the Bar’am Aramaic *lamella* as anything other than a regular amulet, aimed (perhaps among other things) at protecting its user from slander and adverse speech.[24]

A second notable exception to Jewish curse tablets is the Aramaic inscribed potshard from Ḥorvat Rimmon, which was used to ignite love in the heart of a woman (fig. 2).[25]

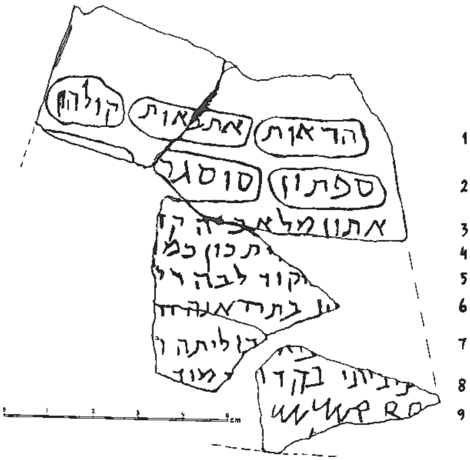

Fig. 2: Inscribed potshard from Ḥorvat Rimmon. Drawing by Ada Yardeni. After Naveh and Shaked 1998 (Amulet 10).

22 Naveh 2001.
23 Naveh 2001, lines 3–5: תטו[ר] [..]ה דיודן ברה דנונה ותטר [יתה] [מ]ן ממללה דפמה ומן זמר[תה]
24 For silencing spells in the Jewish and other magical traditions, see Saar 2015, 34–37.
25 Naveh and Shaked 1998, Amulet 10; see also Naveh and Shaked 1993, 219; Bohak 2008, 156–158, 287; Harari 2017, 211–213; Saar 2017, 116–120.

hr'wt 'tb'wt qwlhwn sptwn swsgr [*mkmr*]

You ho[ly] angels [...], [I adjure] you just as [this shard] [burns (in the fire) so shall] burn the heart of R[achel daughter] [of Mar?]ian after me, I [...]

This artefact, dated to the fifth or sixth century CE, resembles a typical erotic curse of the 'burning procedure' (ἔμπυρον) in its stated aim (modifying the emotions of another person, and subsequently, her behaviour), its appeal to supernatural forces, the inclusion of *charakteres*, and partially, the metaphoric vocabulary employed.[26] A Greek parallel appears in *PGM* XXXVI.187–210, which contains an adjuration of Hecate to be inscribed on an unbaked *ostrakon* with a copper stylus. The Ḥorvat Rimmon shard differs, nonetheless, from typical curse tablets in the medium employed (clay rather than lead), the mode of employment (burning rather than burying or tossing into a water source), and the nature of the supernatural entities invoked (angels rather than chthonic entities). Thus, it cannot be fully classified as a curse tablet. Interestingly, the shard from Ḥorvat Rimmon is not only the earliest product of Jewish love magic, but also attests a very popular practice, since recipes describing the same practice ritual and listing the same magical formula abound in later Jewish sources, from the medieval period up to the twentieth century.[27]

One last exception that should be noted here, although it derives from a different geographical setting, are several Babylonian magic bowls that show intriguing affinities to Greco-Roman curse tablets.[28] These have been discussed in detail elsewhere,[29] so it suffices to recapitulate the main similarities. The vast majority of these bowls, roughly dated from the fourth to the eighth centuries CE, display apotropaic and healing aims, thus differing from the world of curses. However, some of them fall under a different class. There are bowls for overturning the curses of one's enemies upon their sender (thus resembling prayers for revenge or for justice), bowls meant to silence the (named) enemies of the beneficiary, others that seek to generate love or hate, and other bowls that are overtly aggressive, mentioning no reason for the curses they include. A few bowl texts appeal to the dead and some con-

הראות אתבאות קולהון ספתון סוסגר [מכמר] אתון מלאכיה קד[ישיה ...] [אשבעית] יתכון כמ[ה דהדין חספא
(יקוד) בנורא כן] יקוד לבה דר]חל ברתה [דמר]ין בתרי אנה [...]

26 For burning metaphors in Jewish magic and the way they differ from Greek and Roman ones, see Saar 2013; Saar 2019. For Greek ἔμπυρα spells, see Faraone 1989; Faraone 1999, especially 26, 50–51, 58–60.

27 For other, non-Jewish examples, see Saar 2017, 120.

28 These bowls are written in Jewish Aramaic or in Mandaic, but not in Syriac.

29 Saar 2015.

tain rituals conducted in funerary contexts, including burying the bowls in a cemetery.[30] The following passage is an illustrative example:[31]

> In the same way as you have eyes but do not see, as you have ears but do not hear, so shall you give me a stone from you to silence from me, I, Berik-Yehabia son of Mama, the mouth of all people who stand against me, as well as the mouth of Dadgushnasp, son of his mother.

It is possible that the similarities between these bowls and Greco-Roman curse tablets stem from ritual transfer and an acquaintance of practitioners in Babylonia with the latter – possibly through contacts with Jews in Palestine – though this is not necessarily the case.

Information on the Jewish counterparts to curse tablets derives not only from the material record but also from the literary one. A survey of late-antique recipe manuals, including fragments preserved in later, medieval versions, indicates that Jews were aware of the use of aggressive and binding magical practices for a variety of ends, ranging from juridical to sportive, erotic, and generally destructive. For example, *Sefer Ha-Razim* (*The Book of Mysteries*) includes several recipes intended to send angels of wrath and fury

> onto your enemy or your creditor, or to capsize a ship, or to demolish a fortified wall, or against any business of your enemies, to damage and destroy, whether you desire to exile him, or to make him bedridden, or to blind him, or to lame him or to grieve him in any thing …[32]

The recipes that follow, however, consist in oral practices and manipulation of *materia magica*, not the inscribing of texts that might resemble curse tablets.[33] Other recipes, however, are more similar to curse tablets. One of them, titled 'If you wish to disturb the sleep of your enemy', instructs the practitioner to inscribe a lead *lamella* with several names of supernatural entities ('angels'), utter an incantation, and then insert the product into the

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30 In this context it is worth mentioning the human skull inscribed in Aramaic with what is probably a love-inducing formula (Vorderasiatisches Museum, Berlin, VA.2458), for which see Levene 2006, 368–372; Saar 2017, 126–128.

31 Naveh and Shaked 1998, Bowl 6, lines 4–6; Levene 2013, 124:
כמה דעינין לכון ולא חמתון אודנין לכון ולא שמעיתון כן תיתנו לי אבן מנכוןכון לשתקא מיני אנה בריך יהביה בר ממא {פ}פומה דכל בני אינשה דקימין לקובלי ופום דדגושנסף בר אימה

32 English translation from Morgan 1983. For the Hebrew, see Rebiger and Schäfer 2009, § 42.
ואם ביקשתה לשלחם על שונאך או על בעל חובך או להפוך אנייה או להפיל חומה בצורה או לכל עסק אויביך להשחית ולהרע. בין שתרצה להגלותו ובין להפילו במיטה ובין להכהות מאור עיניו בין להאסירו ברגליו בין להצר לו לכל דבר.

33 Some of the formulae to be recited, however, are reminiscent of the language of *defixiones*, e.g., *Sefer Ha-Razim*, First Firmament, lines 68–69 (Rebiger and Schäfer 2009, § 47):
אם בעל חובך הוא אמור כן: שתיסתמו את פיו ותבטלו עצתו ולא יעליני במחשבתו ולא יביאיני לתוך דברי פיו ושאהיה עובר לפניו לא יראיני בעיניו

mouth of a black dog who never saw light, sealing it with wax and a ring on which a lion is incised.[34] A partial parallel to this recipe is found in another Jewish handbook of magic, *Ḥarba de-Moshe* (*The Sword of Moses*): 'To send a dream against someone, write on a silver plate from ʾBNSNS to QYRYWʾS (supernatural names) and place (it) in the mouth of a cock and slaughter it (…)'.[35] Here, as in *Sefer Ha-Razim*, the formula to be written on the metal *lamella* consists only of names, while the one to be recited contains the actual curse. Were such magical 'finished products' to be discovered by other persons, either the spell target or the authorities, they would be unaware of the aggressive ritual lying behind them, unless familiar with the magic manual, and even then they would be unable to detect whom the target – or the beneficiary – were.

A total of sixteen recipes in *Sefer Ha-Razim* employ metal as a writing medium.[36] Of these, only one, quoted above, requires the use of lead, while the others make use of bronze, iron, tin, silver or gold *lamellae*. The aims of these recipes are not necessarily aggressive: some are intended to heal a person, to protect a pregnant woman from evil spirits, to expel wild animals from a town, or to prevent the sea or a river from overflowing a town. Others, however, show affinities with the aims of curse tablets. One *lamella* (unspecified metal) seeks to subdue the citizens of a city and prevent them from speaking evil against the beneficiary, and is thus similar to subjection spells; another (copper) is meant to return a fugitive slave, and its words are somewhat similar to Greek 'attraction spells' (ἀγωγή); one (silver) aims to dissolve hate and obtain favour;[37] another (silver) to win at horse races (by enhancing the swiftness of the horses and protecting them from magic, but not by harming the opponents' horses);[38] and two *lamellae* (tin and copper) seek to win the heart of a woman. It is interesting to note that, just like the lead tablet described above, none of these should contain a formula that

34 *Sefer Ha-Razim*, Second Firmament, lines 63–72 (Rebiger and Schäfer 2009, § 137–140): אם בקשת לשום אויבך מטורף בשינה קח ראש כלב שחור שלא ראה אור מימיו וקח ציץ פסוכרופורון וכתוב עליו אלה המלאכים ואמור כך. On this recipe, see Bellusci 2017.

35 Harari 1997a, 42 (for the English translation, see Harari 2012, 89): לשדורי חלמא על חברך כת' על טסא דכספא מן אבנסנס ועד קיריואס ואחית בפום תרנגלא ושחוט יתיה. A similar spell can be found in *PGM* IV.1815–1829, bearing the title 'Sword of Dardanos'. For a recent discussion, see Faraone forthcoming 2021. I am grateful to Christopher Faraone for sharing his article.

36 See Bohak 2008, 174, note 77 for the full list.

37 While this text may resemble an amulet, the words 'nullify the thought concerning me of N son of N and the intention of his heart and his plot. Let his mouth be unable to speak against me' are reminiscent of silencing spells.

38 This silver *lamella* is to be buried in the hippodrome, just like Greco-Roman curse tablets aimed against charioteers, but its wording resembles protective amulets rather than curses.

might disclose their purpose to the uninitiated, or any personal names. The accompanying magical practice was an oral, not a scribal one.

Magical recipes preserved in medieval manuscripts, primarily those uncovered in the Cairo Genizah, sometimes display even closer affinities to Greco-Roman curse tablets.[39] An interesting example, written in a combination of Judaeo-Arabic (the instructions) and Aramaic (the formula), aims to bring illness upon a person, by inscribing a text on a lead tablet and burying it where the intended target resides:[40]

> Another (charm). It should be written on a plate of lead and buried in the house of whom you wish. And this is what you should write: This writing is designated for NN, that he should melt and drip and be tormented and cast on a sickbed, in the name of *'w 'w nwq'k qhtk qdytk 'plwq 'w 'w kyt'wn and š'qṣw* is his name.

Were archaeologist to discover such a 'finished product', it would conform to a typical curse tablet, both in terms of form as of content, but with the language being Aramaic. So far, however, no such items have been brought to light.

Summing up, it can be shown that in principle, Jews in Late Antiquity were aware of the existence of curse tablets, and included recipes for producing items partly or fully resembling these in their magic manuals. Nonetheless, some exceptions excluded, it seems that Jews did not take part in the world of curse tablets, at least not in ways that can be ascertained. Furthermore, they did not develop their own distinctive alternative to Greco-Roman curse tablets, although it appears that magical items that display similarities to these exhibit several differences from the latter, not just in form (e.g., use of clay rather than metal, use of bronze, tin, and silver rather than lead) but also in a broader sense. There seems to have been a reticence towards inscribing full curse formulae. Most recipes shown above require that a list of names is inscribed, with a formula to be uttered over the written text, and, sometimes, a further manipulation of *materia magica*. Greco-Roman curse and binding rituals, on the other hand, include the inscription of a formula, containing at times the names of the target and the spell beneficiary.

39 Some medieval recipes from the Cairo Genizah reflect much earlier, late-antique texts, as was eloquently demonstrated by Gideon Bohak in several instances. See, e.g., Bohak 2009.

40 Naveh and Shaked 1998, Geniza 6 (T-S K 1.73), manuscript page 3, lines 14–19, page 4, lines 1–3:

חורן יוכתב עלא צפיחת אנך ויטמר פי אלבית אלדי תריד והאדא אלדי תוכ<תב> מזמן הדן כתבה לפ ב פ דיהווי שיח ודייב ומדנק ומטלק בערס מרעה בשם או או נוקאך קהתך קדיתך אפלוק או או כיתאון ושאקצו שמו

For other examples, see Bohak 2008, 144–147; Bohak 2011, 335–338.

So where are the late-antique Jewish curses in Syria-Palaestina and elsewhere? Could Jews have used a different medium, a perishable or an oral one? Possibly, but then we would expect to find traces in the historical record. This is not absolutely necessary, since the Babylonian magic bowls, of which thousands have been in existence from the fourth to the eighth century, are never mentioned in the rabbinic literature and most intriguingly in the Babylonian Talmud. Thus, one cannot learn from the silence of the sources about the absence of practices, but this situation is nonetheless intriguing. My hypothesis is that there is a reason for the absence of Jewish curse tablets, and this reason is conceptual, not magical. I suggest that this absence stems from a reticence on the part of Jews in Late Antiquity to express *in writing* something that may have been perceived as unjustified aggression.

4 The curse that wasn't there

Curses in the ancient Jewish tradition – taken in the broad sense of speech-acts, oral or written – differed from Greco-Roman curses. They required a justification, in this sense resembling prayers for justice.[41] I would argue that the Jewish attitude towards curses and their justifiability may be said to go back to biblical times, continues to be reflected in the rabbinic literature, and eventually may be identified also in the Jewish magical tradition.

As early as 1914 William Sherwood Fox attempted to find a connection between early, biblical Hebrew curses and the Greek curse tablets.[42] As was subsequently demonstrated, such imprecations may be linked to much later curses against thieves.[43] One thing both classes of rituals share is the underlying concept of justified aggression. A similar situation may be observed when reading the Psalms, many of which contain imprecatory elements.[44] The imprecations are reactive, being directed against those defined as enemies – of the Psalmist, of God, or both. Other biblical passages and later rabbinic sources convey a similar attitude. Curses, mostly understood in an oral form, tend to be prohibited unless deserved. Proverbs 26:2 poetically reflects this notion: 'As the bird by wandering, as the swallow by flying, so the curse causeless (קללת חנם) shall not come'.[45] The last words of the verse

41 A similar ritual idiosyncrasy may be observed in the lead tablets from Roman Britain.
42 Sherwood Fox 1914.
43 Faraone, Garnand and López-Ruiz 2005.
44 The number of imprecatory psalms ranges between 18 and 39, depending on the interpretation of the term 'imprecation'.
45 כַּצִּפּוֹר לָנוּד כַּדְּרוֹר לָעוּף כֵּן קִלְלַת חִנָּם לא [לוֹ] תָבֹא.

have been interpreted to mean 'the curse causeless shall come to him [the curser]', by replacing the word לא (not) with לו (to him).[46] When so read the verse appears to refer to birds that wander yet return to their nests, like the unjustified curse is supposed to return to the person who produced it. Moreover, some interpreters referred to both words simultaneously, suggesting that the verse means: the unjustified curse shall not come to pass (לא תבוא), but instead shall return to him [the curser] (לו תבוא).[47] In any event, the verse illustrates the notion that unjustified curses are either ineffective, or outright dangerous to those who produce them, or both. This verse is mentioned in the Babylonian Talmud (BT Makkot 11a), along with a contradictory statement: 'The curse of a sage, even when undeserved (causeless, בחנם), comes to pass'.[48] The same dictum attributing a superior force to a sage's curse is repeated in BT Berakhot 56a and BT Sanhedrin 90a. Conversely, the Talmudic dictum implies that the curse of someone who is *not* among the sages, will *not* come to pass if undeserved.[49] The curse, though seemingly supposed to function automatically, is nonetheless rooted in a moral system (or a legal one). Thus, if unjustified, even if all its technical aspects have been fulfilled, the curse will not come to pass or, to follow some interpreters of Proverbs 26:2, it will return to its sender.

On the other hand, when deemed justified, it was considered legitimate to use supernatural means of aggression, such as curses or bans.[50] These would be regarded as retribution or reaction to previous wrongdoings. A case in point is the story of the violent man who was bullying a rabbinic scholar and ultimately found his death after a ritual conducted in a cemetery (BT Mo'ed Qatan 17a). Not all wrongdoings, however, necessarily conform to our moral perceptions. Both in the Hebrew Bible and in later rabbinic writings one encounters curses that seem unwarranted, such as the prophet Elisha cursing the children who mocked him and causing them to be devoured by bears (2 Kings 2:23–24), or the rabbi excommunicating a woman who spoke disparagingly of his mater's physique and causing her death (BT Nedarim

46 The interpretation is given, e.g., by Rashi.

47 See the commentary on this verse by Gersonides (Ralbag, fourteenth century) or the Malbim (Meir Leibush ben Yehiel Michel Wisser, nineteenth century).

48 קללת חכם אפילו בחנם היא באה.

49 Nonetheless, the rabbis advocate caution even with the curses of other people: 'And Rabbi Yitzḥak said: "Never regard the curse of an ordinary person lightly"' (BT Bava Qama 93a; the same warning is attributed also to other sages, see BT Megilla 15a). For curses in the early rabbinic literature, especially in connection to magic, see Harari 1997b, and for additional aspects of rabbinic supernatural aggressions, see Turan (Tamas) 2008.

50 See, e.g., PT Moed Qatan 3, 1. For medieval bans and excommunication formularies, see Weiss 1977.

50b, below). Yet these stories do not contain criticism against the cursers and would seem to imply that, to their writers, this was justified aggression.

Some rabbinic attitudes to imprecations, as well as their biblical basis, may be glimpsed from the following Talmudic passage:[51]

One day [Herod] came and sat before [the sage Bava ben Buta] [without identifying himself, in order to test him].

He [Herod] said: 'See, Master, what this evil slave Herod is doing.'
He [Bava] said to him: 'What should I do to him?'
He [Herod] said to him: 'The Master should curse him.'
He [Bava] said to him: 'But it is written: "Do not curse the king, not even in your thoughts" (Ecclesiastes 10:20).'
He [Herod] said to him: 'He is not a king [since he rules illegally].'
He [Bava] said to him: 'And even if he were merely a rich man [I would not curse him], as it is written: "And do not curse a rich person in your bedchamber" (Ecclesiastes 10:20). And even if he were only a leader [I would not curse him], as it is written: "And you shall not curse a leader among your people" (Exodus 22:27).'
(…) [Herod] said to him: 'I am he. Had I known that the Sages were so cautious [with their words] I would not have killed them.'

Needless to say, there also were rabbis acting less 'carefully' than Bava ben Buta's personage in the above passage. The Talmudic corpus contains stories of sages who harm others (including their own colleagues) for reasons that are not elucidated or may not seem justified to a modern eye. For instance, Rabbi Judah of Nehardea became furious when a woman referred to his late master, Rav Samuel, with unfavourable terms, describing him as a short, fat man with large teeth. 'He said to her: "Did you come here to disparage him? Let that woman be excommunicated!" She burst and died' (BT Nedarim 50b). Such stories are adduced as evidence of the rabbis' superior powers, perhaps also as a warning not to interfere with them, lest one be cursed (even for no good reason) and subsequently harmed. Nonetheless, they do not contradict the general impression that a curse had to be justified in order to achieve its end, with the rabbinic orders being an exception to this rule.

I do not claim, nor wish to imply, that Jews in Late Antiquity refrained from cursing for unjustified motives. It is perfectly conceivable that some Jews cursed (aloud or in mind only) with no justification: out of envy, jealousy, or self-benefitting motives, such as wanting their favourite team to win the horse races. However, the written evidence adduced above suggests that unjustified cursing was not socially acceptable. Cursing was viewed as more than a technical speech-act; it had to conform to a moral/legal system. It

51 BT Bava Batra 3b–4a; English translation based on www.sefaria.org. On this passage, see Feintuch 2011.

seems unlikely that people would commit to writing something that wholly contradicted their social norms.

Consequently, I suggest that conceptual differences between cultures about what is right and wrong – or about what can be expressed in writing as such – are reflected in the case of Jewish *written* curses in Late Antiquity. Jews seem to have abstained from resorting to typical curse tablets when these would entail curses to benefit oneself while one suffered no harm. Binding procedures appear to have been more acceptable, because they were either reactive or were not perceived as harmful (and there is, indeed, a difference between the request to make a person fall in love and a request to make them fall ill). We have no way of knowing what people thought or expressed orally, so it is impossible to comment on that, but one may comment on what they allowed themselves to articulate in written words. Here, the evidence from silence indicates that Jews in Late Antiquity did not express unjustified aggression in writing.

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