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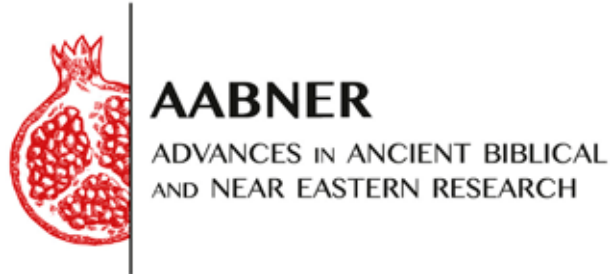
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AMULETS AND ANCESTORS: JEWISH WOMEN’S REPRODUCTIVE AGENCY IN LATE ANTIQUITY

Sari Fein

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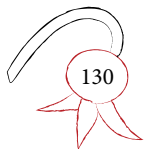
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Keywords: amulets, critical fabulation, fertility, incantation bowl,
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Abstract

This article investigates a Jewish Aramaic incantation bowl dating to between the fifth and the eighth centuries CE that is currently housed at the Museu da Farmácia Lisbon (Inv. 10895). It focuses on a biblical quotation, Gen 30:22, which is deployed on the bowl in the context of an incantation for fertility for a female client named Mihranahid. It locates this incantation within an inherited tradition of biblical matriarchs, such as Rachel, who were invoked in magical and non-magical settings in late antiquity because of the efficacy they were understood to have as the ancestors of late antique Jewish women. The article argues that the use of this quotation exemplifies how some Jewish women utilized *imitative magic* in order to assert agency over their reproductive lives.



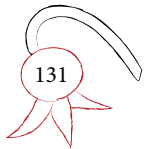
Dieser Beitrag untersucht eine jüdisch-aramäische Zauberschale aus dem 5. bis 8. Jahrhundert n. Chr., die derzeit im Museu da Farmácia Lisbon (Inv. 10895) aufbewahrt wird. Die vorliegende Studie konzentriert sich auf das Bibelzitat aus Gen. 30,22, das auf der Schale im Rahmen einer Beschwörung für die Fruchtbarkeit der Kundin namens Mihranahid verwendet wird. Der Zauberspruch kann in eine übernommene Tradition biblischer Matriarchinnen wie Rachel eingeordnet werden. Diese Matriarchinnen wurden aufgrund der Wirksamkeit, die ihnen als Vorfahren spätantiker jüdischer Frauen zugeschrieben wurde, in magischen und nicht-magischen Kontexten angerufen. Es wird gezeigt, dass die Verwendung dieses Zitats als Beispiel dafür steht, wie einige jüdische Frauen nachahmende Magie einsetzten, um Einfluss auf ihre Fruchtbarkeit zu nehmen.



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AMULETS AND ANCESTORS: JEWISH WOMEN’S REPRODUCTIVE AGENCY IN LATE ANTIQUITY

Sari Fein



Introduction

Sometime between the fifth and eighth centuries CE, a woman named Mihranahid, presumably married and of childbearing age, found herself unable to become pregnant. Her experience of infertility, however long it may have lasted, prompted her to commission an incantation bowl, a type of amulet, from a local ritual expert.¹ This earthenware bowl, 181 mm in diameter, is currently housed at the Museu da Farmácia in

¹ On referring to incantation bowls as amulets, see Ahuvia 2018, 232–33: “Notably, some incantation bowls refer to themselves as amulets (*qmy*”), the same term used for personalized amulets worn around the neck ... Bowl-amulets intended for the home ought to be placed on the same spectrum of ritual practice as amulets worn around the neck or those placed on the door, such as the mezuzah, or those worn on one’s arm and head, such as tefillin.”

Lisbon. Its first 5½ lines, inscribed in Jewish Babylonian Aramaic in an “ornate and elegant” hand (Bhayro 2017, 107), read:

1. Šn May there be healing from
heaven for Mihranahid
2. daughter of Aḥat, who is called
Kuṭus, by *dqyš qdyšh*
3. and by *ḥqyr*, the lord of mysteries,
that you will place the wine of
life in the bowels of Mihranahid
daughter of Aḥat,
4. who is called Aḥat {Kuṭu} Kuṭus.
And she will have living and
abiding children. By the name of
gptr wgpt'l
5. *snpt wsnplt'l tṭt yṭ yhw*
Amen, Amen, Selah. ‘And God
remembered Rachel, and God
listened
6. to her, and He opened her womb’
(Gen 30:22). ‘And He remembered.’²



² Translation and transcription are from Bhayro 2017. Bhayro notes on Šn: “It is possible that the text contained more writing in the centre, perhaps including an abortive attempt to write *לשמך*—the nun in *שנ* is unclear, and could be the start of a mem.” On *dqyš qdyšh*, he notes: “The phrase *קדישה בידקיש* could be understood as ‘by *ydqyš qdyšh*’, or ‘by the holy *ydqyš*’. I prefer to understand the phrase as containing a pun between *dqyš* and *qdyšh*.” Bhayro 2017, 110.

The following lines of the inscription, which will not be the focus of this article, continue: “I beswear you, O subdued ones, O subdued ones. Your face is the face of a lowly creature, your horn is a conspicuous horn./ *yhw* shall strike you, He shall bring you to an end. So you shall die if you come near or if you touch the flesh, the body, the bowel, the spleen, and the two hundred and fifty-two / members that there are in her, and the sixty-six members of the body of Mihranahid daughter of Aḥat, who is called Kuṭus. ‘And *yhw* said unto Satan, *yhw* / rebuke you, O Satan,

This incantation, which invokes the figure of Rachel by quoting Gen 30:22 (“And God remembered Rachel, and God listened to her, and He opened her womb”), appears in the context of an adjuration that there be “healing from heaven” for Mihranahid so that she may conceive. Its appearance provides evidence for how some Jewish women in late antiquity deployed their inherited scriptural tradition, particularly with regard to the literary archetype of the “barren matriarch.” Not only Rachel, but additional matriarchs, such as Sarah and Rebekah, were invoked in other types of magical objects, as I discuss below. For female clients like Mihranahid who commissioned incantation bowls, invocations like this represented an attempt to exercise agency over a debilitating social and physiological condition: infertility.³ The incantations were an effort at manipulating the supernatural forces, whether God or demons, who were understood to control the activity of women’s wombs. By invoking the inherited tradition of Rachel, this client hoped to access *imitative magic*: as God remembered Rachel and opened her womb, so too Mihranahid hoped that God would remember her and help her conceive.



The Context of the Aramaic Magic Bowls

The Jewish Aramaic magic bowl from the Museu da Farmácia Lisbon (Inv. 10895) is part of a corpus of Sassanian empire incantation bowls that date from between the fifth and eighth centuries CE

even *yhw* that has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you. Is this not a brand plucked out of the fire?’ (Zech 3:2). Amen, Amen, Selah.”

³ I am indebted to Shira Eliassian’s work on the women mentioned in the Aramaic incantation bowls. In her essay “The Matrons of Mesopotamia: The Aramaic Incantation Bowls as an Archive of Motherhood” in *The Aramaic Incantation Bowls in their Late Antique Context*, edited by Alexander W. Marcus and Jason Mokhtarian (The Society of Biblical Literature, Brown Judaic Studies, 2025). Eliassian investigates the bowls from each of three women, including Mihranahid, and analyzes how they function as an “archive of motherhood.” She carefully catalogues how the multiple bowls that each woman commissioned allow us to reconstruct the story of their lives.

(Shaked et al. 2013, 1–27). Over two thousand of these bowls have been unearthed, though only about 25 percent have been published (Gross and Manekin-Bamberger 2022, 5). During this approximately three-hundred-year period, the bowls were commissioned by clients and made by scribal experts who inscribed an incantation and sometimes artwork on the bowls for the purposes of healing and protection and for the clients to take and install in their homes.⁴ They are evidence of a stream of religious thought and practice that is deeply concerned with the impact that supernatural and semi-divine forces could have on an individual's life, and that is premised on confidence in the human ability to manipulate these forces in order to avoid harm and achieve benefit. In this framework, biblical “ancestors” are often called upon to protect clients from malevolent spirits or call divine attention to their condition. These practices were, therefore, perfectly positioned to be deployed by women seeking solutions for their infertility.



The incantation bowls can be understood as evidence of Jewish magical practices that flourished in late antiquity. Yuval Harari offers a definition of Jewish magic that is a helpful tool for recognizing this phenomenon:

At the core of Jewish magical practice is the belief that non-human personal and immensely powerful beings are involved in what goes on in the world. In practice this led to an attempt to rule them by adjurations. Therefore ancient Jewish magic was not founded on impersonal laws but on a belief in the ability of man to impose his will upon supernatural personal beings. (Harari 2005, 94 n. 15)⁵

⁴ We would classify the bowls as “magical” artifacts, defining “magic” as “typically concerned with the more intimate and immediate concerns of the individual, and reflect[ing] minor frictions within society ... [addressing] the worries of the individual concerning problems of health, the assault of malevolent powers, or a lack of control over one’s destiny” (Shaked et al. 2013, 2).

⁵ Harari describes the defining feature of Jewish magical texts as the adjuration: “Adjuration is the focus of magic texts, and as far as may be judged by them, they are also the very heart of the magic acts described therein. In light of this, I believe that a Jewish magic text in its clearest and most reduced sense is an adjuration text” (2005, 119). He describes eight features by which we can identify Jewish adjuration texts (114–15). See also Harari 2017, 170–74.

While historically religion and magic have been understood as distinct and even diametrically opposed phenomena, in recent years scholars have increasingly recognized how often the boundary between the two has been blurred. An interest in historical practices of Jewish magic has exploded in the literature, resulting in new understandings of rituals that have long been sidelined in favor of the study of “normative” Judaism.⁶ The practitioners of Jewish “magic,” however, do not appear to have seen themselves as being outside the norm, considering themselves instead as legitimate inheritors of Jewish textual and ritual traditions. Jewish magical texts can be found throughout Palestine and Babylonia, two centers of Jewish communal, religious, and intellectual life throughout late antiquity.⁷ Incantations on amulets, bowls, and other ritual objects frequently invoke scripture and biblical figures, and many have parallels to rabbinic literature.⁸ The Jewish Babylonian Aramaic incantation bowls, in particular, display evidence of an inherited textual tradition:

A study of the distribution of motifs on the bowls reveals that some bowls contain concentrations of specific traceable literary traditions, including biblical verses and Aramaic targum, liturgical and legal formulae, hekhalot-like motifs, rabbinic figures, and even the Mishnah ... [This] suggests sustained knowledge by some bowl scribes of a distinct reservoir of traditions, along with the deliberate eschewal of traditions common on other bowls. (Gross and Manekin-Bamberger 2022, 6)

A significant topic of concern in magical texts is physical and mental health. There were multiple types of medical practices in antiquity, including scientific practice based on the traditions of Galen and

⁶ See the summary of scholarship in “Magic and the Study of Religion” in Harari 2017, 15–67.

⁷ The types of magical texts differ depending on the geographic context in which they were found: “The material findings testify to the use of metal and clay amulets in Palestine throughout the fifth to seventh centuries, and clay magic bowls in Babylonia for roughly the same period. Archaeological findings teach us that the Palestinian use of amulets was occasionally connected to the synagogue, and that Babylonian Jews primarily made use of bowls in their homes” (Harari 2005, 118).

⁸ See Kanegson 2017; Gross and Manekin-Bamberger 2022; Waller 2022.

Hippocrates; local traditions based on handbooks such as that of Asaph the Physician; and popular medicine as described in the Talmud, which made use of herbs and “practical” remedies (Naveh and Shaked 1993, 31–32). Magical adjurations, which were “concerned with controlling the spirits and subduing the malevolent powers that cause disease” (Naveh and Shaked 1993, 32), provided yet another option for Jews seeking remedies for their health concerns.

Malevolent spirits and powers included those that could negatively impact women’s reproductive health: preventing pregnancy; causing a miscarriage, stillbirth, or neonatal death; or causing complications during childbirth. The bowls preserve numerous incantations that relate to women’s reproductive lives. For example, there are a series of bowls that issue edicts of divorce to Lilith, a female demon who threatens pregnant women, women trying to conceive, women in childbirth, and newborn infants.⁹ The incantations on these bowls follow a divorce formula meant to hinder the demon’s powers, which is also sometimes represented visually by an image of the demon in the center of the bowl bound in chains.¹⁰ In placing these textual traditions in new contexts and to be utilized for new purposes, the creators of the bowls in turn created new meanings and contributed to the inheritance of the tradition of the Hebrew Bible in late antiquity.

The incantation bowl at the Museu da Farmácia contributes to the body of inherited scriptural tradition that centered on maternal experiences such as infertility and conception. In Genesis, the quotation used on Mihranahid’s bowl (Gen 30:22) originally follows the story of Rachel procuring mandrakes (מַדְרָאִים) (known in antiquity as an aphrodisiac and perhaps an aid to conception) from her fertile sister and co-wife, Leah (vv. 14–21). Rachel seems to think the mandrakes may be the answer to her infertility challenges. Other biblical texts preserve a memory of the association between mandrakes and fertility:

⁹ See, as examples, JBA 50–54 in Shaked et al. 2013. The purpose of these bowls is to protect the client from any threat to her reproductive capabilities. Text from a representative example begins thus: “T[h]is is the deed of divorce of the accurse[d] lilit, [which] I [have written] for Immi [daugh]ter of Qa[qa]y” (JBA 50).

¹⁰ On the power of these images, see Lesses 2013.



Song of Songs 7:13, for example, describes how “the mandrakes give forth fragrance” in the context of describing other fertile fruits, including budding vines, opening blossoms, and blooming pomegranates (v. 12).¹¹ While credit for Rachel’s conception is ultimately attributed to the divine, Jewish women in late antiquity who commissioned incantation bowls could have seen themselves as emulating their maternal ancestor in seeking magico-medical remedies for their infertility. While the mandrake, amulet, or bowl was not the ultimate solution to a woman’s challenge, it was the seeking out of this remedy, the indication of desire or desperation, that was understood to prompt God to remember the seeker, open her womb, and allow her to conceive. In this way, bowls like Mihranahid’s represented a way in which Jewish women in late antiquity could deploy their inherited scriptural tradition in order to exercise agency over their own reproductive lives.

There are inherent limitations to any attempt to “reconstruct” the figure of Mihranahid or any other late antique Jewish individual. We cannot know the exact situation that led her to possess an incantation bowl, let alone her inner thought processes or emotional experiences. But exercising an overabundance of caution—and *not* allowing ourselves to imagine this late antique Jewish woman and the world in which she lived—carries its own risks. As Meredith Warren points out: “Being overly cautious in the name of academic suspicion presents its own dangers ... The current minimalist approach to locating Jews in antiquity risks erasing them altogether” (2023, 3). This principle applies to any marginalized group, such as women or enslaved people. Warren urges us to heed Annabel Wharton’s warning: “We are all continually responsible for eliminating the Other through lapses in the idiosyncratic hegemonies of our own memories” (2000, 211).



¹¹ Later tradition, both Jewish and non-Jewish, makes explicit the belief in the potent aphrodisiac and fertility-giving powers of the mandrake. See, for example, Ramban (trans. Chavel, 1971–1976) on Gen 30:15: “And some scholars say that *duda'im* are herbs, which act as a male aphrodisiac, the word being derived from the expression, *the time of 'dodim' (love)*. Therefore Leah said, *Is it a small matter that thou hast taken away my husband?* as I have mentioned.” For more, see Rosner 1980.

In the interest of not eliminating the Other and instead centering them in the telling of this history, I will frame my argument using *critical fabulation*, a type of “alternative storytelling.” The term “critical fabulation” originated with Saidiya Hartman in her 2008 essay “Venus in Two Acts” to describe her reimagining of Venus, an African girl enslaved by the Atlantic slave trade.¹² Mika Ahuvia has written persuasively about the effectiveness of using critical fabulation to center otherwise marginalized populations, such as women, in the study of late antiquity (Ahuvia 2023a). She describes it thus:

Critical fabulation begins with close reading of the evidence and exposes implicit power dynamics, with particular sensitivity to the perspectives of underrepresented figures who have been marginalized in contemporary scholarship. Critical fabulations foregrounds [*sic*] their perspectives using linguistic terminology that would have made sense in their historical, social, and cultural context. (Ahuvia 2023a, 42)

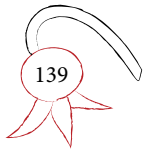


Critical fabulation allows us to work within the silences and gaps of the archive, and yet not be constrained by its walls. While evidence is always subject to multiple interpretations, I venture that it would do more violence to our understanding of the past to assume that women never exercised agency, never making choices about their own reproductive lives, never seeking solutions for their own medical problems, possessing no relationship with the sacred scriptures of their religious tradition. Therefore, throughout this essay I will utilize a “methodology of imagination” (Warren 2023) at certain critical moments to uncover the experiences of Mihranahid, one Jewish woman living in Sassanid Babylonia in late antiquity, experiences that were likely far more common than an overcautious assessment would allow us to believe.

¹² I am cognizant of Maia Kotrosits’ salient critique of the “consumptive” tendency to use Hartman’s theory of critical fabulation as a tool for knowledge production in the late capitalist academy. In my essay I have tried to practice “an ethics of reading that honors incompatibilities and takes its time” (Kotrosits 2024, 7).

Rachel in Genesis 29–30

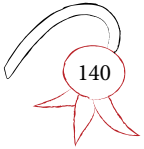
Out of the approximately five hundred Jewish Babylonian Aramaic incantation bowls that have been published, the bowl at the Museu da Farmácia is the only one with an incantation that utilizes Gen 30:22 and invokes Rachel as a maternal ancestor.¹³ The uniqueness of this bowl is somewhat striking, as the story of Rachel is a prime example of the biblical narrative conundrum known as the “barren matriarch archetype.” An analysis of Rachel’s story illuminates why this verse may have been chosen to deploy in a ritual as a way to ensure Mihranahid’s fertility. In Gen 29:31, Rachel is established as a “barren matriarch,” which provides the narrative tension for the following two chapters.¹⁴ Despite being the more beloved wife, for whom Jacob has worked for fourteen years, Rachel is barren (עֲקָרָה). While her co-wife, Leah, bears son after son, Rachel’s womb remains closed. This situation leads Rachel to cry out to her husband: “Give me children, or I shall die!” (Gen 30:1) Jacob, however, cannot give Rachel children. He reminds her that only God has the power to open her womb, asking angrily: “Am I like God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?” (Gen 30:2). Jacob’s words speak to the biblical concept of infertility, wherein a woman’s “natural” state is infertility and God’s active intervention is required to “open the womb” and make her able to conceive. Fertility is “constantly negotiated”; one can experience alternating periods of fertility and infertility, depending on divine activity or inactivity (Moss and Baden 2015, 61).



¹³ “Currently, there are around five hundred bowls inscribed in Jewish Babylonian Aramaic (JBA) and some two hundred more in Syriac and Mandaic that have been deciphered and published; this number is likely to double or even triple in coming years” (Manekin-Bamberger 2025, 2). As nearly 75 percent of incantation bowls thus far unearthed remain unpublished, it is not improbable that further bowls that invoke Rachel will be discovered. Gross and Manekin-Bamberger 2022 suggest as further reading for comprehensive overviews of the incantation bowls: Shaked 2005; Levene 2002; Bohak 2008, 183–93; and Harari 2017, 132–40, 234–51.

¹⁴ Robert Alter places this archetype within what he calls the “type scene” of “the annunciation ... of the birth of the hero to his barren mother” (1978, 359).

Frustrated by Jacob's inability to give her the outcome she desires, Rachel attempts to manipulate the situation by other means. First, she gives her maid Bilhah to Jacob, so that "I [Rachel] may bear upon her knees, and that I may have children from her" (Gen 30:3). I concur with Rachel Havrelock's assessment of this act, which identifies it as a sort of "imitative magic, in which [Rachel] plays the deity causing a woman to conceive in the hopes that the creator will likewise fertilize her" (2008, 166). This act demonstrates that magical performance is present in the reproductive realm even from the inception of this narrative (an idea we later see materially enacted in the incantation bowl). The results of this magic at first appear promising, as Bilhah bears two sons whom Rachel claims as her own, naming them Dan and Naphtali.¹⁵ At Dan's birth, Rachel explicitly states that "God has given *me* a son" (יִתְּנֵנִי לִי בֶן; Gen 30:6, emphasis mine).



Yet Rachel herself has not conceived in her own womb, and her desire to bear her own biological children persists: "The maidservant stratagem proves effective in producing adopted sons, but not in transforming the matriarchal body" (Havrelock 2008, 169). Rachel then pursues a "magico-medical" alternative.¹⁶ Seeing that Reuben, one of Leah's sons, has brought his mother mandrakes from the field, Rachel begs her sister to spare her a few: "Please, give me some of your son's mandrakes" (תִּתֵּנִינָא לִי מְדוּדָאֵי בְּנֶךְ; Gen 30:14). When Leah resists, arguing that Rachel has first stolen her husband and now is attempting to steal her mandrakes, Rachel bargains away a night with Jacob in exchange for the plants. Surrogacy with her handmaid having failed to produce a satisfying conclusion, "by acquiring and, we assume, taking the mandrakes, Rachel shifts her method from imitative to contagious magic" (Havrelock 2008, 169). Contagious magic would suggest that if the mandrakes led to an overabundance of fertility for Leah, perhaps they will do the same for Rachel.

¹⁵ For an analysis of mothers naming their children in the Hebrew Bible, see Bridge 2014. Esther Fuchs summarizes: "The act of naming signifies a recognition of identity, an endowment of new essence and being, and it suggests the namer's authority" (1985, 153).

¹⁶ See the discussion in Ackerman 2015.

Seeking out the mandrakes ultimately proves efficacious, but perhaps not in the way Rachel imagined. Leah bears her fifth and sixth sons, and ultimately a daughter, while Rachel remains barren. Then, and only then, “God remembered Rachel, and God heeded her and opened her womb” (Gen 30:22). The mandrakes, in other words, did not make Rachel fertile. Candida Moss and Joel Baden wonder if this delayed opening may suggest a “subtle Israelite rebuke” of the belief in the curative powers of herbal medicine, rather than divine power (2015, 63–64). However, as Havrelock argues, Rachel’s seeking out of a cure was not, in fact, in vain, for it was a critical step in ending her infertility:

The mandrakes do not cure Rachel’s barrenness, but they do alert God to her desperation and the lengths to which she will go in order to conceive. In other words, the actions that Rachel takes to reverse her situation function as self-initiation into a relationship with God and prove her to be an ambitious mother worthy of a heroic son. Rachel follows a three-part course in protesting her infertility: articulation of discontent, surrogacy, and medicinal aid. God likewise responds with three actions: “God remembered ... listened ... and opened her womb” (Gen 30:22) ... *In the stories of barren women, the occasion of divine remembrance signals that their actions have led to acknowledgment and the reversal of their situation* [emphasis mine] (Havrelock 2008, 173).



Rachel’s behavior in Genesis 30 can be understood as expressing the agency of a barren woman who, by seeking a “magical” solution for her infertility, attracts the attention of the deity and prompts a positive divine response. It should perhaps not be surprising that even centuries later, the biblical story of Rachel would be referenced in an incantation on a magical bowl aimed at ending infertility.

The Literary Reception of Rachel

Analysis of the literature and material culture of later Jewish tradition reveals that different authors developed the concept of Rachel’s maternal agency in various ways. Rabbinic reception of Rachel solidifies her image as a figure who has the capacity to intervene with the deity

by virtue of her maternal role. In rabbinic texts, however, the context for Rachel's intercession is not her infertility but rather her grief for her lost children. Sarit Kattan-Gribetz characterizes the rabbis' idea of Rachel's power as *zekhut avot*, or "ancestral merit." In the rabbinic worldview, ancestral merit was "the idea that the merits of parents, especially fore-parents, continue to offer their descendants favor in the eyes of God and redemption from punishment that these descendants would otherwise (were it not for their ancestors' merits) deserve" (Kattan-Gribetz 2018, 264). In rabbinic literature, Rachel is remembered most clearly for her death in childbirth, which is described in Gen 35:16–20 as a result of her "hard labor" (הַקֶּשֶׁת) during the birth of her second child, Benjamin. Rachel's connection with maternity and grief is used to establish her as an intercessor with God. In both tannaitic and amoraic sources, Kattan-Gribetz observes that Rachel's acts of dying during childbirth and weeping for her children accrued her merit in the eyes of the rabbis. These acts, alongside her "intercessory prayers on behalf of her children in future generations are considered a part of the category of *zekhut avot*, no less effective or powerful than those deeds of her male counterparts" (Kattan-Gribetz 2018, 266). The sources paint a picture of

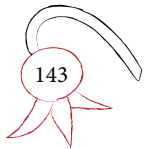


Rachel as an eternal mother of the people of Israel whose barrenness, untimely death, accumulation of merit due to several episodes of loss and self-sacrifice, and her timeless supplications in later generations can intervene in God's judgment of her descendants. They transform Rachel not only into a heavenly maternal intercessor but the most meritorious matriarch, whose merit transcends generations. (Kattan-Gribetz 2018, 280)

As I have argued elsewhere, the image of Rachel as a mourning mother is granted collective importance in the fifth-century midrash *Lamentations Rabbah*, which presents Rachel as a tool of political formation in times of national crisis (Fein 2024). Although the midrash was composed in late antiquity, its literary setting is the destruction of the First Temple in the sixth century BCE during the Babylonian conquest. In an introductory "proem" (*petichta*) to the midrash, Rachel is described as castigating God for sending her children into exile and

allowing them to suffer and die, because of God's jealousy of their worship of idols. It is Rachel's outcry to God, "Why are you jealous of idolatry [lit. *'avodah zarah*], in which there is nothing, and [and why did you] send my children into exile, allow them to be killed by the sword, and let their enemies do to them whatever they desired?!", which prompts God to relent and allow the Israelites, imagined as the Babylonian exiles, to "return to their land."¹⁷ While the scene that immediately preempts Rachel's speech is one that demonstrates her own lack of jealousy—that is, caused by Leah's marriage to Rachel's beloved, Jacob—I argue that reading Rachel's speech in the larger narrative context demonstrates that her speech implicitly centers her role as a mourning mother, which is the position that allows her so much strength vis-à-vis the deity. It is her maternal role that prompts the proof-text at the end of the *petichta*, Jer 31:15–17:

Thus says the LORD:
A voice is heard in Ramah,
lamentation and bitter weeping.
Rachel is weeping for her children;
she refuses to be comforted for her children,
because they are not (כִּי אֵינָנִי).
Thus says the LORD:
Keep your voice from weeping,
and your eyes from tears;
for there is a reward for your work, says the LORD:
[they] shall return from the land of the enemy.



The reason for Rachel's weeping for her children in verse 15, "because they are not [or, no longer/not there]," is ambiguous.¹⁸ In the metaphorical world of Jeremiah 31, in which Rachel is understood as the mother of the people, the "children" she weeps for are the destroyed tribes, her

¹⁷ מפני מה קנאת לע"ז שאין בה ממש והגלית בני, ונהרגו בחרב, ועשו אויבים במ כרצונם
Hebrew from Buber edition of the manuscript. Salomon Buber, ed. *Midrasch Echa Rabbati* (Vilna: Press of Widow and Brothers Romm, 1893).

¹⁸ See the discussion of the difficulties of this verse in the Hermeneia commentary (Holladay and Hanson 1989, 187–88).

children Joseph (and his sons Ephraim and Manasseh) and Benjamin.¹⁹ However, the phrase could also plausibly be a reference to Rachel's experience of infertility, which caused her a lack of children. That is, she weeps for her children, because they are "not" and have never been. This reading would adhere more closely to the tradition in Genesis; after all, Rachel is said to envy her fertile sister and demand children from her husband (Gen 30:1), not to experience the death of her children. It is she herself who dies, of course, in Gen 35:16–20. The polysemic meanings of the text contribute to Lamentations Rabbah's multilayered portrait of Rachel: she is an intercessor between the people and the deity due to the power she holds as both a barren and a bereaved mother.

While the midrash above focuses on Rachel's death as the act by which she accrues *zekhut avot*, certain *piyyutim* (late antique Jewish liturgical poems designed for use in the synagogue) instead emphasize Rachel's meritorious action in Gen 30:22.²⁰ *Piyyutim* flourished during the fifth to the eighth centuries (Lieber 2010, 8), contemporaneous with the period of the production of the incantation bowls. Yannai, a *payyetaṇ* considered the "father of *piyyut*" who probably lived in the sixth century CE in the Land of Israel, wrote a series of *qedushta'ot* (em-



¹⁹ "Though according to the Genesis accounts Rachel is the mother of Joseph (and thus the grandmother of Ephraim and Manasseh) and of Benjamin (Gen 30:23–24; 35:16–18; 41:51–52), at issue here is Ephraim (vv. 18, 20), the tribe that exemplifies the northern kingdom (v. 16). These are her children for whom she is weeping, at least in the setting of the recension to the north. But in the recension to the south, Benjamin may also be in the mind of the prophet (compare 6:1)" (Holladay and Hanson 1989, 187).

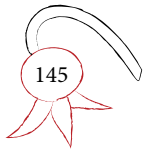
²⁰ Shacham-Rosby observes that *midrashim* and *piyyutim* have a close relationship as part of the inherited traditions of late antiquity:

ההקבלות הרבות בין הסוגות מלמדות עד כמה מסורות של פירוש מקרא היו
גמישות בתקופה הביזנטית, כאשר הפיוט והמדרש הינם צדדים מובחנים של אותו
מטבע, התגלמויות נפרדות של אותה התופעה.

The many parallels between the types show how flexible the traditions of biblical interpretation were in the Byzantine period, with the *piyyut* and the *midrash* being distinct sides of the same coin, separate embodiments of the same phenomenon (2011, 51, my translation).

bellishments on the first three blessings of the Amidah) on the book of Genesis (Lieber 2010, 12–16). His *qedushta* for Gen 30:22, which includes nine poems, survives in fragmentary form.²¹ In this *qedushta*, Yannai presents an intensely personal characterization of Rachel. His depiction of the matriarch proves to be an important link in the interpretive chain in the inherited tradition in which Rachel functions as an intercessor for women experiencing infertility.

In the first poem, or *magen*, of the *qedushta*, Yannai emphasizes Rachel's suffering as a barren woman. He expands upon Rachel's outcry in Gen 30:1 ("Give me children, or I shall die!") with a rabbinic idiom suggesting social contempt: "Give me sons! Lest I be scorned like a cast-down stone" (Lieber 2010, 556 n. 14). The following several lines (4, 6, 15, 16, and 20) in the subsequent poem, the *mehayyeh*, detail the divine response to Rachel's outcry, many of which explicitly link her cry with God remembering her and opening her womb. The poem begins with "Then He created creation anew in her womb," and continues:



Line 4: Then He murmured, listening, to her whispered prayer [וְהָמָה
[לְהַאֲזִין לְחִישַׁת הַגִּיגָה] ...

Line 6: Then He remembered her silence, to her merit [יִזְכּוֹר שְׁתִּיקָתָהּ
[זְכוּתָהּ] ...

Line 15: Then He answered abundantly the plea of her prayers [וַיַּעַן עֲתָרָהּ
[סִיחַ עֲטִיפָתָהּ] ...

Line 16: Then He opened the shut place, a reward for her works [וַיִּגְתַּח
[מִסְגּוּרַת מִסְכּוּרַת פְּעוּלָתָהּ] ...

Line 20: Then He heard her whisper, and heeded her cry for help [וַיִּשְׁמַע
[לְחֹשֶׁה וּשְׁעַ שׁוּעָתָהּ]. (Lieber 2010, 556–58)

These lines affirm that it is Rachel's voice—whether a whispered prayer, the plea of her prayers, her works, her whisper, or her cry for help—that attracts the attention of the deity and causes God to act. When Rachel's silence is referenced, it is an allusion to the restraint she demonstrates when her sister Leah was given to Jacob as his wife, which the rabbis

²¹ The poetic cycle of a *piyyut* comprises several units, as Lieber describes: "(1) the *magen*, (2) the *mehayyeh*, (3) the *meshalles*, (4) 'Poem Four,' (5) the *asiriyyah*, (6) 'Poem Six,' (7) the *rahit* or *r'hitim*, (8) the *silluq*, and (9) the *qedushah*" (2010, 35).

of Genesis Rabbah 73:4 and Lamentations Rabbah *petichta* 24 identify as a reason for divine favor toward Rachel (Lieber 2010, 557 n. 18). Elsewhere, Lieber summarizes: “Above all else, this poem creates a sense of a Rachel who yearned. A singular, richly textured, and evocative picture of the matriarch emerges when all these passages are read together ... Rachel is desire incarnate” (Lieber 2016, 169). In the tradition of the *piyyut*, Rachel is no passive recipient who awaits divine mercy, but rather an active agent whose desire for a child moves her to act.

The final poem, the *qedushah* of this *qedushta*, affirms Rachel’s relationship with the divine as one of being heard and heeded. As Lieber states:



The poet dwells on God’s relationship with this specific matriarch. He balances the realistic emotional turmoil and psychological price Rachel, the beloved wife, paid for her privileged status ... but he balances those with clear (if not very impressive) reiterations of God’s providential care for her. The first unit depicts *God’s responsiveness to Rachel’s pleas* [emphasis mine], while the second subtly enlarges the frame of the story. (Lieber 2010, 563)

The poem concludes:

“From His Place”—He Heard Rachel’s prayer and He remembered her
[ממקומו שמע תפילת רחל יזכרה]

“From His Place”—He hearkened to the moans of her entreaties and He recollected her [ממקומו הקשיב נאקת תחנונה ויפקדה]

“From His Place”—He saw her despair lest she be forgotten and He kept her in mind [ממקומו ראה שחקה כי נשכחה מבן ויפקדה].

Lieber notes that the root פ-ק-ד, repeated in the last two lines and translated as “recollected” and “kept in mind,” perhaps had two different nuances for the *payyetan*, “the first being the simple idea of memory, the second that of *acting* upon that memory” (2010, 561 n. 31). פ-ק-ד “often has connotations of redemption or granting fertility” (2010, 563), thus its second usage may suggest the divine act of opening Rachel’s womb to make her fertile.

What function might this intensely personal *piyyut* have served for its audience? Chana Shacham-Rosby describes this stanza as the “crescendo before the sacred verses recited together by the entire congregation, which is the climax of the *piyyut* system”

היחידה משמשת קרשנדו לפני פוסקי הקדושה הנאמרים יחד על ידי כל
הקהל, שהינו השיא של מערכת הפיוט

(2011, 59).²² It is this moment where the speakers who recited this liturgy experience the emotional climax of Rachel’s story as if it is their own. Lieber suggests that in the *qedushta*, “Yannai transforms potentially petty jealousy into deep sorrow and profound suffering, and he encourages his audience (whether all male or mixed) to identify with Rachel’s wrenching grief” (2010, 290). A methodology of imagination allows us to imagine the additional resonance this prayer may have had for women experiencing infertility—a resonance mixed with both pain and hope. We know that women attended the synagogue in antiquity, and a significant portion of those women likely experienced infertility at some point in their lives.²³ By hearing how Rachel effectively called for the deity’s attention and how she was rewarded with fertility, these women could have identified themselves with their ancestor and imagined that their wombs, too, would be opened if they prayed and acted in such a way that attracted God’s notice.

The literary tradition of Rachel in rabbinic literature and *piyyutim* in Jewish late antiquity established a precedent in which Rachel is a model of agency, especially for women who had experienced child loss or infertility. These textual traditions provide an important point of comparison for the deployment of the figure of Rachel in material culture, to which we now return.

²² For more on the sensory experience of liturgical poetry in the ancient synagogue, see Lieber 2016; Münz-Manor and Arentzen 2019; Stern 2023.

²³ See the discussion on women’s attendance, participation, and leadership in the ancient synagogue in Fein 2021, 99–101. Today, it is estimated that at least one in eight heterosexual couples experience infertility, which is defined as trying to conceive for one year (if under 35 years old) without a pregnancy. We can only imagine that rates of infertility were at least as high in antiquity without the benefits of modern medicine or science-based understandings of conception. See <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/infertility> (accessed April 9, 2026).

Rachel in Magical Contexts

As we have seen above, the figure of Rachel figured prominently not only in the literary tradition of rabbinic texts, but also in texts of the material culture of late antiquity, including in the Jewish Aramaic magic bowl from the Museu da Farmácia Lisbon we encountered at the start of this article. This bowl redeploys a line of Genesis in the context of an incantation for infertility, and in doing so creates a bridge between the biblical world of Rachel and the late antique Jewish woman who might have used this bowl for magical purposes. As I argued in the previous section, some late antique Jewish texts preserved a memory of Rachel in the literary tradition of midrash and *piyyut*, which recharacterized Rachel as an intercessor with the divine on behalf of women experiencing infertility. Using a methodology of imagination, we can imagine how some women accessed their inherited literary tradition about Rachel's infertility, which soon became her miraculous conception, and found agency through deploying it in material magical objects such as the incantation bowl.



The text of the incantation represents a step on the interpretive pathway of the biblical verse Gen 30:22. It contributes to the reception history of the character of Rachel, and it is part of a larger trend of texts that utilize the stories of women from the biblical corpus as models for rituals that demand women's active participation in order to summon divine attention and achieve a desired outcome. Understanding this incantation as part of a literary tradition requires an analysis of the relevant text of the bowl.

The incantation's first request is:

דתיננון יין חיין בימעי
מיהרנהיד בת אחת ...
יוחון לה בגין חיין וקימין ...

Place the wine of life in the bowls of
Mihranahid daughter of Ahat ...
that she may have living and abiding children.

Bhayro points out that the use of wine as a metaphor for blood has a parallel in the rabbinic tradition (2018, 107). M. Niddah 9:11 reads:

נשים בבתוליהם כגפנים ...
 ר' יהודה אומר כל גפן יש בה יין
 ושאין בה יין ה"ז דורקטי

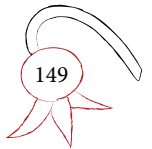
Women, regarding their virginal blood [lit. “their virginity,” *betulei hem*], are like grapevines ...

R. Yehudah says: “Every grapevine has wine in it, but that in which there is no wine is dried up [*dwrqty*].”²⁴

In B. Niddah 64b, the Gemara explains the meaning of *dwrqty*:

תנא דור קטוע תני רבי חייא כשם שהשאור יפה לעיסה כך דמים יפין לאשה
 תנא משום ר"מ כל אשה שדמיה מרובין בניה מרובין

Dwrqty means “truncated generation.”²⁵ Rabbi Hiyya teaches, “Just as leaven is good for dough, so blood is good for a woman.” Similarly, Rabbi Meir teaches, “Any woman whose blood is plentiful, her children are plentiful.”



This line of the incantation, like the Mishnah and the Gemara, thus associates the flow of blood with women’s fertility, one of its most easily recognized indicators. Bhayro summarizes: “The bowl, therefore, is requesting both the resumption (or continuation) of Mihranahid’s menstrual cycle and that the conceived children are carried full term, successfully delivered and survive infancy” (2017, 108). Mihranahid seems to be suffering from *amenorrhea*, absent or irregular menstrual cycles. Menstrual cycles are necessary for conception, as they ensure regular and predictable ovulation. We can imagine that she may have

²⁴ Translation from Bhayro 2017.

²⁵ Jastrow notes that דורקטי “is a perversion of τρωκτική...grape used for dessert, fit for eating but yielding no wine, fig. a woman who has no menstruation.” 1903, 290, s.v. דורקטי.

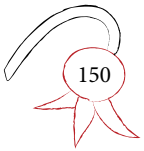
also experienced pregnancy or infant loss—or, at least, that she suffers from the fear of those events.²⁶

While Genesis does not describe Rachel as lacking “the wine of life” or as “dried up,” this language is used elsewhere in the biblical text as a metaphor for infertility. For example, Hos 9:16 states:

הכה אפרים / שרשים יבש/פרי בלי עשון.

Ephraim is stricken/Their root is dried up (y-b-sh)/They will bear no fruit.

Therefore, it is an intuitive transition from Mihranahid’s plight to appealing to the famously infertile Rachel for a solution. The incantation text then quotes Gen 30:22:



ויזכר אלהים את רחל וישמע אליה
אלהים ויפתח את רחמה ויזכר

And God remembered Rachel, and God listened to her.
He opened her womb, and He remembered.

We have already discussed the context of this line within the Genesis narrative. Let us consider, then, the impact of this quotation within the textual medium of an incantation bowl. Unlike the rest of the incantation, the Genesis quotation is in Hebrew, rather than Aramaic. Peter Lanfer argues that biblical quotations such as this point to the potency that the biblical text was understood to have for its audience, almost irrespective of the content of the quotation: “The mysterious quality of the spell texts is enhanced through the performative qualities of their contents, including the use of Hebrew for biblical quotations” (2015, 13). We can use a methodology of imagination to imagine a community in which Jewish Babylonian Aramaic is the dominant spoken language—indeed, it is the language in which the remainder of the incantation is constructed—and in which Hebrew, understood only by a few and reserved for sacred occasions such as the reading of the Torah, carries a heavier weight. The quotation of Gen 30:22 is there-

²⁶ Cf. Eliassian’s reconstruction of Mihranahid’s reproductive life (2025, 147–149, 159–163).

fore linguistically “marked,” enhancing its “performative qualities,” as Lanfer argues. Its content, of course, also contributes to its significance. The deployment of Gen 30:22 within the text calling for healing from heaven for Mihranahid fits the framework of what Lanfer calls a “contextual citation” type. A quotation of this type

shows a ... correspondence between the content of the verse and the intent of the citation. The citations of this type are generally introduced with a formula such as “may the following verse apply to so-and-so,” while other verses conclude with a personalizing summary such as “... so shall x happen to so and so.” In this way, the scriptural citation becomes an antecedent of God’s mighty deeds and power invoked in the incantation. (Lanfer 2015, 18–19)

Though the text of this incantation does not explicitly state “May the following verse happen to so-and-so,” or “So shall X happen to so-and-so,” it is clear from the thematic connections between Mihranahid and Rachel that God is called to remember Mihranahid and open her womb, just as God did for Rachel. Rachel is used in the incantation precisely because her story is understood to have power for the user of this bowl: “With respect to the reception history of the Hebrew Bible the incantation texts represent an active praxis involving the personal adoption of these sacred words as powerful instruments and guarantors of individual desires” (Lanfer 2015, 23). Mihranahid, the client, is invited to adopt these words, to identify with the figure of Rachel, and envision herself conceiving, as Rachel did.

Our understanding of the use of Rachel’s story on this incantation bowl is enriched when we consider it in conversation with other contemporaneous ritual technologies that invoke biblical figures, especially the matriarchs. Wearable amulets from the Cairo Genizah provide further evidence of the usage of biblical women, such as Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel, in biblical quotations as part of incantations. These figures are deployed as *Vorläuferinnen* (“forerunners”) in magic formulas that are intended to address the users’ experiences of infertility, pregnancy, and/or childbirth (Salzer 2010, 266). Some formulas in particular have strong resonances with the incantation bowl at the Museu da Farmácia. One Genizah fragment from the tenth or eleventh century CE, “for an



infertile woman” (לאשה שלה נתעברה), asks that the user should “conceive, become pregnant and open up”:²⁷

די (ב)(ת) בא על מיטרא דפ'ב'פ'
ועוברתה ותכטן ופתחה

The fragment invokes the matriarchs. The first is Rachel in a biblical quotation of Gen 30:22:

ויזכר אלהים את רחלוישמע אליה אלהים ויפתח .
And God remembered Rachel and God heard her, and opened [her
womb].

It follows by invoking the stories of Sarah and Rebekah's infertility.²⁸ Finally, it concludes with an expression of desire for the same outcome to be applied to the user of the amulet:



כן יענינו אלהי הצעבאות
אלוהי ישראל
בשעה הזאת
ותיבטן פ'ב'פ'

So may God of hosts answer us
the God of Israel,
in this hour
and may Plonit bat Plonit get pregnant.
Amen. Amen. Selah.

²⁷ This text is from amulet T-S. K (Taylor-Schechter Collection, Cambridge) 1.157, fol. 1b/21–31 (Nr. 8, Schäfer and Shaked 1997, 111–12). Based on the text's request in line 14 to say the following names and incantation ten times, Salzer imagines it being used so that the amulet is hung around the client's neck while the practitioner speaks the magical formula (2010, 267 n. 212).

²⁸ The fragment continues: “And God visited Sarah as he said...” (Gen 21:1) וי'פקד את שרה כאשר אמר... And later, “And Isaac entreated the LORD on behalf of his wife [Rebekah]” (Gen 25:21).

ויעתר יצחק לי' לנוכח אשתו

In this text, Rachel, Sarah, and Rebekah are imagined as “role models” (*Vorbilder*) for clients, as these figures first experienced infertility and then, following divine intervention, were able to conceive. The incantation is an attempt to affect “die Übertragung des Schicksals”—a transfer of fate—from the biblical women to the clients (Salzer 2010, 267). As Dorothea Salzer describes:

By referring to biblical figures who were in a similar situation and who had already received divine help, on the one hand, the events of the present are connected to the biblical past; on the other hand, this magical text draws parallels to the current problem and thus demands the same expressions of favor again. (Salzer 2010, 270, my translation)²⁹

This magical text functions to connect a woman experiencing infertility in the present, the unnamed Plonit bat Plonit who would purchase and use this amulet, to the “barren matriarchs” of the past, seeking divine intervention to open her womb as God did in the past for the matriarchs named in the biblical quotations.

While separated by several centuries and situated in different cultural and geographic locations, our understanding of the functions of the Genizah amulets can be applied to the fifth- to eighth-century CE incantation bowls of Babylonia.³⁰ An incantation on a bowl, just like



²⁹ Durch den Hinweis auf biblische Figuren, die sich in einer ähnlichen Situation befanden und die bereits göttliche Hilfe erfahren haben, wird zum einen das Geschehen der Gegenwart mit der biblischen Vorzeit verbunden, zum anderen zieht der magische Text hier Parallelen zum aktuellen Problem und fordert somit dieselben Gunstbezeugungen ein weiteres Mal ein.

³⁰ Shaked names some ways in which the Cairo Genizah magical texts, representing a Palestinian tradition, and the incantation bowls, representing a Babylonian tradition, differ: “Whereas the range of goals which are attested in the magic bowls is rather limited and can be summarized in a few words: protection from various ailments, represented by a variety of demons and malevolent spirits (these form the great majority of the bowl texts), the desire to have favour and influence in society, or to inflict pain and death on an enemy (both of these are attested by just a few bowls) ... the Geniza material contains a large number of *segullot*, or magical recipe books, which give advice on all conceivable circumstances, including very often circumstances which are not common ... economic aims become more

a wearable amulet, which invoked biblical quotations about fertility, would have served to connect the user with her ancestors whom God remembered and whose wombs God opened. I argue that an incantation invoking Gen 30:22, specifically, goes one step further *and demands the woman's active participation in a magical ritual in order to summon divine attention and achieve a desired outcome*. As I argued above, the literary context of Gen 30:22 establishes the cause and effect of Rachel's fertility: she seeks out and acquires mandrakes (Gen 30:14–15), God remembers her, and God opens her womb. Other traditions about Rachel reinforce the fact that her initiative was understood in some late antique Jewish texts as a critical factor in her conception; rabbinic literature and *piyyutim* emphasize Rachel's active role vis-à-vis God, which results in a positive change in her personal status as indicated by the return of her children to their land (i.e., from exile) or by her fertility.

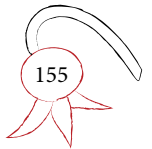


Rachel's embodied ritual activity in Gen 30:22—the seeking out of the mandrakes—is *imitated* in the use of an incantation bowl by a client experiencing infertility. A client was required to be an active participant in the magical practice of procuring and utilizing an incantation bowl—indeed, the bowl would be useless without her. Ahuvia compellingly theorizes a five-step process for the utilization of an incantation bowl, one which highlights the client's active role throughout:

It is reasonable to suggest that there was 1) a moment where a client decided that a ritual object written by a specialist was necessary to confront a problem; 2) a moment where the client encountered a specialist and explained his/her predicament to him/her; 3) a process of producing the incantation bowl; 4) a performance or recitation of the incantation in the home; and finally, 5) the deposition of the bowl at a fitting location in the home. While there must have been variation in practice, this may serve as a general outline of the process. (Ahuvia 2018, 236)

prominent in Geniza society, and the desire to control and exercise power seems to become more pronounced; similarly, the search for treasure looms large in the Cairo Geniza” (2006, 364–66). Yet the desire of infertile women to conceive seems evergreen in Jewish magical texts and is present in both the incantation bowls and the Genizah documents.

We can use a methodology of imagination to apply Ahuvia's framework to what we know about Mihranahid's circumstances and imagine the agency she might have exercised in this moment. Mihranahid seemed to be experienced in playing an active role in the procurement of incantation bowls. Her seeking out of a ritual expert seems to have been prompted by a variety of health-related maladies. There are several bowls preserved that name Mihranahid as the client, some seeking to address migraines or blindness, as well as three adjurations of divorce to the demoness Lilith.³¹ Some of these bowls (JBA 5, 6, 7, 9, 10) appear to have been written by the same hand, and share features such as the inclusion of the *historiola* of Hanina ben Dosa, a miracle worker known from stories in the Babylonian Talmud, thus suggesting authorship by the same scribe, school, or family (Shaked et al. 2013, 54). The other bowls, JBA 28, 33, 43, "were also probably written by the same scribe, for the same client and with the same texts" (Shaked et al. 2013, 158). This indicates that Mihranahid would have likely chosen to return to the same scribe (or two) for her various needs over a period of time: "If scribes were distinguished by the traditions with which they had facility or preferred, clients would possibly have had agency in the decision of which scribes to patronize. ... it is possible that some clients with similar proclivities would have preferred their bowls in particular" (Gross and Manekin-Bamberger 2022, 19–20). Intriguingly, Bhayro observes that the bowl from the Museu Farmácia seems to have been written in a different hand than the others (2017, 107). Using a methodology of imagination, we may speculate as to whether Mihranahid was compelled to go to a different scribe than usual due to outside factors, such as "her" scribe no longer being available, or whether she chose to go to a different scribe due to the sensitive and personal nature of her request, perhaps for greater discretion, or because the scribe of this bowl was a specialist in incantations for fertility.³²



³¹ See JBA 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 28, 33, 43.

³² There is even some evidence that the women themselves might have been responsible for inscribing some of the bowls, though this is by no means scholarly consensus. See the discussions in Lesses 2001, esp. 361–64; Ilan and Kedar 2022.

Once the client had encountered an expert, the process of composing an incantation would begin. Scholars are not in complete agreement about what this process looked like.³³ Ahuvia (2023) imagines the clients as active participants in the composition process. She makes a convincing case for using ancient conceptions of literacy, which would include dictation by people of diverse gender and class identities, rather than only labeling as “literate” those who inscribed letters on a surface. Expanding the definition of literacy allows us to imagine women as participants in the creation of texts, including incantation bowls. In the case of Mihranahid’s bowl, which does not use the first-person and perhaps was not dictated by her to a scribe, there are other indications that she may have played a role in composing the incantation, such as featuring “innovative, rare and unique elements that display gender-awareness” (Ilan and Kedar 2022, 298).³⁴ While the incantation does make use of some familiar formulas,³⁵ its usage of Gen 30:22 is unique (as mentioned above)—this quotation has not been found in the incantations of any other bowl. A methodology of imagination allows us to imagine how Mihranahid may have instructed the scribe to insert the verse about Rachel and the mandrakes because of her individual,



³³ Rebecca Lesses, for example, argues that “the practitioner made use of a set of previously known formulas and put them together according to the needs of the client. There was scope for the creativity of the practitioner, both in the formulas chosen and in the way they were put together, but the texts were not the unique spontaneous creations of each practitioner” (2001, 361). Manekin-Bamberger emphasizes that “bowl scribes were part of a professional guild of *soferim* that engaged in different forms of Jewish writing” (2020, 253) and that “the use of the person, male or female, is simply a magical technique in which the client of the bowl is listed that way ... in order to achieve a feeling of proximity to the narrative” (2020, 238).

³⁴ Manekin-Bamberger (2025) argues against the impulse to attribute women’s agency through authorship of the incantation bowls, but instead for the use of the bowls for understanding the social and gender history of Jewish women in late antiquity. My argument does not depend on attributing authorship in the form of inscribing an incantation on a bowl to Mihranahid.

³⁵ Namely, the oft-cited Zech 3:2, and the “Your face is the face” formula, at the conclusion of the incantation. See Bhayro 2017, 108–9.

personal connection to that verse, based on her own experience of infertility and desire to regain agency over her own reproductive life.

After purchasing the bowl, a client like Mihranahid would return with it to her own home. The language of the incantation bowls suggests that they were likely intended to be read aloud in an act of ritual performance, as Lanfer describes:

There are a number of features of the bowl spells and amulets that indicate an oral component in these magical devices. In the first place, the texts themselves often allude to whispering or susurrations, and clusters of sibilants in the incantations draw out this feature when read aloud ... Moreover, the texts are rife with harsh sounding words, often demon names that would have been voiced with ominous importance. (Lanfer 2015, 13)

The emphasis on the orality of the bowls, rather than their literary features, suggests that the recitation of the incantation was a critical component in its efficacy. While Lanfer believes that the client's comprehension of the incantation was not the point of the bowl, I contend that the association of the bowl with the domestic space suggests that even if a scribe created the bowl, an important piece of the ritual practice with the bowl was reserved for the client and would take place in her own home.³⁶ Mihranahid, as an upper-class woman wealthy enough to commission several bowls during her lifetime, may have received an education that would have allowed her to read the bowl herself. Otherwise, she may have employed a literate member of her household, such as an enslaved person.³⁷ After reading the incantation, the client would place or bury the bowl under the floor, most likely on the threshold or in the corner of her home, though some were also buried in graveyards (Lesses 2001, 345). It would be set upside-down, in order to "speak" to



³⁶ Ahuvia offers the alternative suggestion that a ritual practitioner may have accompanied the client home and recited the incantation in her domestic space (2018, 240–44). In this case, the role the client would play would be as a witness to the ritual performance.

³⁷ For an overview of women's education and literacy in antiquity, see Ahuvia 2023b, 4–10.

the malevolent forces in the underworld below and prevent their entry to the human world above. Whether the bowls were buried or remained visible on the surface of the client's floor, "the incantation bowls were seen at least during their introduction to the home, and then experienced either as a visible or subterranean presence that ensured protection" (Ahuvia 2018, 240).

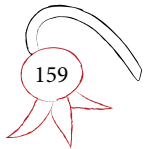
Though we may not know the exact details of Mihranahid's engagement with every step of the process, a methodology of imagination offers us the reasonable possibility that she would have been involved as an active participant, to some degree, in acquiring, composing, and ritually utilizing the incantation bowl. The activity of a client like Mihranahid *imitates* the role of Rachel actively seeking a remedy for her infertility via mandrakes and deploying "reproductive magic" in order to achieve her desired outcome of conception. The client's actions can, therefore, be understood as "imitative magic." The use of Gen 30:22 signifies not just God remembering and acting upon a passive participant, but the agency Rachel deployed in Gen 30:14 and following. The client's act of agency functions as imitative magic from the first moment of her seeking out an incantation bowl in pursuit of a remedy for her infertility. Thus, the bowls provided a means by which female clients, like their ancestor Rachel, could deploy their inherited tradition to exercise agency over their reproductive lives. While we only have this single example of a "fertility" bowl using Gen 30:22, there are hundreds that have yet to be translated and published—and perhaps more yet to be discovered. Rather than preemptively erasing late antique Jewish women from the archive, let us allow ourselves to imagine that Mihranahid may have been just one of many who took her reproductive life into her own hands.



Conclusion

The biblical archetype of the "barren matriarch" proved an enduring part of the tradition inheritance of early Jewish communities. The frequent utilization of the story of Rachel in literary and material traditions demonstrated its power in the imagination of women who similarly

struggled with their fertility in the ensuing centuries. Using a methodology of imagination, we can imagine how Rachel's outcry to her husband must have resonated with the despair and desperation to conceive that some women felt: "Give me children, or I shall die!" (Gen 30:1). Like Rachel, these women were not content to wait patiently for their husbands or even God to act, to be the passive recipient of womb-opening activity. The inherited literary tradition of late antiquity cast Rachel as a character who has agency over her own reproductive life. The rabbinic midrash in Lamentations Rabbah *petichta* 24 established Rachel as a worthy intercessor with the divine because of the ancestral merit, or *zekhut avot*—or shall we say *zekhut imahot*—she accrued through her "loss and self-sacrifice" (Kattan-Gribetz 2018, 280). Yannai's *piyyut* emphasized Rachel's active pursuit of God's intervention to remedy her infertility, and the personal nature of the poem allowed its audience to identify themselves with "Rachel who yearns." Wearable amulets such as those found in the Cairo Genizah explicitly identified figures such as Rachel as forerunners, *Vorläuferinnen*, of women experiencing infertility. Finally, the incantation bowls allowed participants to manifest Rachel's agency by imitating her magico-medical practices, seeking a remedy for their fertility struggles through somewhat unconventional means (at least in the eyes of the biblical authors and rabbinic authorities). Mihranahid's magic bowl provides a case study which allows us to see how, like Rachel, the women of late antique Babylonia could exercise agency over their reproductive lives, attempting to manipulate the forces that were understood to control fertility to achieve their desired outcome: to have "the wine of life" placed in their bowels, to have "living and abiding children." Through amulets and ancestors, Jewish women expressed their desire and intention to bear a child, calling divine attention to their plight and, like Rachel, prompting God to open their wombs and change their fate.



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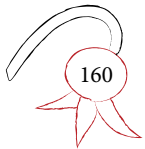
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