

When I began researching third-century Babylonia for my historical novel, *Rav Hisda's Daughter*, I had never imagined that the subtitle would be "A Novel of Love, the Talmud and **Sorcery**." But I soon learned that magic, whose etymology comes from Magi, the scholar-priests of Zoroastrian Babylonia, was pervasive not only in Persia, but throughout the Roman Empire as well. My initial glimpse of this world came when, looking for historical sources of names to give my female characters, I discovered a corpus of research on something called Babylonian Incantation Bowls.

These were ordinary pottery with inscriptions inside whose purpose was to protect the people under whose home the vessels were buried. Thousands of these bowls had been unearthed in what is now Iraq and dated to the 4th-6th century. At first my interest in the inscriptions, written in the same Aramaic language as the Talmud, was purely as a source of authentic women's names. But upon careful reading, I saw that the lengthy incantations, unique to each bowl, must have been produced by educated Jews.



Most were for benevolent purposes - healing the sick, protecting children and pregnant women from harm, guarding against demons and the Evil Eye. The spells often contained biblical verses and drawings of bound demons. One even quoted Talmud. The bowl pictured here, one of two I own, includes the verse from Zechariah 3:2, "May

the LORD rebuke you, O Satan."

Archeologists have also found amulets with similar, albeit shorter, incantations written by Jews, Christians, and pagans throughout the Persian and Roman empires. They discovered Hebrew magic instruction manuals that list an astonishing variety of spells, some benevolent and some not. My favorites were the love spells, along with one for winning at chariot races.

Meanwhile, I learned that the Talmud contained discussions of spells, amulets, demons, the Evil Eye, and other occult subjects. Magic was clearly an integral part of life in this world, and some of the rabbis, including Rav Hisda, performed what we would call acts of magic themselves. But rabbinic sages agreed that sorcery was mostly the province of women. Though the Bible says, "You shall not allow a sorceress to live," these women were able to practice freely. They were respected professionals, not scary hags with pointy hats as in *Snow White* and *Wizard of Oz*. The Talmud even tells of a rabbi who consulted the 'head sorceress' to learn a special protective spell.

It came to me when I read that Rav Hisda's daughter demonstrated various ways of protecting her husband, a rabbi well versed in magic himself, from demons. My heroine was an enchantress! Not only that, but sorceresses who inscribed incantation bowls were probably members of rabbinic families too, for what other Jewish women would be literate and learned enough to create them? My literary task was to show her becoming an enchantress in a society where, unlike today, highly educated people accepted magic as real and effective.

The difference between *Rav Hisda's Daughter* and supernatural novels like *Harry Potter*, *Witches of Eastwick*, and the *Twilight* series, is that the magic in those stories is clearly fictional, the product of the novelist's imagination. I use actual, historical, spells and procedures from incantation bowls, amulets, magical

instruction manuals, and the Talmud. But surely that ancient magic didn't really work any better than Harry Patter's.

Yet perhaps it did work more often than one might think. Since many people recovered from their injuries and illnesses, most pregnant women did not die in childbirth, and the majority of children survived childhood, spells to heal and protect them were clearly successful. Physicians now know that the placebo effect is real. And then there are occasional magical procedures from the Talmud such washing one's hands upon leaving a privy or sickroom, as protection against the myriad demons who lurk there. Change 'demons' to 'viruses and bacteria,' and we have one of today's most effective public health measures.