

Early Jewish and Christian Magical Traditions in Comparison and Contact

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This article discusses the project Early Jewish and Christian Magical Traditions in Comparison and Contact, a research initiative funded by the European Research Council under the Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme (Starting Grant 2020–2025; Grant Agreement 851466; Principal Investigator: Joseph E. Sanzo) and hosted by Ca' Foscari University of Venice. This project constitutes the first large-scale comparative study of Jewish and Christian magical objects from late antiquity (ca. III–VII C.E). Accordingly, it will significantly improve knowledge of ancient magic and early Jewish–Christian relations in lived religion (i.e., religion as it was actually practiced in everyday life). This interdisciplinary project examines the local and global features of these objects – and the social contexts behind them – through a synthetic and innovative interpretive framework, which draws upon various academic fields including religious studies, sociology, and art history. The project's illumination of the late antique lived contexts of early Jews and Christians will help rewrite the history of two of the world's most prolific religions. The project will eventually include five team members: 1 Principal Investigator; 2 Junior Researchers (Ricercatori a tempo determinato di tipo A [RtdA]); and 2 PhD fellows.

I. Introduction

Like most individuals living in the late antique Mediterranean world (ca. III–VII CE), Jews and Christians believed that the world was populated with otherworldly beings (e.g., angels, demons, and ghosts) that could either provide assistance or cause spiritual and physical harm.¹ In order to deal with this dire and complex situation, Jews and Christians sought the help of ritual experts (e.g., Christian priests, monks, Jewish rabbis, and neighborhood healers), who were entrusted to combat, appease, or invoke such beings. These so-called “magicians” created various kinds of aids for the healing and protection of their clients, including amulets (often made from papyrus or parchment) to place around the neck and earthenware bowls to bury under the house. Fortunately, many of these artifacts have survived from antiquity and include texts written in diverse languages and scripts (e.g., Greek, Coptic, Jewish Babylonian Aramaic, and Syriac) that incorporate citations from sacred texts, drawings, divine names, and references to various ritual practices.²

In many cases, however, these objects conflict with our inherited ideas about the boundaries between early Judaism and Christianity. Several amulets, for instance, include both traditional Christian language (e.g., the Trinity) and traditional Jewish language (e.g., *Iâo Sabaôth*). Unfortunately, such objects are often merely described or castigated as “syncretistic” or as reflecting the polytheistic world of late antiquity. But such identifications – without further nuance and attention to the complex social dynamics of late antiquity – obscure at least two distinct phenomena: (1) the intentional usage of foreign or exotic names, practices, etc. for ritual efficacy and (2) the use of cultural elements that had already been absorbed into new cultural contexts and had, therefore, lost their original associations. Indeed, these objects raise various questions about their social contexts: do they reflect

¹ For further information about this project, see <https://pric.unive.it/projects/ejcm/home>

² The principal corpus of materials for this project is based primarily on published artifacts and consists of approximately 200 Greek objects (including gems); 275 Coptic objects; 500 JBA magical bowls; and 50 Syriac objects. In addition to this principal corpus team members will make use of related magical objects, such as the approximately 100 Jewish Palestinian Aramaic amulets and 125 Mandaic incantation bowls.

cooperation between Jewish and Christian ritual experts? Do they reflect the assimilation of originally Jewish terminology into the Christian tradition? How do these local ritual objects fit into the global world of late antiquity, in which Christians and Jews differentiated themselves from one another and even had violent exchanges? To state the problem in more technical terms: how did the dynamics of religious assimilation, cooperation, and differentiation play out in such magical contexts? This problem requires a study that traverses the academic fields of early Jewish magic, early Christian magic, and early Jewish–Christian relations. Unfortunately, there has been no focused and sustained project that brings together these fields of study.

II. Early Jewish and Christian Magical Traditions and Disciplinary Boundaries

The lack of a clear scholarly focus on the dynamics of religious assimilation, cooperation, and differentiation in the study of late antique Jewish and Christian magic is closely linked to disciplinary divisions and interests in the study of late antiquity. Although there has been substantial and important research over the past few decades devoted to magic in Jewish and Christian communities – including editions of Jewish and Christian textual amulets and incantation bowls³ and studies examining particular practices of Jewish magic or Christian magic⁴ – the study of these magical traditions tends to be divided along disciplinary lines: historians of early Judaism study early Jewish magic; historians of early Christianity (or Classicists) study early Christian magic. To be sure, select studies have tried to approach the Jewish and Christian magical traditions with greater attention to local social dynamics, especially as it pertains to the Mesopotamian incantation bowls. For instance, scholars have stressed the broader Mesopotamian context within which both the Syriac incantation bowls and the Jewish–Aramaic incantation bowls were created and circulated. Most importantly, Nils H. Korsvoll’s dissertation has usefully examined both sets of bowls (with the occasional reference to the Egyptian materials) in order to make a broader comment on the usefulness of the category “Christian” for the Syriac incantation bowls.⁵ Despite the significant contribution his dissertation makes to the study of Mesopotamian incantation bowls, the analytical scope of the dissertation is primarily oriented around the Syriac materials; he did not, therefore, stress to a significant degree the respective dynamics of religious assimilation, cooperation, and differentiation within and across Jewish and Christian traditions (more globally understood) nor provide a broader theoretical analysis of these social dynamics in lived religion. In the end, disciplinary approaches toward the evidence have typically – and without scholarly justification – rendered instances of contact or sharing between Jewish and Christian magical traditions as syncretistic or as reflecting a cultural exoticism or a generic magical practice.

Yet, recent studies on the early relationship between Judaism and Christianity more generally have shown that the boundaries between Judaism and Christianity were configured in diverse ways. For instance, scholars have deftly demonstrated that the arguments found in many early Christian writings (e.g., the Gospel of John, the Apologies of Justin Martyr, Melito of Sardis’s *Peri Pascha*, and John Chrysostom’s *Homilies against the Judaizing Christians*) and early Jewish writings (e.g., the Mishnah, the Palestinian Talmud, the Babylonian Talmud, and the Hekhalot literature) reflect the close social and spatial contexts

³ E.g., Meyer and Smith 1999; Michel (with Zazoff and Zazoff) 2001; Moriggi 2014; Naveh and Shaked 1985, 1993; Shaked, Ford, and Bhayro 2013; Ford and Morgenstern 2019.

⁴ E.g., Bohak 2008; Sanzo 2014a; Jones 2016; Harari 2017; de Bruyn 2017; Saar 2017.

⁵ Korsvoll 2017.

at the local level in which ancient Jews and Christians negotiated their identities in relation to one another.⁶ Archaeological excavations from various regions of the ancient Mediterranean world have likewise demonstrated that local social, economic, and religious concerns often brought Jews and Christians into close contact.⁷ Not surprisingly, the evidence disclosed in these literary and archaeological sources reveals diverse kinds of social interactions and exchanges between Christians and Jews, from equal participation in local festivals,⁸ to sharing of poetic genres,⁹ to rhetorical and even physical violence.¹⁰ Such local dynamics were further augmented by global Christian, Jewish, and imperial factors.¹¹ In fact, a powerful bishop, such as Ambrose of Milan, could even conflict with the Emperor (Theodosius) over issues surrounding Jewish-Christian tensions in another region (Callinicum). Unfortunately, scholarship on early Jewish-Christian relations has not taken into sufficient consideration how magical practices, texts, and artefacts might inform these local and global dynamics. This gap in the study of early Jewish-Christian relations is unfortunate because the magical objects give us insight into aspects of inter-religious interaction that are not readily apparent in the literary and archaeological sources. For instance, as I will describe in more detail below, the magical objects acutely demonstrate that religious assimilation and religious differentiation could be operative simultaneously.

In sum, despite the growing scholarly interests in Jewish and Christian magical traditions, on the one hand, and early Jewish-Christian relations, on the other hand, there has been no focused and sustained study of the social and religious dynamics that unfolded at the crossroads of late antique magic, early Judaism, and early Christianity. In order to offer an account of all of these dynamics, one must adopt a methodology, which takes into consideration all the features of the artifacts (e.g., texts, images, and materiality), the social complexities of (late antique) cultural interaction and exchange at the local and global levels, and the relationship between contemporary scholarly categories and ancient evidence.

III. Objectives

EJCM seeks to fill this important aspect of late antiquity by providing a detailed, comparative analysis of the similarities, differences, and contacts within and between early Jewish and Christian magical traditions on both the local and global levels. This project will contribute to the study of late antique magic by bridging materials and texts that are usually treated independent of one another and by adopting an interpretive framework for understanding the magical objects – and their operative social contexts – that is informed by recent scholarship on: (1) the intersection of text, image, and material of magical objects; (2) inter-religious contact and exchange (e.g., syncretism, foreignness/exoticism, boundaries, and identity); and (3) comparison and classification in the study of antiquity (e.g., how to approach terms, such as magic, Judaism, Christianity). This methodology will be outlined in more detail in the Interpretive and Methodological Framework (see below).

The project's four primary objectives are:

1. To synthesize insights from ancient magical studies, comparative history and

⁶ E.g., Becker and Reed 2007; Boyarin 2004; Schäfer 2012.

⁷ E.g., Rutgers 1992; Crawford 1999.

⁸ E.g., Sozomen, *Eccl. Hist.* 2.4; John Chrysostom, *Adv. Jud.* 8.5.4.

⁹ E.g., Münz-Manor 2010.

¹⁰ E.g., *Ep. Sev.* 13.3–14.1.

¹¹ E.g., Sanzo and Boustán 2014.

religion, art history, and sociology in order to illuminate the local and global features of early Jewish and Christian magical objects and to assess their implications for the study of early Jewish–Christian relations.

2. To offer unique insight into the dynamics of religious assimilation, cooperation, and differentiation in late antique lived religion.
3. To reconfigure the ways historians of antiquity approach key terms in the field, especially Judaism, Christianity, magic, syncretism, and communal boundaries.
4. To provide new readings of patristic, rabbinic, and legal texts, which describe or complain about Christians and Jews participating in illicit rituals.

In order to achieve these research objectives, this project will attend to the similarities, differences, and contacts between Jewish and Christian traditions in four shared and central magical practices: (1) the uses of biblical texts and traditions; (2) the uses of sacred names and titles; and (3) the juxtapositions of words, images, and materials; and (4) references to illicit rituals. EJCM will also consider how rituals for healing and protection against demonic threat unfolded at the crossroads of the literary and material records of early Jews and Christians. Consequently, this project will not only include close readings of magical texts (written in the Greek, Coptic, Latin, Syriac, and Jewish Babylonian Aramaic [JBA] languages/scripts), but it will also place such magical materials into dialogue with select literary and legal traditions (e.g., patristic writings; Talmudic literature; Roman imperial legislation), which describe, resemble, or criticize the Christian and Jewish uses of magic or early Jewish–Christian relations more generally.

IV. Approaches and Methods

IV.1. Research Orientation

In order to examine the dynamics of religious assimilation, cooperation, and differentiation in the Jewish and Christian magical objects, the team members must continually reflect on the following question: how did the local monks, Christian priests, rabbis, and other specialists who produced ostensibly magical objects synthesize the symbols and practices of their immediate, local environments with global religious motifs? This emphasis on both local and global dynamics dovetails with the Interpretive and Methodological Framework (see below) in order to illuminate two partially overlapping domains of late antique religion:

1. It will help us gain a better understanding of the ways magical objects facilitated or required close interaction between individuals from Jewish and Christian communities and the implications of those interactions for religious identity. For instance, a series of Christian Syriac incantation bowls cite the authority of a famous Jewish rabbi (Rab. Joshua bar Peraḥya), while several Jewish Babylonian Aramaic (JBA) incantation bowls invoke Jesus, with at least one calling upon the power of the Christian Trinity. Such a network of local Mesopotamian practitioners is also reflected in the commonalities among the Syriac and JBA bowls with respect to layout (e.g., the spiral writing, which typically progresses from the center of the bowl to the rim of the bowl, and the usual placement of the image [when present] in the center of the bowl) and materiality (i.e., the use of domestic earthenware). Taken together, these objects demonstrate both that the alignment of region, medium, and language were often more important in determining the nature of ritual practice than religious

affiliation and that in some cases practitioners may have actually embraced religious difference. To be sure, several other objects reflect a much more sectarian approach to religious identity: at times, Jewish practitioners would draw exclusively from global Jewish traditions, and Christian practitioners would draw exclusively from global Christian traditions. In short, communal identity and difference could take on diverse manifestations in lived religion. This project will work to taxonomize further these diverse configurations of difference and identity in lived religion.

2. This approach will yield important insight into the relationship between religious symbols and religious identity in late antique lived religion, which will improve scholarly knowledge of early Jewish–Christian relations and the global Christianization process in the Mediterranean world. It will also raise new questions about the literary sources. For instance, a group of late antique Christian magical objects, written in Greek and Coptic, differentiate their clients from the “Jews” using global vitriolic motifs.¹² These objects emphasize the evils of the Jews, especially in relation to the suffering and death of Jesus. In fact, one late-antique Coptic spell book (Leiden, Ms. AMS 9) not only highlights the Jewish culpability for the death of Jesus, but also refers to the Jewish people as a “dead dog,” thus appropriating the anti-Jewish invective of ecclesiastical leaders, such as John Chrysostom. Nevertheless, the evidence suggests that these very same anti-Jewish objects ironically appropriate local Jewish ritual customs. This conjunction of assimilation and religious differentiation illuminates early Jewish–Christian relations and the early Christianization process more generally by demonstrating that local Jewish traditions could become so separated from their global – and original – contexts that they could figure into rigidly defined Christian discourses, which were directed against the Jews. These objects also require us to reassess the accuracy or the interpretation of the literary sources, which complain about believers crossing religious boundaries or mixing the symbols of different religious traditions when practicing magic; such objects reveal that, while participants in so-called magical rituals held to different versions of the boundaries between Judaism and Christianity than ecclesiastical leaders promoted, practitioners and their clients could in fact be very interested in religious differentiation. At a more general level, these objects challenge the widely held assumption in ancient history and archaeology that shared or common cultural traditions are necessarily indicative of friendly inter-cultural relations or the blurring of cultural/religious boundaries.

IV.2. Interpretive and Methodological Framework

Given the interdisciplinary nature of the project, team members will not appropriate a single theory or method; rather, this project requires the linking of various approaches that are usually treated separately. This synthesis of approaches works in conjunction with the research orientation (see above). Each of the theories and methods falls into one of three categories:

1. *Text and Artifact*: At the most basic level, the project will draw on the methodological insights of recent scholarship on how to identify an amuletic or magical function of an object.¹³ It is not always clear, for instance, if a small biblical artifact was intended to be used as an amulet or was used for another purpose (e.g., a memory aid). Team members will take into consideration the material and textual properties of the object in order to help identify its function. Are there holes on the object (which might suggest that it was worn as an amulet)? Does the shape and character of the object resemble other known magical objects? Are the

¹² See Sanzo 2014b; Boustan and Sanzo 2017.

¹³ Esp. de Bruyn and Dijkstra 2011; Wilburn 2013; Artz-Grabner and de Troyer 2018.

texts, symbols, or images found on the artifact common to known magical objects? Members of the team will follow the now standard protocol of assessing the likelihood that an object was used for magical purposes based on the following rubrics: certain; probable; and possible.¹⁴ Of course, EJCM recognizes that objects could serve multiple functions for their users, even for a single user. Carrying a papyrus with a psalm inscribed on it to church, for instance, might have meant one thing; however, that same object probably served a totally different function when the carrier was sick or afraid of demonic attack.

At a broader methodological level, the team members will also apply to the magical objects an integrative approach, in which the scholar examines the intersections of words, images, and material properties – with a particular emphasis on local parallels – in order to provide a more comprehensive interpretation of the artifacts.¹⁵ This approach synthesizes research from historians of the book¹⁶ and proponents of the “New Philology”¹⁷ on the relationship between materiality, reading habits, and conceptions of text, on the one hand, and on research from historians of ancient art on the complexities of ancient word–image relations,¹⁸ on the other hand.

2. *Social Dynamics*: The project will also draw from several academic disciplines, including art history, religious studies, and sociology, to address questions of religious identity and social interaction between early Jews and Christians on both local and global levels. The project's synthetic focus on these issues will redraw the relationships between cultural symbols, communal boundaries, and religious identities in late antiquity and thus rewrite the early history of Judaism and Christianity in lived religion. For instance, the project will grapple with contemporary theory on the relationship between identity, the individual, and groups in order to answer the following question: to what extent was religious identity operative in the late antique magical objects? For this question, we will draw on the work of the sociologists Rogers Brubaker and Bernard Lahire, who have highlighted in separate studies the ways individuals can align themselves with different groups depending upon the situation and context.¹⁹ We are not the first historians of late antiquity to draw on the work of Brubaker and Lahire to discuss late antique magic; Éric Rebillard has used their work in order to claim that religious identity was not “activated” in magical contexts.²⁰ Rebillard's analysis, however, was based exclusively on the literary evidence (e.g., the writings of St. Augustine). EJCM, which not only takes into consideration the literary sources, but, more importantly, the material evidence (e.g., amulets and incantation bowls), will show that in fact religious identity – conceived in both local and global ways – played an important role in such magical contexts.

In addition, the examination of the dynamics of assimilation, cooperation, and differentiation requires that team members grapple with questions of cultural exoticism, syncretism, and synthesis. By attending to these features in conjunction with one another, the project addresses three central questions, which will reorient the study of early Jewish and Christian lived religion:

1. To what extent – if at all – did late antique Christian and, especially, Jewish

¹⁴ See de Bruyn and Dijkstra 2011.

¹⁵ Cf. Sanzo 2015; Sanzo 2016.

¹⁶ E.g., Cavallo and Chartier 1999.

¹⁷ E.g., Driskoll 2010; Lied and Lundhaug 2017.

¹⁸ E.g., Newby 2007; Squire 2009.

¹⁹ E.g., Brubaker 2002; Lahire 2011.

²⁰ Rebillard 2012, 73.

practitioners appropriate cultural stereotypes about them when they composed their ritual texts?

2. To what extent did elements, which were originally Jewish (e.g., Iaô Sabaôth and Rab. Joshua bar Peraḥya) or Christian (e.g., the name Jesus or a cross), continue to be understood as specifically Jewish or Christian by subsequent users?

3 What social factors contributed to the appropriation of foreign religious or cultural symbols, practices, and traditions?

The examination of exoticism, first, takes into consideration what historian of ancient religion David Frankfurter has called “stereotype appropriation,” whereby an individual actively appropriates and displays the stereotypes thrust upon him or her by hegemonic power.²¹ Frankfurter has demonstrated how Egyptian practitioners utilized Roman stereotypes of Egyptians as they produced their ritual objects. The examination of exoticism also takes into consideration the work of art historian Alicia Walker, whose study of the imperial court in the medieval Byzantine Empire has demonstrated how exotic cultural elements can function as “active agents of meaning,” resolving the curiosities and fears that result from interactions with cultural and ethnic Others.²² Such scholarship works in dialogue with research on cultural syncretism and synthesis. In contrast to much scholarship in ancient magic, which has assumed that the inclusion of both Jewish and Christian elements on a single object inherently reflects a conscious and intentional mixture of religious traditions, Michael Pye has shown that cultural symbols commonly lose their original associations over time.²³ This process, which he calls “resolution,” can take a variety of forms, such as “assimilation” (i.e., weaker elements are absorbed into the dominant tradition) and “synthesis” (i.e., a new religious tradition is created). The project's synthetic focus on identity, exoticism, syncretism, and synthesis will contribute to a new understanding of the ways late antique people understood Judaism and Christianity – as both local and global categories – as they went about their everyday lives.

3. *Comparison and Classification:* This project also grapples with the relationship between ancient artifacts and scholarly categories and approaches. The team's comparative study of Jewish and Christian magical traditions draws upon both the analytical use of comparison (i.e., oriented around similar kinds of individuals/groups at a particular period of time) and the illustrative use of comparison (i.e., oriented around a broader idea, concept, or model that transcends specific groups or a particular time period), as described by Victoria Bonnell and applied to the study of late antiquity by David Frankfurter²⁴ This two-fold approach will help the team members to examine early Jewish and Christian magical practices as equivalent historical units (i.e., the analytical use of comparison) and to reflect on the relationship between this material evidence and broader scholarly categories, such as magic, religion, syncretism, and inter-cultural contact (i.e., the illustrative use of comparison). What is more, in light of this two-fold comparative approach, the team members will not only rely heavily on scholarship devoted to early Jewish or Christian magical traditions and early Jewish–Christian relations, but they will also utilize broader sociological research on syncretism (see above) and on accusations of violence and boundary demarcation among closely related communities.²⁵

²¹ E.g., Frankfurter 1999, 224–37. Cf. Dieleman 2005, 9–10, 287.

²² Walker 2012. Cf. Canepa 2010.

²³ Pye 1994.

²⁴ Bonnell 1980; Frankfurter 2012.

²⁵ E.g., Simmel 1956; Coser 1956; Smith 1985, 44–48; Frankfurter 2001, 412–16.

In addition, the project will also make use of scholarship on taxonomy and classification from various fields. For instance, analyses of the adjectives “Christian” and “Jewish” (as well as the controversial term “magic”) necessitates an evaluation of the use of these terms in ancient studies,²⁶ on the one hand, and a frontal engagement with research in the cognitive and social sciences on classification²⁷ and the emic/etic distinction,²⁸ on the other hand. This aspect of the project is largely oriented around the following question: to what extent should we allow ancient sources to frame our scholarly categories? In addition, the study of the practitioners’ own understandings of their religious traditions, beliefs, and practices will make use of the work on lived religion among historians of modern religions, such as Robert Orsi,²⁹ and historians of ancient religions, such as Jörg Rüpke.³⁰

V. Conclusions

The EJCM project offers the first comparative and extended analysis of early Jewish and Christian magical traditions, with particular attention to their implications for the study of early Jewish–Christian relations and for the study of ancient magic more generally. In order to accomplish these research aims, the project applies a new analytical framework that allows for a reassessment of the local and global dynamics that stood behind early Jewish and Christian magical practices. This framework not only makes a unique and important contribution to the study of both ancient magic and early Jewish–Christian relations by bridging these sources (which are typically analyzed in isolation), but it also applies to them a robust, interdisciplinary methodology, which synthesizes insights from various academic fields, including history, religious studies, sociology, and art history. The joining of these fields and sources will produce significant information about the past by revealing how religious assimilation, cooperation, and differentiation worked in ancient rituals, on the one hand, and by illuminating the ways Jews and Christians configured the symbolic, social, and material boundaries between their respective communities in lived contexts, on the other hand. Beyond supplementing the literary evidence, the Jewish and Christian material objects challenge scholars to redraw many of the constructs they currently use to describe and think about ancient magic and early Jewish–Christian relations (e.g., syncretism and communal boundaries). These artifacts also recontextualize patristic, rabbinic, and legal texts that describe or complain about believers participating in illicit rituals or interacting with religious and ethnic Others. This synthetic project will also better equip scholars to evaluate the extent to which we can usefully distinguish between Jewish and Christian magical traditions and Judaism and Christianity more generally in late antiquity. In the end, this interdisciplinary project will offer a unique portrait of the intersecting histories of early Judaism and early Christianity.

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²⁶ E.g., Becker and Reed 2007; Boyarin 2004; Schäfer 2012; Jacobs 2012; Bremmer 1999; Aune 2007; Otto 2013.

²⁷ E.g., Smith 1980; Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Lakoff 1987.

²⁸ E.g., Headland, Pike, and Harris 1990.

²⁹ Esp. Orsi 1985. See also Hall 1997; Ammerman 2007; McGuire 2008; Knibbe and Kupari 2020.

³⁰ E.g., Rüpke 2016; Raja and Rüpke 2015. See also Denzey Lewis 2021.

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