

The Vow-Curse in Ancient Jewish Texts*

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■ Abstract

Uttering a vow was an important and popular religious practice in ancient Judaism. It is mentioned frequently in biblical literature, and an entire rabbinic tractate, *Nedarim*, is devoted to this subject. In this article, I argue that starting from the Second Temple period, alongside the regular use of the vow, vows were also used as an aggressive binding mechanism in interpersonal situations. This practice became so popular that in certain contexts the vow became synonymous with the curse, as in a number of ossuaries in Jerusalem and in the later Aramaic incantation bowls. Moreover, this semantic expansion was not an isolated Jewish phenomenon but echoed both the use of the *anathema* in the Pauline epistles and contemporary Greco-Roman and Babylonian magical practices.

■ Keywords

rabbinics, Aramaic incantation bowls, Second Temple literature, Paul, Damascus Document, ancient magic

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■ Introduction

Uttering a vow was an important and popular religious practice in ancient Judaism. It is mentioned frequently in biblical literature, and an entire rabbinic tractate, *Nedarim*, is devoted to the subject. Previous studies on the history of the use of the vow in Jewish tradition have frequently focused on its substantial development, from a mechanism of dedication in the Hebrew Bible to a prohibitive locution in Second Temple and rabbinic literature.¹ In this article, I will focus on an additional semantic expansion of the ancient vow and on the social contexts in which such vows were used. I will argue that, starting from the Second Temple period, alongside the regular use of the vow, vows were also used as an aggressive binding mechanism in interpersonal situations. This practice became so popular that in certain contexts the vow became synonymous with the curse. Moreover, this semantic expansion was not an isolated Jewish phenomenon but echoed both the use of the *anathema* in the Pauline epistles and contemporary Greco-Roman and Babylonian magical practices.

■ The Aggressive Vow in the Second Temple Period

The vow in biblical times served as a declarative promise to sanctify something in return for a favor from God—for example, the vows made by Jacob (Gen 28:20–22) and Jephthah (Judg 11:30–31).² This votive institution differs significantly from the rabbinic prohibitive vow. The prohibitive vow was a declaration that an object was prohibited because it was likened to an offering to God. This prohibition was used either as an ascetic practice or as a means of distancing somebody from oneself.

In Second Temple literature, the vow was closer to the rabbinic prohibitive vow than to the biblical vow, although the exact mechanism of the vow in this period is disputed.³ Most discussions center on a passage from the New Testament, Second Temple ossuaries from Jerusalem, and a mention of the vow in the Damascus Document.⁴ In what follows, I hope to demonstrate systematically that in this early period the vow already functions as a harmful speech act used in interpersonal situations.

¹ For biblical vows, see Tony W. Cartledge, *Vows in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East* (JSOTSup 147; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992); Jacques Berlinerblau, *The Vows and the “Popular Religious Groups” of Ancient Israel: A Philological and Sociological Inquiry* (JSOTSup 201; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1996); Yael Ziegler, *Promises to Keep: The Oath in Biblical Narrative* (VTSup 120; Leiden: Brill, 2008). For the Second Temple and rabbinic periods, see Albert I. Baumgarten, “*Korban* and the Pharisaic *Paradosis*,” *JANESCU* 16–17 (1984–1985) 5–17; Moshe Benovitz, “The Origin and Meaning of the Prohibitive Vow in Second Temple and Tannaitic Literature,” *Tarbiz* 64 (1995) 203–28 (Hebrew); idem, *Kol Nidre: Studies in the Development of Rabbinic Votive Institutions* (BJS 315; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998).

² See Cartledge, *Vows*, 15–18.

³ See, for example, Baumgarten, “*Korban* and the *Paradosis*”; Benovitz, *Kol Nidre*, 9–13, 127–31.

⁴ Other texts discussed include those of Philo and Josephus; see nn. 7 and 13 below.

A. The Vow of the Pharisees in the New Testament

In Mark 7:9–13, Jesus criticizes the Pharisees for favoring their tradition over the commandments of the Lord:

⁹ Then he said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition! ¹⁰ For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.’ ¹¹ But you say that if anyone tells father or mother, ‘Whatever support you might have had from me is Qorban’ (that is, an offering to God)— ¹² then you no longer permit doing anything for a father or mother, ¹³ thus making void the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on. And you do many things like this.”⁵

In this passage, Jesus chastises the Pharisees for distancing their parents by using the vow of the *qorban* and preferring to fulfill their vow rather than fulfilling their divine obligation to honor their parents. In verse 11 of the original Greek version, there is a transliteration of the Hebrew word *qorban* (Κορβᾶν) and immediately thereafter a translation to the Greek, “that is a gift” (ὅ ἐστιν Δῶρον). Many scholars have linked the action of the vow mentioned in Mark and the rabbinic vow.⁶ Indeed, the word *qorban* is one of the substituted names (*kinnuyim*) for vows in tractate *Nedarim*: “A person who states ‘*qorban*,’ ‘like a *qorban*,’ or ‘*Qorban* that I will eat for you,’ (it is) forbidden.”⁷ Scholars are divided on the question of how exactly the Pharisees performed this vow.⁸ Regardless of the understanding of the exact mechanism, there is another issue that has not yet been resolved: Jesus’s reference to the prohibition to *curse* one’s parents. In verse 10, Jesus cites the prooftexts for his criticism: “Honor your father and your mother” (Exod 20:12) and “Whoever speaks evil of (lit., curses) father or mother must surely die” (Exod 21:17).

While the first verse seems relevant, the prohibition to curse one’s parent is not. George Buchanan has suggested that the passage should be understood in light of an original Pharisaic vow that included a curse that was later omitted.⁹ Ze’ev Falk rejected this reconstruction of the vow, claiming that there was no omitted curse, but rather that the Pharisaic vow was a regular rabbinic vow and the verse emphasizes the breaching of the duty of honoring one’s parent.¹⁰ Neither opinion can explain the text as it stands: Buchanan needs to supply a vow that is not extant in the text; and

⁵ According to the NRSV, with minor changes. See parallel text in Matt 15:1–5.

⁶ See Baumgarten, “*Korban* and the *Paradosis*,” 13–15. For a detailed summary of previous research, see Benovitz, “Prohibitive Vow,” 210–12 nn. 31–34. See also Joel Marcus, *Mark 1–8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 27A; repr. London: Yale University Press, 2000) 445; Adela Yarbo Collins, *Mark: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007) 27:352–53.

⁷ *M. Ned.* 1:4. Josephus attests to the Jewish usage of the word *qorban* as an oath (“ὄρκος”); see *C. Ap.* 1.167; *Ant.* 4.70–74.

⁸ Benovitz, “Prohibitive Vow,” 210–17.

⁹ See George W. Buchanan, “Some Vows and Oath Formulas in the New Testament,” *HTR* 58 (1965) 319–26.

¹⁰ Ze’ev W. Falk, “On Talmudic Vows,” *HTR* 59 (1966) 309–12.

Falk diminishes the importance of the curse that appears in the passage. I suggest the following reading of this proof-text: The Pharisaic vow has an intended harmful function *in and of itself*; therefore, Jesus cites the prohibition to curse. This harmful function is compatible with contemporary uses of the vow in other Second Temple sources and in Greco-Roman curse texts, as we shall presently see.¹¹

B. Vows in the Damascus Document

The Damascus Document contains a warning against the use of vows: “The law of donations (נדבות): let no man vow to the altar . . . let no man sanctify the fo[od of his mouth unto God, for this is] what He said, [‘They hu]nt each other with *herem* (הרם).”¹²

Scholars have understood the phrase, “let no man sanctify the fo[od of his mouth unto God,” to refer to some sort of prohibitive vow, similar to the rabbinic vow.¹³ Moshe Benovitz has demonstrated that this prohibition is part of a larger context about donations that are made while engaging in sin (such as donating stolen goods). Benovitz also has noted that the short description in the scroll is similar to Mark 7:9–12. Both passages discuss a vow associated with a prohibition that is employed in order to withhold from someone something which that person deserves.¹⁴

However, the vow here may have a stronger purpose than just as a means for moral exploitation. The proof-text from Mic 7:2 reads: “The faithful have been swept from the land; not one upright person remains. Everyone lies in wait to shed blood; they hunt each other with *herem*” (איש את אהיהו יצודו הרם).¹⁵ In Micah, *herem* is a kind of net,¹⁶ but in the scroll the *herem* is interpreted as “vow.”¹⁷ The Damascus Document issues a warning against such vows, comparing the action

¹¹ In a forthcoming article, Daniel Boyarin proposes another reading of the verse. In ancient sources the verb KBD, “to honor/make heavy,” is interpreted as to provide for one’s parents in their old age. The verb QLL, “to curse/make light,” a semantic opposition to KBD, should therefore be understood as doing the opposite. Thus, the verse, “Whoever curses their father or mother,” fits the context of Jesus’s criticism of the Pharisees who do not provide for their parents as they are obligated. (Daniel Boyarin, “Jesus, the Pharisees and the Oral Law,” *Tedua* 31: *Aharon Shemesh Memorial Volume* [forthcoming; Hebrew]; I would like to thank Prof. Boyarin for sharing his paper with me prior to its publication.)

¹² See J. M. Baumgarten, *Qumran Cave 4.XIII: The Damascus Document (4Q266–273)* (DJD XVIII; Oxford: Clarendon, 1996) 178–79. Square brackets mark lacunae in the Qumran text with additions according to the genizah. I have modified the translation for the sake of consistency.

¹³ See Benovitz, “Prohibitive Vow,” 219–21 n. 65. Cf. Philo, *Hypoth.* 7.3–5: “Each individual is master of his possessions unless he has solemnly named the name of God over them declaring that he has given them to God. . . . If a man has devoted his wife’s sustenance to a sacred purpose he must refrain from giving her that sustenance; so with a father’s gift to his son or a ruler to his subjects.”

¹⁴ See Benovitz, “Prohibitive Vow,” 220–21.

¹⁵ In the Damascus Document, the verse is quoted with רעהו, different from the Masoretic version, אהיהו.

¹⁶ See Ezek 32:3: “I will throw my net over you; and I will haul you up in my dragnet.”

¹⁷ Cf. Tannaitic literature where the word “*herem*” is used similarly to “*qorban*”: for example, *m. Ned.* 2:5, 5:4; *t. Ned.* 5: 5.

to “hunting” a fellow man, again revealing the vows’ harmful effects. The word *herem* is interpreted in the scroll as a vow, compatible with the regular meaning of the word in Hebrew, from the Hebrew Bible through Qumran to rabbinic literature. However, it is important to stress that the biblical word *herem* is connected not only to the act of consecration but also to the action of human destruction and killing.¹⁸

That the semantic field of vows had expanded to include baleful effects on humans, and that this was appreciated by ancient readers, is clear from the Septuagint. The Hebrew word *herem* is consistently translated as “anathema” (ἀνάθεμα). The anathema also underwent a similar change, from signifying a votive dedication to a god to functioning as a type of imprecation.¹⁹ In the Damascus Document, while closely connected to the classical sense of the vow, *herem* was also read as a harmful action—a notion that may further assist in understanding the semantic expansion and varied functions of the ancient vow.

C. Vow Formulae on Ossuaries from Jerusalem

Qorban formulae on Second Temple ossuaries provide yet another source that attests to the harmful function of the Jewish vow. The first such inscription was found in the Kidron Valley, and it reads: כל די אנש מתהננה בחלתה דה קרבן אלה מן דבגיה. J. T. Milik interpreted the inscription thus: “Whoever re-uses this ossuary, for his benefit, a *curse* (lit., *qorban*) of God on behalf of him who is inside it.”²⁰ Thus, the word “*qorban*”—which literally means “offering” and serves as a votive term in this period—should be understood as a curse (“malédiction”). Milik’s translation was later widely criticized, especially for its reading of *qorban* as a curse. For example, Albert Baumgarten explained that the inscription should be read in light of the rabbinic vow: the person whose remains are in the ossuary dedicated the grave like an offering while he was alive, thus prohibiting anyone from later opening it.²¹ The inscription from the Kidron Valley is also similar to the rabbinic vow, in that the formula contains a condition: if a man benefits from the contents of the grave, it will be as if he desecrated the holy. Subsequently, however, more ossuaries with the word *qorban* were discovered, and they were not always compatible with the language of the rabbinic vow. One ossuary carries a bilingual inscription: כל אנש – כל אש קרבן מתהננה בה קרבן (Each man that benefits [from] it is a *qorban*, each man

¹⁸ See Arie Versluis, “Devotion and/or Destruction? The Meaning and Function of חרם in the Old Testament,” *ZAW* 128 (2016) 233–46; Ishay Rosen-Zvi, “Rereading *Herem*: Destruction of Idolatry in Tannaitic Literature,” in *The Gift of the Land and the Fate of the Canaanites in Jewish Thought* (ed. Katell Berthelot, Joseph E. David, and Marc Hirshman; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) 50–65.

¹⁹ See more below, in the section on the vow-curse in the Pauline epistles and archaeological findings.

²⁰ J. T. Milik, “Trois tombeaux juifs récemment découverts au Sud-Est de Jérusalem,” *SBFLA* 7 (1956–1957) 232–39.

²¹ See Baumgarten, “*Korban* and the *Paradosis*,” 7. See also Benovitz, “Prohibitive Vow,” 218; Ya’akov Billig, “An Ossuary from Jerusalem Bearing *Korban* Inscriptions,” *Cathedra* 98 (2000) 49–60 (Hebrew).

is a *qorban*). Another states: כל אדם בה קרבן (Each man in it is a *qorban*).²² These inscriptions seem to indicate that the person who violates the grave is himself the *qorban*, which contradicts the idea that the ossuary and its contents are the *qorban*. Scholars have suggested either that some element was missing from the formula or that the formula was a shortened one indicating the existence of a longer vow that had been made orally.²³

If *qorban*, a regular votive term in this period, had already acquired the meaning of “curse,” this would uphold Milik’s reading, that there is a curse upon the man who opens the ossuary. It would also obviate the need to change the reading of the text and to add something that is not in the original inscription. This reading helps in understanding the bilingual inscription that scholars have struggled with: “Each man that benefits (from) it is a *qorban*, each man is a *qorban*.” I suggest the meaning to be that a man who opens and benefits from the ossuary is to be cursed, basing my suggestion on the common curse formulae on Jewish and non-Jewish graves in antiquity, for example, inscriptions from *Beth Shearim*: “That is buried here *Shimon b. Yochanan*, and in an oath that every (man) that will open it will die a bad death.”²⁴ If the *qorban* inscription is interpreted as another example of the curse inscriptions regularly found on ancient graves, we may conclude that the *qorban*-vow itself carried with it the implication of a curse, an implication that echoes contemporary uses of the vow. This reading may be compared to a much later vow-curse that appears on the grave inscription for a young boy from the year 588 CE in the area of Beer Sheva:

Ἀνάθε ||-| Μα δὲ ἔστω ἀπο του | π(ατ)ρ(ὸ)ς κ(αι) τοῦ Υἱοῦ κ(αι) τοῦ Ἁγίου
Πν(εύματος)ς πᾶς ἀνύ|γων τὸ μνημα τοῦ|το ἐπειδὴ γέμει.²⁵

Anathema from the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit will be anyone who opens the grave because it is full.

This grave inscription employs the word “anathema” as a curse aimed at a potential grave robber. The curse conforms to the ossuaries in which words of dedication were used as warnings for potential grave robbers, such as: “Each

²² For a summary of the *qorban* inscriptions and their interpretations, see Boaz Zissu and Amir Ganor, “A New ‘Qorban’ Inscription on an Ossuary from Jerusalem,” *Cathedra* 123 (2007) 5–12 (Hebrew).

²³ Billig claimed that the ossuary from Arnona should be read in a similar way to the ossuary from the Kidron Valley, meaning that the particle *dy* was omitted (Billig, “Ossuary from Jerusalem,” 55 n. 24). As Benovitz rightfully points out, this explanation is unlikely, since, among other things, the inscription is bilingual. As a result, Benovitz reads the inscription as a shortened formula stating that there was a vow that was performed orally (Benovitz, “The Korban Vow and the Ossuary Inscription from the Arnona Neighborhood in Jerusalem,” *Cathedra* 104 [2002] 179) [Hebrew]).

²⁴ See Nahman Avigad, *Beth She’arim* (3 vols.; New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1971) 3:233–34. For a summary of scholarship on the subject of the use of curses on graves, see Billig, “Ossuary from Jerusalem,” 56 n. 33.

²⁵ M. Abel, “Nouvelles inscriptions grecques de Bersabée,” *RB* 1.2 (1904) 266–70; Eve Miriam Davies, “From Womb to the Tomb: The Byzantine Life Course 518–1024 AD” (PhD diss., University of Birmingham, 2013) 341.

man that benefits (from) it is a *qorban*, each man is a *qorban*.” Of course, there is a significant time gap between the various inscriptions; nevertheless, both are Palestinian grave inscriptions using words that initially served as dedications to deter potential grave violators. Understanding these dedications as curse formulae situates them well within the widely attested practice in antiquity of writing curses and warnings on graves.

■ The Rabbinic Prohibitive Vow

A key difference between the biblical vow and the rabbinic prohibitive vow was that while the former was a declaration of dedication, the latter was a declaration to receive no personal benefit or to prevent others from receiving benefit. Like the Pharisaic vow in Mark, these prohibitive declarations had the power to bind and constrict all people who were mentioned in them. Thus, they possessed the potential to harm others. Although in some cases vows and oaths were used interchangeably in rabbinic literature, for the most part they were each distinct, both in the practices themselves and the contexts in which they were used.²⁶ Oaths were used as a binding form of declaration in various contexts (שְׁבוּרַת הַבֵּיטוּי), as well as in the legal sphere (oaths of witnesses, watchmen, orphans, partners, and the like), and they required uttering a holy name. Vows, on the other hand, were used in personal and social contexts, such as ascetic vows²⁷ or separation vows, in which one undertakes not to give benefit to, or receive benefit from, someone else.

Separation vows could be directed at family and friends or at strangers.²⁸ When one pronounced a separation vow, all connection between the one making the vow and the object of the vow ceased immediately. Such vows were probably intended to cause distress to the object of the vow. A man could vow to deny his wife the ability to work, have sexual relations, eat his food, adorn herself, enter her father’s house, or go to houses of mourning or feasting.²⁹ In these cases, the rabbis lacked the power to annul the vow, but they could, under certain conditions, force such a man to divorce his wife and provide her with her *ketubbah*. The many laws regarding the use of the vows in various different social contexts attest to the popularity of this practice. The vow was an effective binding social instrument that could be used to segregate, expel, or otherwise control others. Like the Pharisaic vow, the abusive function of the vow was the result of a consecration that was driven not by charity but by a personal desire to harm.

²⁶ On the popular origin of various oaths and vow formulations, see Saul Lieberman, *Greek in Jewish Palestine: Studies in the Life and Manners of Jewish Palestine in the II–IV Centuries CE* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1942) 115–41.

²⁷ For personal ascetic vows, see chs. 6 and 8 of *m. Ned.* (and *t. Ned.* 3:1–4:3).

²⁸ See *m. Ned.* 3:6–11.

²⁹ See *m. Ket.* 5:4–5; 7:1–5. On these practices, see Ishay Rosen-Zvi, “Mishnah Ketubbot Chap. 7: The Tannaitic Conceptualization of Marriage,” *Dinei Israel* 26 (2010) 92–106 (Hebrew).

That the vow was used to harm others does not imply that it automatically carried with it the connotation of “curse,” as we will see in the later incantation bowls. However, harm was a primary motivation for those who employed the vow, such that the potential to harm also provides an opportunity (an “opening”), according to the rabbis, for the retraction of the vow:

And Rabbi Meir said, We provide an opening for him from what is written in the Torah and say to him: “If you would have known that you transgressed ‘You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge’ (Lev 19:18) and ‘You shall not hate your brother in your heart’ (Lev 19:17) and ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’ (Lev 19:18) and ‘that your brother may live with you’ (Lev 25:36); perhaps he will become poor and you cannot provide for him?” And he said: “If I had known it was such, I would not have vowed,” [the vow] is released.³⁰

In this passage, the rabbis release someone from a vow by arguing that he would not have made the vow had he been cognizant of obligations toward fellow Israelites, such as not to hate them. The assumption of the Mishnah is that hatred is often the motivation for pronouncing such vows.

The existence in Tannaitic literature of a wide variety of vow terminologies that are not always consistent with the proper vow formula may also attest to the semantic expansion of the vow.³¹ The classic interpretation of the rabbinic vow formula is that a person declares property as likened to an offering, thus forbidding the person who vowed to benefit from it. This interpretation is consistent with part of Mishnah *Nedarim* and with both Talmuds.³² Yet Moshe Benovitz has pointed out that, although the classic way to pronounce such a vow is “*Qonam* is something upon me,”³³ most examples from the Mishnah in *Nedarim* are formulated differently. For example, one common way of uttering a vow is to declare: “*Qonam* is the wine that I taste” (*m. Ned.* 8:1).³⁴ This formula does not fit the classical interpretation in which the untasted wine is consecrated, as it would make much more sense to formulate the vow thus: “*Qonam* is this wine upon me.” As a result, Benovitz interprets the majority of these vows as expressions that create specific personal prohibitions, without any real intention to dedicate the object of the vow.³⁵ In the case of the wine vow, the prohibition pertains to the wine that the man intends to drink. In other words, the quasi-dedication occurs only when the man actually drinks the wine. Obviously, the digested wine cannot be dedicated to the temple; it serves

³⁰ *M. Ned.* 9:4.

³¹ For the origin and meaning of the variety of votive formulae in the Mishnah, see Moshe Benovitz, “Substitute Vow Formulae,” *Sidra* 12 (1996) 5–25 (Hebrew).

³² See *m. Ned.* 1:3–4, 2:1; *b. Ned.* 14a; and *y. Ned.* 1:4 (37a). See also Hanoah Albeck, introduction to Tractate *Nedarim*, in *The Mishnah, Seder Nashim* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1958).

³³ For example, *m. Ned.* 7:6: “*Qonam* this produce [lit., fruit] upon me”; i.e., the produce is like an offering for the person who pronounced the vow and he may not taste it.

³⁴ Cf. “*Qonam* is that which I benefit from you” (*m. Ned.* 7:9).

³⁵ Benovitz, *Kol Nidre*, 13–16.

as a personal binding prohibition that will result in the grave sin of desecration if the vow is abrogated.

Although Benovitz's solution helps in reading a variety of mishnaic passages, he himself admits that it still does not explain all of the vow formulations in the Mishnah and other rabbinic texts. For example, in a number of passages from Tannaitic literature, there is a vow formula in which a man says to his peer: "*Qonam* to your home (קונם לבייתך) that I will enter."³⁶ This recurrent formula cannot easily be understood, either through the "likening" explanation or through Benovitz's "personal prohibition" explanation.³⁷ In addition, the Mishnah cites *qonamot* that force their pronouncer to perform some act, for example, to marry or divorce. Such vows do not fit any of the aforementioned explanations.³⁸ Mishnah *Gittin* tells of a man from Sidon who said to his wife: "*Qonam* if I do not divorce you."³⁹ The man proceeded to divorce his wife, and the rabbis permitted them to remarry each other because of *tiqqun ha'olam*.⁴⁰ The use of the *qonam* here is so unclear that already the anonymous redactor of the Talmud asked, "What is (this) *qonam*?"—leading to the answer, "All the produce of the world will be prohibited upon me if I do not divorce you."⁴¹ In other words, the *qonam* of the man from Sidon can only be understood by adding a proper formula that prohibits foods on the pronouncer of the vow. J. N. Epstein suggested that the *qonam* formula in this story may be understood as an oath formula, thus solving the problem of adding to the original text; but this explanation empties the *qonam* of its customary meaning by rendering it as an oath.⁴²

A more plausible solution, both for the case of the man from Sidon and for the formulation of "*Qonam* to your home," is to understand the *qonam* as a type of curse. In pronouncing the words "*Qonam* if I do not divorce you," the man from Sidon places upon himself a curse that forces him to divorce his wife.⁴³ Similarly, the words "*Qonam* to your home" signify placing a curse on a home and preventing

³⁶ See *m. Ned.* 5:3, 8:7, 9:2-3; *t. Ned.* 4:8-9.

³⁷ Benovitz, *Kol Nidre*, 15 n. 30.

³⁸ *M. Ned.* 9:3; *m. Git.* 4:7.

³⁹ See J. N. Epstein, *Introduction to the Mishnaic Text* (3rd ed.; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2000) 500 (Hebrew).

⁴⁰ *M. Git.* 4:7.

⁴¹ In the printed edition and in MS Vatican 140, the answer is brought in the name of Rav Hunna. In contrast, MS Vatican 130 and Munich 95 bring the answer anonymously.

⁴² See Epstein, *Introduction*, 500 n. 2.

⁴³ This conclusion may be connected to J. N. Epstein's interpretation of the origin of the word "*qonam*." According to Epstein, *qonam* is a Phoenician loanword, meaning "to adjure," as is seemingly attested in the Ashmunezer inscription (J. N. Epstein, "On the Language of Nezirut," in *Sefer Magnes* [ed. J. N. Epstein et al.; Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1938] 10 [Hebrew]). Benovitz has argued convincingly that this interpretation is highly unlikely, since there is no other attestation of such a usage in Phoenician. And even in the Ashmunezer inscription itself, the meaning is probably not an adjuration, since it does not fit the expected syntax; rather, the meaning is "whoever," as most scholars of Phoenician suggest. Benovitz suggests that the origin of the word *qonam* is from the Greek κοινός, meaning "common" or "shared" (Benovitz, "Substitute Vow Formulae," 5-25).

a man from entering. These meanings may be compared to the use of the anathema in Pauline literature, or to the common rabbinic phrase יבוא עלי, which is used as an abbreviation of a curse formula, usually in order to prove that a statement or action is true.⁴⁴ Such uses are similar to the presence of the *qorban* vow on certain ossuaries and to the later use of the vow-curse in the incantation bowls. In other words, in popular circles votive terms such as *qonam*, *qorban*, or *neder* may have indicated a binding imprecation that was used in a wide variety of situations, such as against a wife, to ward off grave robbers, and the like.

Of course, this does not mean that all mishnaic vow formulae should be read in this way. The diverse vow formulations in the Mishnah attest first and foremost to the use of specific legal vows in many situations. Alongside the primary dedicatory purpose, however, the vow is also employed as a method to gain coercive power, whether in domestic or wider social contexts, and to inflict harm. That a pious and sacred votive institution could take on a harmful function is not as surprising as it may seem. In the act of uttering a vow, a person consecrates spaces or objects—an act that immediately creates a power hierarchy, for the person who utters the vow *de facto* controls and constrains other people. Such a vow functions as a sacred dedication when a person stands alone before God, but when another person enters this equation, the vow has the potential for harm. In this, the vow was extremely useful because it gave a person the power to obligate others without the need to utter a holy name.⁴⁵ A person seemingly engaged in piety could realize injurious intentions, as with the vows of the Pharisees or the vows of the husband against his wife in Mishnah *Ketubbot*. These harmful practices are comparable to other contemporary uses of dedications and vows.

■ The Vow-Curse in the Pauline Epistles and Archaeological Findings

A. Anathema in Pauline Literature

The Greek word anathema (ἀνάθημα) had a significant semantic evolution, initially referring to a dedication to the gods, then to a curse, and finally to a formal ecclesiastical excommunication.⁴⁶ Here, I wish to note the change in meaning

⁴⁴ This phrase is very common in the Palestinian Talmud and the various midrashim: for example, *y. Šeb.* 7:1, 38d; *y. Yoma* 1:1, 38d; *y. Mo'ed Qat.* 3:7, 83c. Regarding this phrase, see Lieberman, *Greek in Jewish Palestine*, 121–23.

⁴⁵ The tremendous power of vows may explain why the rabbis institutionalized their own ability to annul them. See Mira Balberg's argument regarding the minimization of vows that a husband may annul for his wife against the backdrop of this rabbinic institution (Mira Balberg, "The Vows That He Annuls": The Definition and Classification of Annulable Vows in Rabbinic Literature" [MA thesis, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2005] 14–20).

⁴⁶ For further reading and references, see J. Behm, "ἀνάθημα," *TDNT* 1:356–57; Katell Berthelot, "The Notion of Anathema in Ancient Jewish Literature Written in Greek," in *The Reception of Septuagint Words in Jewish-Hellenistic and Christian Literature* (ed. Eberhard Bons, Ralph Brucker, and Jan Joosten; WUNT 2/367; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014) 35–52; David Martinez, "'May She Neither Eat nor Drink': Love Magic and Vows of Abstinence," in *Ancient Magic and Ritual*

from classical Greek to the later uses in the first centuries CE. In classical Greek, the word *anathema* meant a votive offering set up in a temple, in accordance with its literal meaning.⁴⁷ The word is widely attested in textual and archaeological evidence alike.⁴⁸ In the Septuagint, *anathema* (ἀνάθεμα) was the usual translation for the biblical *herem*.⁴⁹ As I mentioned earlier, the biblical *herem* had a meaning of devotion or consecration, but it also carried a meaning of total destruction.

In the New Testament, most prominently in the Pauline epistles, *anathema* is usually translated as “a curse” or “an accursed thing,” a meaning connected with the Septuagint’s translation.⁵⁰ For example, in 1 Cor 16:22 Paul declares: “If anyone does not love the Lord, let that person be *anathema* [ἦτω ἀνάθεμα].” In other words, according to Paul, the person who does not love Jesus will be “*anathema*,” generally translated as “cursed.” Further elaboration on the use of the *anathema* occurs in 1 Cor 12:3: “Therefore I want you to know that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, ‘Jesus be cursed’ (ἀνάθεμα Ἰησοῦς), and no one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord’ (κύριος Ἰησοῦς), except by the Holy Spirit.” This passage contains a prohibition against stating that Jesus is *anathema*, as opposed to stating that Jesus is the Lord (κύριος), seemingly pointing to the fact that *anathema* means the opposite of Lord or master—that is, accursed.⁵¹

B. Vows in Greco-Roman Curse Texts

Yet another source that may attest to the *anathema*-curse is a first- to second-century CE curse tablet (*defixio*), found in Megara, Greece. The end of side A uses the

Power (ed. Marvin Meyer and Paul Mirecki; *Religions in the Graeco-Roman World*, 129; Leiden: Brill 1995) 335–59; Benovitz, *Kol Nidre*, 87–107.

⁴⁷ *LSJ*, s.v. “*anathēma*.”

⁴⁸ See Berthelot, “Notion of *Anathema*,” 36–40.

⁴⁹ Berthelot comments that there is no significant meaning for the difference in spelling (ἀνάθεμα or ἀνάθημα), as both forms are found in each period (*ibid.*, 40–46).

⁵⁰ See Behm, “ἀνάθεμα”; Berthelot, “Notion of *Anathema*,” 52.

⁵¹ For other occurrences, see Behm, “ἀνάθεμα,” 1:356. Benovitz argues that the accepted translation of *anathema* as a curse is erroneous and that the correct translation should be akin to the rabbinic prohibitive vow, namely, *herem*. Benovitz explains the quoted verse from 1 Cor 12:3 accordingly: “Anyone who tries to force Jesus to keep his distance by declaring Jesus *herem* to his own person is not actually speaking by the Spirit” (Benovitz, *Kol Nidre*, 105). However, this translation does not seem to be precise, since the words “to his own person” are not part of the original text, and the translation does not quite fit the antithetical structure of the verse, where the parallel statement is that Jesus is the Lord. Moreover, the word *anathema* is used as a curse in a *defixio* from the same time period. The common translation of *anathema* as curse seems to be imprecise as well. Consider, for example, Rom 9:3: “For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ” (ἀνάθεμα εἶναι αὐτὸς ἐγὼ ἀπὸ τοῦ Χριστοῦ). In this passage Paul declares that he himself should be *anathema* from Christ. As Benovitz pointed out, this kind of declaration has a striking resemblance to the rabbinic vow in which one may declare that he shall be distanced from another by a *herem* (Benovitz, *Kol Nidre*, 98–99). The translation of *anathema* as a general curse means this unique meaning of the *anathema* as akin to the *herem* is lost. Perhaps a more precise translation of the Pauline *anathema* would be a vow-curse, similar to the later use of the vow in the incantation bowls.

verb “anathematize” (ἀναθεματίζομεν), and the curse tablet itself ends with the word “anathema,” which apparently serves as a self-designation of the amulet: “We anathematize [ἀναθεματίζομεν] them—body, spirit, soul, mind, thought, feeling, life, heart—with Hekatean words and Hebrew oaths . . . We anathematize (?) them . . . and enroll them for punishments, pain and retribution . . . the body. Anathema.”⁵²

In this curse tablet it is clear that the anathema was employed as a curse not only in canonical writings but also in magic spells. It is worth emphasizing that the word was not just used with a list of other similar verbs; rather, the curse itself was called anathema. Scholars have suggested that this amulet may have had a Jewish background because of the similar use of anathema in the Pauline epistles and the reference to Hebrew oaths (ὀρκίσμασι τε ἄβραϊκοῖς).⁵³ It is difficult to determine if this is indeed the case, since this *defixio* also refers to Greek gods. The provenance of the tablet, the province Megara, may in fact suggest a non-Jewish practitioner. Moreover, the threat of “Hebrew oaths” does not necessarily point to a Jewish origin for the *defixio* but may have been used because of the oaths’ powerful reputation.⁵⁴ Be that as it may, the *defixio* clearly shows that the anathema functioned as a well-known curse in magical contexts as early as the second century CE. This usage is compatible with the harmful functions of dedications in other Greco-Roman magical texts. For example, Henk Versnel published a curse text from the Temple of Demeter at Knidos, dated to the second to first century BCE:

Artemis dedicates (ἀντεροῖ) to Demeter and Kore and all the gods with Demeter the person who would not return to me the articles of clothing, the cloak and the stole which I left behind, although I have asked for them back. Let him bring them in person (ἀνενέγκαι[ι] αὐτός) to Demeter, even if it is someone else who has my possessions, let him burn and publicly confess ([πεπρη]μένος ἐξ[αγορεύ]ων) his guilt. But may I be free and innocent of any offense against religion . . . if I drink and eat with him and come under the same roof with him . . .⁵⁵

⁵² See John G. Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1999) 183–84; Auguste Audollent, *Defixionum tabellae* (Paris: A. Fontemoing, 1904) 75–76 no. 41.

⁵³ See Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 84 n. 17.

⁵⁴ See John Chrysostom, *Discourses against Judaizing Christians* (trans. Paul W. Harkins; FC 68; Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1977) 12 (1.5): “I asked him why he rejected the Church and dragged the woman to the place where the Hebrews assembled. He answered that many people had told him that oaths sworn there were more to be feared.”

⁵⁵ From Henk S. Versnel, “Beyond Cursing: The Appeal to Justice in Judicial Prayers,” in *Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion* (ed. Christopher A. Faraone and Dirk Obbink; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) 60–106, at 72. This curse text is part of a genre that Versnel defines as “judicial prayers” or “prayers for justice” (see also idem, “Prayers for Justice, East and West: Recent Finds and Publications since 1990,” in *Magical Practice in the Latin West* [ed. Richard L. Gordon and Francisco Marco Simón; Leiden: Brill, 2010] 275–354).

In this curse, Artemis seeks revenge from a person who stole her clothing. She does so by dedicating the thief to Demeter, Kore, and all the other gods, in order for the thief to be punished and confess his guilt. Versnel explains that the dedication of the culprit serves as a curse because the person entered a “provisional taboo situation; he is cursed for the time being and belongs in one way or another under the control of the divine powers of the underworld.”⁵⁶ The curse ends with the accuser’s plea, to be free from sin if she eats or drinks with her adversary. Versnel explains this plea as a fear of “contagion.”⁵⁷ Comparing the judicial prayer to a proper legal vow may render a different reason for this proviso: If the culprit is dedicated to the gods, one cannot benefit from him, and so Artemis is protecting herself from the grave sin of sacrilege.

In addition to dedicating people, some Greco-Roman curse tablets contain dedications of stolen objects in order to achieve similar goals of justice and revenge.⁵⁸ These practices may be compared to the use of vows in Jewish Aramaic incantation bowls.

■ The Meaning of the Vow in the Aramaic Incantation Bowls

Babylonian incantation bowls, dated to the fifth to seventh centuries CE, were generally intended to protect houses from demons, witchcraft, and malice.⁵⁹ They contain numerous references to vows. Earlier scholarship has not provided the precise meaning for the vow, often attributing the frequent use of vow and oath terminology to the ignorance and confusion of the masses. Saul Lieberman, for example, mentions the bowls as a source for understanding the popular confusion of these practices. He has elaborated on the existence of an entire body of terminology of curses and adjurations that served as substitutes for oaths, including the vow. According to Lieberman:

The verb נָדַד for swearing was only one of the substitutes used by the people. Actually they resorted to the entire terminology of curses and adjurations in their search of substitutes for oaths. . . . The rabbis did their utmost to check the irrelevant terminology employed by the people in oaths. They permitted,

⁵⁶ Versnel, “Beyond Cursing,” 72.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ See, for example, a bronze tablet from Southern Italy (3rd cent. BCE), quoted in *ibid.*, 73: “Kollura consecrates (ἀνταρῖζει) to the servant of the goddess the three gold pieces which Melitta received but does not return.” For similar texts, see Versnel, “Prayers for Justice”; Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 188–90; Irene Salvo, “Sweet Revenge: Emotional Factors in ‘Prayers for Justice,’” in *Unveiling Emotions: Sources and Methods for the Study of Emotions in the Greek World* (ed. A. Chaniotis; Stuttgart: Steiner, 2012) 235–66.

⁵⁹ For comprehensive overviews, see Shaul Shaked, “Incantation Bowls and Amulet Tablets: How to Get Rid of Demons and Harmful Beings,” *Qadmoniot* 129 (2005) 2–13 (Hebrew); Dan Levene, “Curse or Blessing: What’s in the Magic Bowl?” (The Ian Karten Lecture; Parkes Institute Pamphlet 2; Southampton; University of Southampton, 2002) 5–40; Gideon Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) 183–93; Yuval Harari, *Jewish Magic before the Rise of Kabbalah* (Detroit: WSUP, 2017) 132–40, 234–51.

legalized and encouraged the use of certain substitutes and “handles” of vows and oaths, but they banned and nullified the validity of certain others.⁶⁰

In other words, Lieberman viewed the rabbis as the educators and gatekeepers who resisted the often confused and inconsistent use of vow, oath, curse, and adjuration formulae by the masses. The many different practices mentioned in the incantation bowls supposedly attest to such popular (mis)use.⁶¹ Yet, an examination of more than a hundred published bowls reveals that the vow and the oath are not confused by the bowl scribes but represent two completely different conventions, each with a specific and unique meaning. The oath is usually written as a verb (משבענא, אומיתי) and is used frequently by the scribe of the bowl in order to adjure demons and combat malice by invoking a holy name.⁶² The vow, in contrast, is usually written as a noun (נידרא) and serves as a distinct subcategory of the curse, as we shall presently see.⁶³ This “vow-curse” was a popular imprecation performed by humans against other humans, and it often appears in a list of the injuries from which the client of the bowl seeks protection. These kinds of lists appear in most of the incantation bowls, and although the lists vary from bowl to bowl, they usually have significant similarities. For example:

(1) This mystery is designated for healing Mihrōy son of Gushnay; Pidarukh daughter of Daday, his wife; Bar Shabbetay;⁶⁴ (2) Imma; and Malbonay and Gushnay, the children of Pidarukh. May they be healed by the mercy of heaven, and may they be sealed (3) from all evil destroyers, from demons, from plague spirits,⁶⁵ from dēws, from afflictions, from misfortunes (?), from satans, (4) from evil liliths, both male and female, from all evil sorceries and evil magic acts, from curses and vows⁶⁶ and accidents⁶⁷ (5) and spells

⁶⁰ Lieberman, *Greek in Jewish Palestine*, 119–20.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 119 n. 27.

⁶² This action is essential to the magic of the incantation bowls. For the significance of adjurations in ancient Jewish magic, see Yuval Harari, “Religion, Magic, and Adjurations: Methodological Reflections Aimed at a New Definition of Early Jewish Magic,” *Da’at* 48 (2002) 52–56 (Hebrew); idem, *Jewish Magic*, 169–75.

⁶³ The published bowls do not refer to other names of the vow, such as *qorban* or *qonam*. In Judah B. Segal’s edition, bowl 35A has the unusual word קרנמא; this is probably due, however, to a mistake in the reading, and the word should be read קיטרי (magical knot), a typical word found on the bowls (Judah B. Segal, *Catalogue of the Aramaic and Mandaic Incantation Bowls in the British Museum* [London: British Museum Press, 2000]). I would like to thank Dr. James Ford for drawing my attention to the correct reading.

⁶⁴ The client names in this bowl are not Jewish. The name Bar Shabbetay appears in *b. Git.* 11a as a typical name of gentiles. A genizah fragment of this passage, *TS Rab.* 2351.13–15 (8450), preserves the same spelling as the bowl, בר שבתי, contrary to other ways of spelling in the printed editions and various manuscripts of tractate *Gitṭin*. For the religious identity of the clients of the bowls, see Shaked, “Incantation Bowls,” 2–13.

⁶⁵ Naeh translates שבטי as שדפין (blight) that harms fields and humans (Shlomo Naeh, “Šebet, Šibta, Sibtana,” *Language Studies* 7 [1995] 97–109 [Hebrew]).

⁶⁶ In the original Aramaic the vow and the curse are written in singular form: מִשְׁבַּעַנְא עֲלֵיכּוֹן מִשְׁבַּעַנְא בִּישְׁתָּא.

⁶⁷ Montgomery translated this magical act קִרְתָּא as “invocations” (James Montgomery, *Aramaic*

and afflictions, and from all evil and mighty destroyers, Amen Amen Selah Hallelujah.⁶⁸

Lines 3–5 itemize the injuries and afflictions from which the bowl protects the clients. This list contains various malign elements, including different types of demons and human curses and sorceries. Although the list may seem to consist of a disorderly collection of harmful injuries, it is constructed of pairs and clusters of similar harms and injuries that also frequently appear together in other bowls as well.⁶⁹ One of these common pairs is the vow and the curse (נידרא ולוטתא), which appear together in a similar manner dozens of times.⁷⁰ The existence of this pair suggests a semantic similarity between the two words. At times, the vow contains formulae that attest to its function as a curse, as, for example, in bowl M123:

(1) This amulet that has been made for Imi daughter of Qaqai so that vows, curses and evil speeches, will not come near them. . . . (6) I adjure you vow, curse and evil speech that are with⁷¹ Imi, daughter of Qaqai, be it by a roar that roars over its descendants; be it by (7) a slumber that goes out from a mouth; be it from a vow of a gentile or a Jew; be it from a curse of far or close; be it from a curse of a neighbor; or brother and sister; be it by a curse of men or (8) women; be it by a vow fulfilled to male idols and female idols; be it by a vow and a fulfillment of all humans.⁷²

Bowl M123 contains various formulae and incantations intended for the protection of Imi, daughter of Qaqai. We can identify two distinct features about the appearance of vows: the vow as the designation of an adjuration (alongside the curse and the evil speech);⁷³ and the use of the phrase נידרא דמשלם, “a vow that is being paid/fulfilled.” There are two other, slightly different but parallel bowls that, according to Levene, were written by the same scribe, or at least were produced in the same atelier. In his edition of the bowls, Levene published a synopsis of all

Incantation Texts from Nippur [Philadelphia: University Museum, 1913] 84).

⁶⁸ Bowl 19, in Joseph Naveh and Shaul Shaked, *Magic Spells and Formulae: Aramaic Incantations of Late Antiquity* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1993) 124–26. The translation is that of the authors.

⁶⁹ This may have to do with the existence of oral traditions. Other pairs include: שיקפתא, שדי וריי, ואשלמתא, הרשין בישין ועוברין בישין. I intend to elaborate on this issue elsewhere.

⁷⁰ See, for example, Montgomery, *Aramaic Incantation Texts*, 138; Charles D. Isbell, *Corpus of the Aramaic Incantation Bowls* (SBLDS 17; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1975) 140, 142, 144, 148; Judah B. Segal, *Catalogue of the Aramaic and Mandaic Incantation Bowls in the British Museum* (London: British Museum Press, 2000) 48, 50, 65, 66, 73; Dan Levene, *Jewish Aramaic Curse Texts from Late-Antique Mesopotamia* (Leiden: Brill, 2013) 31, 37, 64, 130.

⁷¹ This translation is according to a suggested correction from Dr. James Ford that one may read here, דאית עימי, meaning “that are with,” instead of דאי תעימו, meaning “that if you sadden.”

⁷² Bowl M123, in Dan Levene, *A Corpus of Magic Bowls: Incantation Texts in Jewish Aramaic from Late Antiquity* (London: Kegan Paul, 2003) 83–84, Levene’s translation, with slight modifications.

⁷³ The vow as a designation of an adjuration appears three times in the bowl while, in line 5, invoking the holy name given to Moses in the burning bush. For the motif of the burning bush in Jewish magic, see Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic*, 412–14.

three. For our purposes here, I note the relevant differences between two of them, bowls M123 and M138:⁷⁴

M138	M123
<p>בין ניהמתא דנהמא על זרעיה ובין נומתא (ד)[מפ]קא בפומא ובין נידרא דארמאי די[ה]ודאי בין נידרא דשיבבה דקריבה דרתיקא בין לוטתא ובין [נידרא]א דמשלם לבין[.]. בישתא ובין לוטתא דיהודאי דארמאי ובין מללתא דאימא (ובר)[תא]</p>	<p>בין ניהמתא דנהמא על זרעיה ובין נומתא דמפקא בפומא ובין נידרא דארמאי דיהודאי בין לוטתא רתיקא קריבא בין לוטתא דשיבבה דאחא ואחתא ובין לוטתא דגברי דנשי ובין נידרא דמשלם לפתכרי דיכרי לאיסתרתא {ל}ניקבתא ובין נידרא ושלמתא דכל בני אינשה</p>

Bowl M138	Bowl M123
<p>Be it by a roar that roars over its descendants, be it by a slumber that goes out from a mouth, be it from a vow of a gentile or a Jew, be it from a vow of a far or a close neighbor be it from a curse and from a vow that is fulfilled to a synagogue⁷⁵ be it by a curse of a Jew or a gentile Be it by a word of a mother and daughter</p>	<p>Be it by a roar that roars over its descendants, be it by a slumber that goes out from a mouth, be it from a vow of a gentile or a Jew, be it from a curse of far or close, be it from a curse of a neighbor, or brother and sister, be it by a curse of men or women Be it by a vow fulfilled to male idols and female idols, be it by a vow and a fulfillment of all humans</p>

The bowls’ scribe switches between the “curse of far or close . . . curse of a neighbor” and the “vow of a far or a close neighbor”; the scribe also switches between the “curse of a Jew or a gentile” and a “vow of a gentile or a Jew.”⁷⁶ That

⁷⁴ Levene, *Corpus of Magic Bowls*, 89–90. The third bowl Levene includes in his synoptic table (MS 2053/216) does not contain these formulae.

⁷⁵ In Levene’s edition, the reading is “a house of evil” (בי בישתא). I suggest the reading “synagogue” (בי בנישתא), which is compatible with various parallel formulae, for example, bowl VA2423, line 7: “Vows of the cemetery, and vows of the house of idols, and the vow of the synagogue,” cf. also bowl VA2509, line 12; 039A, line 1.

⁷⁶ “Gentiles,” according to Levene’s translation. Sokoloff translates this as “pagans” (Michael Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic of the Talmudic and Geonic Periods* [Ramat-Gan: Bar Ilan University Press; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002] 169). For this bowl, it seems that the correct translation is indeed “non-Jew,” given the context of the binary oppositions presented: “close/far”; “men/women”; and “Jew/non-Jew.” But this isn’t always the preferred translation. For example, in bowl Isbell 49, there is a list of different sorceries: חרשין (Aramean sorcery, Jewish sorcery, Arab sorcery, Persian sorcery . . . sorcery that is performed in 70 languages). In this

the words “vow” and “curse” are interchangeable within similar formulae from two duplicate bowls further attests to the close meaning of these two actions.

Although the meaning of the vow is close to that of the curse, the two are not identical. This distinction may be inferred from the formula that at times is attached to the vow—namely, the נִדְרָא דְּמַשְׁלָם לְפַתְכָּרִי (a vow that is being fulfilled to an idol), as can be seen in the bowls above. Other bowls have other attestations of the fulfillment of vows to the Jewish God, as in the formula, “They vowed and fulfilled (their vows) to the God of the heavens and the earth.”⁷⁷ The root שָׁלַם, used in the sense of fulfilling a vow, already appears in the Bible, in Deut 23:21 (NRSV): “If you make a vow to the LORD your God, do not postpone fulfilling it” (לֹא תִאָּחֵר (לְשַׁלְּמוֹ)). Similarly, this notion occurs in the Babylonian Talmud tractate *Šabbat* 32b: “It is taught (in a *baraita*): Rabbi Nathan says because of the sins of vows, the wife of a man dies, as it is stated: ‘If you lack the means to pay, your bed will be taken from under you’ (Prov 22:27).” This *baraita* not only connects the vow and its fulfillment but also includes the punishment of death to a man’s wife.⁷⁸ The notion of fulfilling vows to a god in the magic bowls echoes the Greco-Roman magical practices discussed earlier, where a person devotes a named individual or stolen goods to the gods so that they will punish wrongdoers and take revenge. This may be the very same practice of the vow-curse in the magic bowls.

In summary: Based on the following considerations, the vow in the bowls served as a distinct type of curse and is not to be confused with the oath: (a) the frequent presence of the vow in the lists of injuries that the client commissioned the bowl to provide protection from, contrary to the oath, which was used consistently to adjure demons; (b) the proximity to the word לוֹשְׁתָּא (curse) in the recurring phrase “a vow and a curse”; and (c) the interchangeability of the word for “vow” with the word for “curse” in the set of duplicate bowls written by the same scribe. The vow in the bowls functions as a distinct subcategory that may have been performed in a certain way that contained some means of dedication to a god. This interpretation

bowl, “Aramean” seems to designate a specific ethnic group and not the general “gentiles.” These two different translations may lead to the conclusion that “Aramean” can indicate a specific group of Aramaic speakers or non-Jews in general.

⁷⁷ This formula is attested in a bowl published by Gordon, where the words נָדַר וְאִשְׁלִימוֹ לְ (vowed and fulfilled to) appear four consecutive times, each time to a different deity: The God of the Heavens and the God of the earth; male Gods and female Ishtars; idols and Ishtars; and another named deity (C. H. Gordon, “Aramaic Incantation Bowls,” *Orientalia* 10 [1941] 121–22). For a Jewish adjuration of the God of the heavens and of the earth, see Gen 24:3 and *t. Soṭah* 7:3. An additional formula that can attest to the specific practice of the vow-curse appears in bowl VA2423, published by Dan Levene, where there is reference to a “vow of graveyards,” a “vow of a house of idols,” and a “vow of the synagogue” (Levene, *Jewish Aramaic Curse Texts*, 37). How to understand the meaning of these labels is uncertain, but they may attest to a vow that consists of devotion to the Jewish God, to idols, or to the dead, similarly to the Greco-Roman *defixiones* discussed above.

⁷⁸ Cf. midrashic exegesis on other biblical verses, in which the sons of a man are the ones who die: *b. Ketub.* 72a; *b. Sabb.* 32b; *y. Ketub.* 7:7, 31b.

accords with the use of the vow in the Syriac and Mandaic bowls,⁷⁹ which suggests that this phenomenon was not unique to Jews.⁸⁰

■ Conclusion

There are a number of attestations from the Second Temple period onward in which the vow was used as a harmful binding speech act. This function followed from a shift in the contexts in which vows were uttered: a once-intimate expression between a person and that person's god was eventually also employed as a quasi-dedication for the purpose of controlling another person's space and objects.

The use of the aggressive and binding vows is reflected in a variety of textual evidence that includes biblical, Second Temple, and rabbinic literature alongside Jewish and non-Jewish grave inscriptions and magical amulets. Some of these uses of the vow can be understood as synonymous with the curse, as in a number of ossuaries in Jerusalem and in the later Aramaic incantation bowls. The popularity of the use of these aggressive vows seems due to the fact that one did not have to contact a specialist or utter a holy name in order to perform them and gain coercive power.

The harmful function of the Jewish vow was not an isolated phenomenon, but paralleled the use of vows and dedications in a number of Greco-Roman curse texts and in the non-Jewish magic bowls. In addition, the semantic expansion of the vow is similar to that of the Greek anathema, which had gradually shifted from a self-imposed religious undertaking to a type of vow-curse in several occurrences in the Pauline epistles and in a magical curse text from the first centuries CE. This case study of the vow is emblematic of the care with which magical practitioners often used precise formulae, and suggests that similar gains may be made by studying other magical formulae in antiquity.

⁷⁹ The translation of "curse" for "vow" is absent from Syriac and Mandaic dictionaries. In the Drower-Macuch dictionary, *nidra* is translated as "vow" or, in magical contexts, as "(evil) vow" (see Ethel Stefana Drower and Rudolf Macuch, *A Mandaic Dictionary* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1963] 297). Syriac dictionaries regularly translate *nidra* as "vow" as well (see Michael Sokoloff, *A Syriac Lexicon: A Translation from the Latin; Correction, Expansion, and Update of C. Brockelmann's Lexicon Syriacum* [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009] 892). However, it is worth noting that for מנדרא, Sokoloff refers to the 9th-cent. Isho Bar Ali (*The Syriac Arabic Glosses*), who translated it as מתעסקא, "torment." This may point to an ancient lexical connection between the vow and the curse.

⁸⁰ The vow appears quite frequently in the Syriac incantation bowls, usually as part of a list of harms that the client seeks protection from, similar in practice to the Jewish bowls (see, for example, bowl nos. 4, 6, 7, 16, 17, 22, 23, 32, 38, 41, and 44, in Marco Moriggi, *Syriac Incantation Bowls* [Leiden: Brill, 2014]). Dr. Ohad Abudraham informed me that in the corpus of Mandaic epigraphic materials (which includes unpublished magical material), the *nidra* appears approximately 14 times, at times as part of a list of harms and in close proximity to the curse. This preliminary research leads to the conclusion that the vow was used as a curse in other religious groups, though more research on this subject needs to be conducted.