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'I Descended to the Depths of the Earth'

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Propositions to accompany the PhD thesis

‘I Descended to the Depths of the Earth’

A Rhetorical Poetics of the Jewish Babylonian Aramaic Incantation Bowls

Daniel James Waller

1. The rhetoric of the incantation bowls is designed to constrain—that is, bring certain salient words, phrases, and motivations to bear upon—an audience of transmundane beings in order to modify a situation by removing or overcoming a controlling exigency.
2. Every narrative implicitly argues for a certain view of the world over and against other possible configurations. In the case of the incantation bowls, the problematic realities and crises of human life could be dealt with by narrating a story or representing a dramatic action, thereby bringing the techniques and power of representational performance to bear upon a transmundane audience.
3. The narrative materials in the bowls represent a socially constructed response to particular rhetorical exigencies—the sometimes desperate *need* to be rid of a demon or to protect one’s family, for example—and their rhetorical power is thus indissolubly linked to the formal features of the bowl narratives.
4. The brief mythic narratives known as *historiolae* exploit the incipient teleology of narrative—moving through the ‘natural’ junctures of instability-complication-resolution—in order to establish a higher-level semantic perspective whereby resolution (and not just precedent or paradigm) are thematised on a formal level.
5. The first person narrative spells in the bowls exploit the techniques of description and the possibilities of narrative space in order to explicitly connect the bowl practitioner or the beneficiary to the events and experiences of the story. They represent a kind of pre-emptive response to Pierre Bourdieu’s critique of the Austinian performative — to wit, that the illocutionary act is not just a matter of doing things with words but whether or not the speaker is invested with the authority to do those things with those words and thereby effect a change in the world.

6. Persuasive appeals reveal people's orientations and attitudes towards transmundane powers, and the narratives in the incantation bowls reveal the human actors behind the bowls in the *active, imaginative* process of constructing and negotiating their relationships with angels, demons, and God. These narratives often work to *describe* or *represent* the reality of these beings, and to give shape to the invisible through language.
7. The bowl narratives shed light on the dialectics of imagination and the linguistic construction or illustration of the transmundane. The ways in which they construct, describe, or enact (trans)mundane reality reflect wider ontological truths about angels and demons within late antique Judaism.
8. The bowl practitioners capitalised upon the materials aspect of writing and inscription, as well as the material aspects of their writing surface, in order to emphasise the correspondence of the bowls to an invisible reality and to ratify and reinforce the efficacy of the praxis.