

Conclusions

This book has attempted to illustrate what might be gained if we allow late antique magical objects to speak to a range of scholarly discourses on early Christian boundaries. As we have seen throughout this study, the diverse late antique objects, rituals, and concerns we identify with the term “magic” constituted sites on which Christians—and, occasionally, Jews—from a variety of social classes articulated, negotiated, and transgressed the limits within and between rituals, communities, texts, images, materials, bodies, and traditions.

The magical objects carry implications for how we might conceptualize broad and long-standing categories, such as Jewish and Christian—or pagan, for that matter—for the study of late antique lived religion. Although I think we can productively talk about Jewish and Christian traditions—at least on some level—the extant evidence demands that we set aside *idealized* notions of Judaism and Christianity when interpreting late antique objects from quotidian life. While the use of MT Ps 91:1 on the incantation bowls in chapter 3 might be unproblematically conceptualized as a Jewish ritual practice, other objects reflect more complex dynamics of religious assimilation, cooperation, and differentiation. Indeed, as we learned from the Jewish amuletic armband from the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, elements that had their origins in Jewish contexts could be reappropriated by Jews in light of their interaction with Christian ritual technologies.

The historical oscillation of MT Ps 91:1/LXX Ps 90:1 within and across Jewish and Christian ritual practices simultaneously gestures toward the complex—and often counterintuitive—configurations of Christianity and Judaism that we find on other magical objects. As I have highlighted, the mere use of terms like “syncretism” or “exoticism” cannot adequately account for these complexities. Indeed, claims about syncretism in the study of ancient magic have often been contingent on an essentializing view of symbols and language, whereby a particular symbol/term (e.g., a cross, a menorah, Jesus, Iaō Sabaōth) is thought to be intrinsically or inextricably connected with a religious group (i.e., Christians and Jews). When

two elements identified with two different idealized communities (e.g., Jesus and Iaō Sabaōth) appear on a single object, therefore, claims of syncretism, exoticism, or blurred/crossed boundaries abound.

But, as we have seen, symbols change their meanings, connotations, and associations as they move into different contexts. Accordingly, *both* Jesus *and* Iaō Sabaōth could at times be completely within the realm of Christianity (see chapter 2); there was no mixture or blurred boundaries—at least not from the perspective of the practitioner. In other words, “common” does not imply “generic.” It is thus unsurprising to find Jesus and Iaō Sabaōth on a single artifact—such as Leiden, Ms. AMS 9, for example—as *well as* invective against the “Jews.” Objects like Leiden, Ms. AMS 9 demonstrate that originally Jewish symbols could radically change their reference points across time and space, in some cases being fully absorbed or assimilated into new (exclusionary) Christian contexts and thus without any trace of “Jewishness.”¹ This point ought to inform the way we isolate and classify elements with rubrics such as “Jewish” or “Christian”—or “pagan,” for that matter. A particular element (e.g., a divine name, a biblical or liturgical tradition, or a ritual symbol) could acquire different values or connotations depending on its context (e.g., ritual, regional, temporal, communal, and experiential).

The portrait of clear-cut boundaries in lived religion that emerged from the first two chapters also carries implications for scholarly discussions on power, heresy, and orthodoxy. Historians of early Christianity have by and large abandoned the model of Christian theological conflict—most famously articulated by Walter Bauer—whereby heresy and orthodoxy were understood and treated as discrete essences.² Instead, scholars now generally follow in the Foucauldian tradition of Alain Le Boulluec, attending to the discursive strategies of the principal early Christian heresiologists (Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Epiphanius, and Augustine, e.g.).³ Although this discursive approach represents an important stride forward, the focus on a relatively limited number of early heresiologists has inadvertently reinforced the idea that interest in religious differentiation fell within the purview of a small, cloistered group of Christian thinkers.

But the magical objects can offer insights into discursive dimensions of what we might call orthodoxy and heresy in lived religion. As we have seen, many late antique Christian ritual practitioners utilized elements derived from Christian “orthodoxy,” including biblical texts, creeds, and Trinitarian formulations. Of course, such “heretical” appropriations of “orthodox” language have not escaped the attention of historians of religion, sociologists, and other theorists. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, whose work on orthodoxy, heresy, and doxa has been influential in late antique studies,⁴ emphasized that the heretical power of figures such as sorcerers necessarily relies on the “authorizing language” of orthodoxy; however, he situated such appropriations of “authorizing language” within a model of (tacit) defiance or protest, whereby practitioners might wield such language against their (elite) orthodox antagonists.⁵ In the tradition of Bourdieu, George

Zito's discursive analysis of heresy concludes that heretical use of orthodox language "articulates, or threatens to expose, the contradictory dialectical meanings necessarily contained in any ideological thesis that has obtained a measure of institutional support and is therefore an orthodox way of speaking about the world."⁶ This view of orthodoxy and heresy, therefore, assumes that the heretical use of authorizing language will be directed against the orthodox or the powerful.

What if, by contrast, the "authorizing language" consists of ideas designed to marginalize other less powerful or deviant groups? The magical objects that deploy anti-magic and anti-Jewish invective (see chapters 1 and 2) in fact demonstrate that "sorcerers" and their clients, who might be condemned as evil or "heretics" for their ritual practices, did not always direct authorizing language—or marshal their intellectual forces—against people in positions of obvious political and social power. Instead, they sometimes appropriated the slanderous rhetoric of orthodoxy and directed it against other marginalized groups (i.e., other magicians and Jews). These objects thus show that the same individuals whom certain ecclesiastical or conciliar texts condemned as wicked on the basis of their ritual practices could, within those very practices, represent orthodox power against other groups, who were marginalized on account of their own ritual practices or religious affiliations/ethnicity. Accordingly, these magical objects imply that many individuals in late antiquity were positioned within global hierarchies of religious and cultural power in such a way that they *simultaneously* embodied the domains of the "orthodox" and the "heretical"—albeit in relation to different discursive categories. Although certain figures in prominent social and political positions stood at the acme of all or at least most cultural taxonomies—and thus represented "orthodoxy" or power pretty much across the board—the ideas and practices of many individuals seem to have placed them in differing positions within various ancient hierarchies of religious and cultural difference. In some areas and social relationships, they were powerless and "heretical"; in others, they were powerful and "orthodox."

On a methodological level, we have also seen how magical sources can illuminate and reorient our understandings of literary texts. Although I have drawn on a range of literary texts to contextualize certain magical rituals, practices, and texts, I have also highlighted instances in which the magical record can raise new questions to ask of patristic and monastic literature. In chapter 1, for instance, we saw how the magical record—alternatively understood as the "religious" record—can help situate early Christian testimonies against illicit ritual within a broader tradition, which included long-standing anti-magical statements in ritual contexts typically deemed magical. In addition, the magical objects demonstrate the diverse ways that people, who were slandered for their ritual practices (chapter 1) or for crossing religious boundaries (chapter 2), could articulate clear-cut boundaries and differentiation. Accordingly, the magical objects can help us reinterpret literary sources, especially in order to understand the nature of ritual and religious boundaries in lived religion.

The magical objects also give us insight into lived dimensions of authoritative traditions—including the Bible—not readily apparent in the literary sources. David Brakke has usefully attempted to shift the discussion away from canonical development toward a discursive analysis of diverse scriptural practices.⁷ I think that the magical objects can play an important role in this attempt to trace scriptural practices—a point that Brakke himself noted as a future area of study.⁸ As I have underscored in a prior venue, the amuletic evidence demonstrates that the Bible in ritual contexts was typically not conceptualized as a “whole” or an “entirety”; rather, it was thought of as a repository of thematic units or fragments—an approach to authoritative tradition that seemed to have crossed the lines between Christians, Jews, and even what we might call for convenience “pagans.”⁹ This approach to scripture both presupposed and promoted a vision of sacred literature, whereby authoritative tradition was linked to individual units (e.g., stories or passages) of scripture that were ordered in a hierarchy of relevance for specific concerns (e.g., healing, exorcism, and even cursing).¹⁰ In so doing, these materials demonstrate that lists, groupings, or collections of biblical *passages* could be as important for certain purposes as those of biblical *books*.

But the evidence assessed in *Ritual Boundaries* illuminates additional layers of biblical practices and reception. On the one hand, we have seen in chapters 3 and 4 how biblical traditions could be read and experienced across textual, visual, material, bodily, performative, and communal boundaries. A particular biblical tradition, such as the crucifixion of Jesus, could merge in lived religion with stories and details known from later Christian texts (e.g., the use of elements from the *Gos. Nic.* or related tradition in Brit. Lib. Or. 6796[4], 6796) or from other ritual contexts (e.g., the restless-dead motif in BM 1986,0501.1).

But the performers in magical rituals also read and experienced the Bible beyond the limits of texts or oral tradition. The diverse ways late antique magical objects interacted with human bodies has led us to consider research on the relationship between objects and bodies, more generally. As I noted in chapter 3, the LAR project and some of its associates, like Emma-Jayne Graham and Heather Hunter-Crowley, for example, have productively drawn on material cultural studies in order to construct a more robust understanding of ancient religious experiences and practices.

These material and affective qualities of magical objects have a bearing on our discussion of scriptural practices. We saw that the material forms through which ritual participants encountered sacred literature necessitated physical movement (e.g., rotating and gesturing) and facilitated diverse fusions between their bodies and the biblical text itself through physical contact (e.g., by wearing rings, pendants, and armbands) and by placing the client within the biblical artifact through visual, textual, material, and performative strategies (e.g., P.Oxy. 8.1077).¹¹ In short, the magical objects exerted themselves on and fused with practitioners and ritual participants, concomitantly reflecting and shaping scriptural practices and ways of

reading in lived contexts. Biblical “reading” in these objects transcended the limits of words, images, materials, and gestures. The magical evidence thus suggests that in lived religion the Bible was not always merely a text but could be an invitation to a multisensory, interactive experience.

As I noted in chapter 3, this multisensory dimension of ancient lived experiences simultaneously necessitates a methodological shift in the editing of (late) ancient artifacts. Although scholars would do well to observe all haptic aspects of the artifacts they are editing, they should especially attend to—and specify in their editions—the *weight* of the object. This relatively simple and straightforward change in the discipline could yield significant results in the study of premodern lived religion.

In the end, the magical evidence offers us a direct glimpse into the diverse configurations of rituals, symbols, and texts in the everyday lives of late antique Christians. These configurations, which worked in dialogue with a range of quotidian concerns, interests, and contexts (e.g., healing and demonic onslaught), manifoldly aligned with or diverged from the portraits and caricatures of lived practices expressed in the late antique literary record and presented in our inherited scholarly narratives. In this way, the magical artifacts demand that our taxonomies of late antique lived religion account for the ever-changing contours of similarity and difference, foreignness and familiarity, and, consequently, Christianity and Other.