

# ON SEALING THE ABYSSES

By DANIEL SPERBER

In B. *Sukka* 53a we read the following: בשעה שכתב... א"ר יוחנן קטא תהומא ובעא למשטפא עלמא אמר דוד מי איכא דידע אי שרי למכתבא שם אחספא ושדיה בתהומא ומנח ליכא דקאמר ליה מידי אמר דוד כל דידע למימר ואינו אומר יתקן בגרתי נשא אחיתומל ק"ו בעצמו ומה לעשות שלום בין איש לאשתו אמרה תורה שמי שנכתב בקדושה ימחה על המים לעשות שלום לכל העולם כולו על אחת כמה וכמה אמר ליה שרי כתב שם אחספא ושדי לתהומא ונחית תהומא שיתטר אלפי גרמידי...

That is, in English:

It was stated thus: When David dug the Pits (*Sbittin*), the Deep (*Tebom*) arose and threatened to submerge the world. "Is there anyone," David enquired, "who knows whether it is permitted to inscribe the Ineffable Name [53b] upon a sherd, and cast it into the Deep that its waves should subside?" There was none who answered a word. Said David, "Whosoever knows the answer and does not speak, may he be suffocated." Whereupon Achitophel adduced an *a fortiori* argument to himself: "If, for the purpose of establishing harmony between man and wife, the Torah said, Let my Name that was written in sanctity be blotted out by the water, how much more so may it be done in order to establish peace in the world!" He, thereupon, said to him, "It is permitted!" [David] thereupon inscribed the [Ineffable] Name upon a sherd, cast it into the Deep and it subsided sixteen thousand cubits..." (Soncino translation, pp. 255-6).

The Jerusalem Talmud records a similar version of this episode. In J. *Sanhedrin* chap. 10 (29A 52) we read as follows: וכן אתה מוצא בשעה שבא דוד לחפור תימליסטים של בית המקדש חפור חמש עשר מאות דאמן ולא אשכח תהומא ובסופה אשכח חד עציץ ובעא מירמיתיה א"ל לית את יכיל א"ל למה א"ל רנא (ג"א דנא) הכא כביש על תהומא א"ל ומן אימת את הכא א"ל מן שעתא דשמע רחמנא קליה בסיני אנכי ה' אלקיך רעדת ארעא ושקעת האנא יהיב הכא כביש על תהומא אע"כ כן לא שמע ליה כיון דרימיה סליק תהומא ובעא מטפא עלמא והוה אחיתומל קאים תמן אמר כדן דוד מתחוק האנא מליך אמר דוד מאן דחכם דידע מקימיה ולא מקים ליה י"א סופיה מתחוקא אמר מה דאמר האוקמיה...

The following is a translation of the Jerusalem version:

And so also you find that when David came to dig the foundations (תימליסטים-θεμελιωσις) of the temple he dug fifteen hundred cubits and did not reach the Tehom (Deeps or Abyss). At length he came upon a

potsherd and wished to raise it. (The potsherd) said to him, "You cannot (lift me up)." "Why?" he asked. "Because I am here to suppress the *Tebom*," (replied the potsherd). "And since when have you been here?" asked (David). "Since that hour when the Merciful One made His voice to be heard on Sinai (saying): 'I am the Lord your God'. Then the earth shuddered<sup>1</sup> and began to subside, and I am here placed to suppress the *Tebom*." Nonetheless (David) did not hearken (to the potsherd, and) when he lifted it up, the *Tebom* came forth and wished to submerge the world. Achitophel was standing there, and he said (in his heart), "Thus will David be suffocated, and I will rule (in his stead)." Said David, "He who is wise and knows how to check it (the *Tebom*) and does not do so, may his end be that he suffocate." He said that which he said and checked it. . .

In the Babylonian Talmud the tradition was cited in the name of R. Johanan (though in B. *Makkot* 11a it is related "in the name of R. Jehuda in the name of Rav"). The Jeruśalmi version appears to be anonymous. Now whereas the traditionaries of these statements, Rav and R. Johanan, lived in the third century C.E. (fl. c. 220-90 C.E.), there can be little doubt that the statements themselves have their sources in very ancient lore.<sup>2</sup> Scholars have already pointed to the connexions between these traditions and that of the *Eben Ha-Shetiyab* cycle.<sup>3</sup> Thus, for example, in pseudo-*Jonathan* to Exod. xxviii. 30 we read: *Eben Ha-Shetiyab*, with which the Lord of the World sealed up the mouth of the *Tebom*.<sup>4</sup>

We wish here to point out yet another source or group of sources related to this motif, hitherto not noted by scholars. In the *Odes of Solomon* (= OS) xxiv. 5, we read<sup>5</sup> "...and they sealed

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Psalm lxxviii. 9.

<sup>2</sup> In *כתבי אחרית* of H. L. Ginzberg, p. 80, we read: *רצו צד את גוף (= שפה) ו* "and he sealed the mouth or lip of the *Tebom*". (But see Driver's reading in *Canaanite Myths and Legends* (Edinburgh, 1956), p. 122, line 30.) See Apocalypse xx. 3: *καὶ ἔβαλεν αὐτὸν εἰς τὴν ἄβυσσον καὶ ἔκλεισεν καὶ ἐπράγισεν ἐπάνω αὐτοῦ*. "Ἀβυσσος" is the word with which *Tebom* is translated in the LXX. For further information on this subject see E. Burrows, "Some Cosmological Patterns in the Babylonian Religion", in *The Labyrinth*, ed. S. H. Hooke (London, 1935), pp. 45-58, and A. J. Wensinck, *The Ideas of Western Semites concerning the Navel of the Earth* (Amsterdam, 1916).

<sup>3</sup> Article by D. Feuchtwang, *M.G.W.J.* LIV-LV. Ginzberg's *Legends*, v, 15 n. 39; and VI. 258 n. 70. See also *Essays presented to R. Herz* (London, 1942), p. 25, in article by A. Altmann, suggesting gnostic origins for these traditions.

<sup>4</sup> *אבן השתייה דבה חתם מארי דעלמא פום תופמא רבא*

<sup>5</sup> *Texts and Studies*, ed. J. A. Robinson (Cambridge, 1916), p. 102. Cf. *The Odes and the Psalms of Solomon*, J. Rendel Harris (Cambridge, 1909), pp. 121-3, and Syriac text, *ibid.* p. 20.

up the abysses with the seal of the Lord. . .". The editor of the Odes, J. H. Bernard, in his notes,<sup>1</sup> brings as a parallel the text of a Coptic Baptismal Office (= C2): *qui in unum locum aquas congregasti ac mare coercuisti abyssosque obserasti easque sancto et gloriosissimo nomine obsignasti.*

If C2 were to be based in or derived from the text cited from the Odes, we would have to explain that "the seal of the Lord" had been interpreted as being the name of the Lord. This is in fact quite a reasonable assumption. For, in Bernard's view, the Odes of Solomon were composed by an eastern Christian between 150 and 170 C.E., possibly in Syriac, and we know that in Aramaic magical texts, "the 'charm, mystery, seal' are identical and refer to the great name of the incantation".<sup>2</sup>

Nonetheless it would appear that C2 is really far more closely related to a source of which Bernard omitted to make mention. In the Prayer of Manasses (i. 1, 3, 4) we read:<sup>3</sup> 1. O Lord Almighty which art in heaven. . . 3. Who hast bound up the sea by word of thy command. 4. Who hast shut up the Deep and sealed it with thy terrible and glorious name (trans. from ed. Charles, I, 620).

The similarities are immediately clear, yet there is still further evidence for the close relationship of the two texts. For Denzinger in his publication of C2<sup>4</sup> brings a variant reading<sup>5</sup> (hereafter C1): *et abyssos clausisti nomine tuo glorioso et timendo.* We have only to put this next to the Latin translation of the Prayer of Manasses to see the remarkable closeness of the two: *qui clausisti abyssum et signasti eam timendo ac glorioso nomine tuo.*<sup>6</sup> Thus it would appear that Denzinger's variant, C1, is, in fact, an earlier version than his main text C2 (rather than a later one corrected to accord with the Apocryphal text). The date of the composition of the Prayer of Manasses is as yet unclear, but it was certainly known by the beginning of the third century C.E.<sup>7</sup> It would appear that these texts C, C1 and C2, Prayer of Manasses and

<sup>1</sup> *Texts and Studies, ibid.* p. 106.

<sup>2</sup> J. A. Montgomery, *Aramaic Incantation Texts from Nippur* (Philadelphia, 1916), p. 130.

<sup>3</sup> For the Greek text see *Didascalia* II. 22. 12, ed. Funk (1905), pp. 84-7: ὁ θεὸς τῶν πατέρων ἡμῶν. . . ὁ πεδήσας τὴν θάλασσαν τῷ λόγῳ τοῦ προστάγματός σου, ὁ κλείσας τὴν ἄβυσσον καὶ σφραγισάμενος αὐτὴν τῷ φοβερῷ καὶ ἐνδόξῳ ὀνόματί σου. . .

<sup>4</sup> *Ritus Orientalium Coptorum* (1863-4), I, 205.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* note 4. Cf. the Ethiopian Baptismal Office cited in Migne's *PL, Series Latina*, vol. 138, col. 947.

<sup>6</sup> Funk, *loc. cit.*

<sup>7</sup> R. H. Charles, *Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha* (Oxford, 1913), I, 614.

maybe OS) are dependent upon some earlier creation cycle, apocryphal no doubt. (In this way they would also be linked with the *Eben Ha-Sbetiyab* cycle, which is clearly related to some creation story.)

Thus far we have seen several different kinds of sources sharing a common theme, namely that of the sealing up of the abysses with the name (= seal) of the Lord. The nature of the differences between these various sources is such as to assure us that they do not derive from one another. The Talmudic texts, perhaps slightly later than the Apocryphal ones in respect of their traditionaries, would certainly not draw upon non-Jewish sources (i.e. OS). Furthermore they would appear to be closer in form to the original source of this theme than the more developed liturgical texts (i.e. the Prayer of Manasses, and the derivative C 1 and C 2). Thus, by the second century C.E., this motif has been adopted and gained currency in both Jewish and Christian literary forms.

Returning to the Talmudic texts, it should be noted that the Jerusalem version preserves elements not found in the Babli (and vice versa), namely the finding of the potsherd, its reason for being there, and Achitophel's evil intentions. Conversely, the story of David's writing of the Ineffable Name upon a sherd and his throwing it into the Tehom to suppress it (and other details) are not to be found in the Jerusalem version. Here it is difficult to state with any certainty whether or not these various elements derive from a common source and were split up during the course of transmission, in which case the two Talmudic versions would complement one another, or whether they have differing origins, in which case a clue to the derivation of one element need not necessarily cast any light upon the history of the other. Though Ginzberg in his *Legends of the Jews* wove together these various elements into one story,<sup>1</sup> apparently believing them to have common origins, I would nevertheless suggest that we have here two different stories sharing common elements.

At all events, the motif of the potsherd suppressing the malevolent *Tebom* (Jerusalem text) clearly presupposes some sort of factual ritualistic or magical basis (being far more concrete an image than that of the written name containing hostile forces).<sup>2</sup> Now A. J. Montgomery, in his great work on Aramaic Incanta-

<sup>1</sup> *Legends*, III, 96.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. B. *Shabbat* 81 b, B. *Hullin* 105 b, B. *Gittin* 69a, etc., for the magical use of sherds. I think all these examples are wholly unrelated to our own case.

tion Texts, describes the discovery of earthenware bowls buried just below the surface of the earth, generally in reversed position.<sup>1</sup> He goes on to demonstrate that their purpose was to contain and suppress demons and other evil spirits, and to protect houses. Thus text no. 4 opens thus: *מיטלי דלמיכל מלאכין קדישין וכל רוחי בישתא* which he translates as: "covers to hold in sacred (= accursed) Angels and all evil spirits . . ." <sup>2</sup> Our Jeruśalmi story would appear to be based on just such a practice. Even the terminology of David's potsherd: *אנא הויב הכא כביש על תהומא* bears distinct affinities with these incantation texts, where the term *כבש* constantly recurs as a magic technical term.<sup>3</sup>

Montgomery's incantation texts are, it is true, of a considerably later date than our Jeruśalmi—not later than the sixth or early seventh century C.E., he surmises<sup>4</sup>—but he writes that they have their antecedents in early Babylonian religious rites.<sup>5</sup> If our suggestion be accepted, then the Jeruśalmi text would appear to be clear evidence of the currency of such magical (cultic?) practices as early as the third century C.E. if not earlier. Certainly such formulae, though perhaps not appearing in incantation bowls, do, nevertheless, go back far earlier than the sixth century C.E. Thus, for example, Scholem quotes from the *Lesser Hechaloth* a text which seems very definitely to be some form of magical incantation:<sup>6</sup>

דין הוא איסרא וחיתמא	This is the spell and the seal
דאסרין ביה ארעא	By which the earth is bound
ואסרין ביה שמיא	And by which the heavens are bound
וארעא נידא מניה	And the earth flees from it
ותבל מתרעשא מקדמוהי . . .	And the Universe trembles before it . . .
פתח סום ימא	It opens the mouth of the sea
וסתם מי רקיע	And closes the waters (other readings: the hooks)
פתח שמיא ומרווי לתבל	It opens the Heavens of the firmament and waters the Universe
עקר ארעא ומערב לתבל . . .	It uproots the earth and confuses the Universe.

Just as the Tehom had been suppressed by a magical bowl, so also was it curbed by the agency of a magic formula. This seems to be the clear meaning of the Jeruśalmi's statement that

<sup>1</sup> Montgomery, p. 41.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 42 and 133.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* no. 4, line 1, no. 38, line 12. See also appendix *s.v.* *כבש*.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* p. 105.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 106f.

<sup>6</sup> G. Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism and Talmudic Tradition* (New York, 1960), p. 83.

Achitophel אמר מה דאמר "said that which he said". *Midrash Sbemuel* (a late Midrash), either basing itself on an independent source, or interpreting the Jeruſalmi, states that he, Achitophel, אמר מילה ואוקמה said a word (= formula, perhaps a "name") and checked it.<sup>1</sup> Thus his method was that of the spoken word, rather than the written one of the Babli. The Achitophel of the Jeruſalmi is more the Magician than the halachically trained Talmudist of the Babli. Thus the Babli does not give additional information as to Achitophel's methods, but different information. In the light of the above the two versions should be viewed as independent to a great extent, and not be regarded (as Ginzberg apparently did) as two halves of one tale.

Finally it is of interest to note that this concept of the sealing up of the *Tebom* with the Holy Name is developed along more philosophical lines in the Midrash into an image of the sealing up of the abysses at the time of creation with the Torah (= the divine name) or *Hokhma* (wisdom—Greek *λογος*<sup>2</sup> or *σοφια*). Thus in *Tanbuma* Genesis 1 we read: "And with it (Torah—*Hokhma*) He sealed up the Sea Oceanus so that it might not well up and wash away the world, . . . and with it he sealed the *Tebom* that it might not overcome the world, as it is written" (Prov. viii. 27), "When he set a compass over the face of the depth (*Tebom*)".<sup>3</sup> Although a later and more developed form employing philosophical terminology and exegetical method, it still preserves certain linguistic and stylistic traits suggesting that it has common origins with both the Talmudic and the Apocryphal sources cited above. Thus the phrase וישטוף את העולם should be compared with the Talmudic ובעא למשטמא עלמא; and ובעא למשטמא עלמא with *abyssosque obserasti easque . . . obsignasti*; and וישטוף את העולם with *ac mare . . . abyssosque*. Certainly it is most clearly related to the Prayer of Manasses and its derivatives in that both are part of a creation

<sup>1</sup> Ed. Buber, chap. 26, p. 125. The phrase אמר מה דאמר in the Jerusalem Talmud is a technical term meaning "he said a magical formula or incantation". See, for example, J. *Sanhedrin* 7, 25 d, 23 and 25. מילה or מליץ also means a magical formula or incantation, cf. B. *Hullin* 139b. It continues to bear this same meaning during the Gaonic period as well. Cf. *Teshubot Hageonim* (ed. Lyck), no. 31. I have discussed this matter at some length in an article entitled "A note on the word מילה" shortly to appear in *Revue des Études Juives*.

<sup>2</sup> See Apocrypha, Hebrew ed. of A. Kahane (Israel, 5716), I, 332 note to verse 3 (Hartum's suggestion). Philo identifies the Name with the *λογος*. See R. McL. Wilson, *The Gnostic Problem* (London, 1958), pp. 170, 228.

<sup>3</sup> ובה חתם את ים אוקיינוס שלא יצא וישטוף את העולם . . . ובה חתם את העולם. שלא יצוף את העולם.

cycle. The origins of these texts would appear to lie in some sort of Apocryphal creation story, now lost to us.<sup>1</sup>

In the above study no attempt has been made to trace the origins of our texts through the methods of the folklorist and anthropologist. All evidence has been either philological or archaeological. The results of our findings can be conveniently summarized in the following manner.

(a) The Coptic Baptismal office quoted by Denzinger as a variant C 1 is probably the earlier liturgical form.

(b) It is dependent in some degree upon the Prayer of Manasses.

(c) Denzinger's main text C 2 of the office is a later form of it.

(d) By the second century C.E. the motif of the sealing up of the Abysses with the divine name had entered into both Jewish and Christian literary forms.

(e) The Jerušalmi story of David's potsherd would seem to be most easily understandable in terms of Montgomery's incantation bowls.

(f) Thus the Jerušalmi text would appear to be evidence of the existence of such magical bowls as early as the third century C.E. in Jewish Palestine.

(g) The Jerušalmi and the Babli texts do not seem to be complementary versions but rather independent ones with common grounds.

(h) The *Midrash Shemuel* version may be partly independent of the Jerušalmi.

(i) The *Tanbuma* text appears to be somewhat related to the Prayer of Manasses text, both presumably dependent upon some earlier creation cycle.

(j) *Midrash Shemuel*, if independent of the Jerušalmi, would then be similarly dependent upon a creation cycle, but no doubt a very different one.

(k) These creation cycles were no doubt Apocryphal and took forms similar to such passages as Enoch lxix. 19.

<sup>1</sup> See Enoch lxix. 19; Vision of Ezra iv. 38; II Enoch xi. 22; Jubilees ii, etc. It should further be noted that according to *Midrash Shemuel* the sherd was placed over the *Tebom* at the time of creation, and not at the time when the ten commandments were given.