

The magic of medicine

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There are many wonderful museums in Jerusalem, but one of my favourites is the Bible Lands Museum. Its collection includes historical artefacts from all around the “fertile crescent”—the great swathe of land from Persia to Egypt that was the source of many ancient civilisations, and gave birth to some of the world’s great religions. Currently there are two special exhibitions there. One is centred on ancient musical instruments and is a multi-media event, helping to bring back to life the tunes and harmonies from thousands of years ago. The other is an exhibition showing the different faces of monotheism. It includes some fascinating examples of how the three principal local religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam have influenced each other and shared many of their core symbols and modes of representation.

There are dozens of objects in both these exhibitions that deserve attention, but if you visit there and you are a doctor I suggest that you should head for the second and look at the display cabinet containing incantation bowls from the sixth and seventh centuries. Incantation bowls are small pottery bowls with painted writing on them, designed as charms to ward off diseases and other misfortunes. They were usually buried under the floors of houses to protect the owner and his or her household from harm attributable to demonic causes.

The bowls themselves are quite simple, and look like ordinary domestic ones. However, the writing and drawings on them are ornate, and were clearly done by professional religious scribes. One of the bowls on display shows the demoness Lilith bound at her hands and feet with ropes in order to incapacitate her. The text around her portrait includes a writ of divorce, presumably aimed at separating her from the helpless person that she has possessed. It calls upon her to place her own signature on the writ, to complete the act of separation. “The magical deed of divorce given to the demoness”, the catalogue explains, “is an act of sympathetic magic to rid the human victim, his

family, houses and property in general from demonic possession; the dissolution of which is intended to restore the patient to good health”.

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

Many of the bowls demonstrate how inclusive the religious beliefs of the time could be. They certainly challenge our ideas about the origins of the three great branches of monotheism, and of the differences between them. The inscriptions are all in Aramaic, the language spoken by the early rabbis and by Jesus, and the common tongue of the Middle East for many centuries afterwards. However, many of them contain references to ancient Mesopotamian and Persian deities as well as recognisable Jewish or Christian names. One shows a protective spell to ward off all idol-spirits from a young girl named Mahlafta. “They are bound and sealed and tied up at their mouths and their heads”, the spell begins, “so that they trample and tread upon every illness that is with Mahlafta daughter of Bathashabba...”. The incantation invokes the help of Yahweh and contains a reference to the prophet Zachariah. But it also refers in passing to Jesus, Satan, Lilith, Adam and Eve, Aphrodite and a local deity named Sidqi’el. Religiously speaking, the parents who commissioned the bowl seem to have been hedging their bets.

It is easy to dwell on what is strange and exotic about these bowls, but it is more helpful to notice what is familiar about them. Across the centuries, Bathashabba and her family speak to us of their anxiety for Mahlafta’s health and their prayers for her speedy cure. They seem no different from any family sitting round a child’s bed in a modern paediatric ward or an accident and emergency department. Just like any parents then or now, they appear to have sought the best professional assistance—someone with obvious expertise whom they implicitly trust to aid their daughter’s recovery. One imagines them sitting patiently in the scribe’s office and watching as he paints the words of the spell in neat concentric circles around the inside of the bowl. Quite possibly they have been to the scribe before, or they know of other local people he has helped to cure. Perhaps

they understand fully the words that he is writing, but perhaps they do not.

The scribe might be aware of that. Maybe he has added in a few more names of obscure gods or demons to impress them, or to justify his fees. But possibly the family has pressed him to include some of their favourite deities in the spell and he has agreed to do so out of kindness—even though he has some professional reservations about the correctness or efficacy of doing so. Is it fanciful to imagine that he has compromised his own certainties, in order to pay respect to the family’s own folk beliefs? If so, he knows that trust, suggestion and a sense of choice may be just as important as the right treatment in helping the patient to get better. Let us hope, anyway, that Mahlafta was fully restored to health and that Bathashabba, her husband and the rest of the family saw her grow into a happy adulthood.

THE POWER OF WRITING

The bowls invite us to perform another act of imagination as well. What will it be like if some of the prescription pads from our own era survive as these bowls have done, and visitors observe them in a museum in another 1000 years or so? However odd we find the idea, the English language and perhaps our alphabet itself might well be unfamiliar by then. No doubt a learned catalogue entry will explain our quaint 21st century notions of swallowing pills with special powers against “biotics”, or ones designed to lower tension that is “hyper”—but, historically speaking, it is highly unlikely that such constructions of illness and of treatment will have any meaningful correspondence with the way that these future visitors make sense of their own world.

No civilisation or system of medicine has ever endured for ever, and it would be a delusion to think that ours might be an exception. Yet museum visitors of the future will almost certainly recognise in the prescription pads some of the timeless and unchanging features of medicine that the bowls also demonstrate: the central role of the expert, the trust placed in us by families, the ritualistic aspects of the consultation, and the magic power of writing something down for the patient to take away. The incantation bowls, and their mode of action, may not be quite as remote from modern medicine as we think.

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