



August 2021

Sacred Writing and Magic Metal: The High Priest's Holy Crown as a Protective Amulet

Abigail Booth

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/studiaantiqua>



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Classics Commons](#), [History Commons](#), and the [Near Eastern Languages and Societies Commons](#)

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Booth, Abigail. "Sacred Writing and Magic Metal: The High Priest's Holy Crown as a Protective Amulet." *Studia Antiqua* 20, no. 1 (2021): 23-37. <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/studiaantiqua/vol20/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studia Antiqua* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

SACRED WRITING AND MAGICAL METAL

THE HIGH PRIEST'S HOLY CROWN AS A PROTECTIVE AMULET

ABIGAIL BOOTH

Abigail Booth is earning a BA from Brigham Young University in ancient Near Eastern studies with an emphasis in Hebrew Bible. She plans to graduate in June 2021 and pursue a graduate degree in chaplaincy or social work.

Abstract: What forces, practices, rituals, or objects worked to safeguard the ancient Israelite sanctuary against evil and harm? Archaeological and textual evidence suggests that the high priest's golden crown may have been an apotropaic amulet worn to protect the high priest and the holy space. Magical practices described in the Bible are illuminated by the presence of apotropaic ritual and amulets in wider Near Eastern society. Metallic amulets such as those found at Ketef Hinnom were utilized to protect the wearer in the name of the deity. In inscriptions, sacred writing invoked the name of YHWH to guard a sanctuary. The high priest's headplate contained precious metals, sacred writing, and an appeal to YHWH reminiscent of its neighbor apotropaic amulets. These sacred elements as prescribed by YHWH in his holiest sanctuary strongly suggest that the high priest's crown was intended to protect the high priest and the community he represented.

The various writings of the Pentateuch called for ancient Israel's separation from the profane practices of its surrounding cultures in the Near East through the observance of kosher laws, monotheism, and other "peculiar" practices of holiness.¹ However, modern archaeological finds and textual evidence suggest that, in many ways, the Israelite footprint may not have been as distinct from its ancient Near Eastern neighbors as Pentateuchal texts would suggest.

1. For examples of peculiar dietary laws, warnings against foreign influence, and other separating practices, see Exod 22:30, 23:19, 34:26; Lev 11:1-47, 17:7, 19:1-37, 23:1-3; Deut 12:15-16, 12:30-31, 14:1, 14:3-21. Exod 23:33 warns against allowing foreigners to live in the land, for "they will make you sin against me; for if you worship their gods, it will surely be a snare to you."

Particularly intriguing is the Israelite use of apotropaic (evil-warding) amulets, despite being a culture wary of magical practice. These amulets came in a variety of forms and functions throughout the Levant. Iron Age Palestinian cities such as Megiddo, Beth-Shean, Lachish, and Gezer yielded amulets that likely appealed to the Egyptian deity Mut for protection.² One scholar used the proliferation of the Mut amulets in the Levant as evidence of the goddess's protective role in the eyes of some Israelites.³ Another scholar's study of naturalistic mask-amulets from Tel Dor in Israel led him to conclude that the masks were primarily intended to ward off evil.⁴ The most significant example of amulets seeking YHWH in ancient Israel are the scrolls discovered at the Ketef Hinnom tombs in Jerusalem. These famous silver amulets are some of the most clearly apotropaic metallic Hebrew artifacts.⁵ They also share significant features with the high priest's crown, the ramifications of which will be discussed later in this study.

Despite the resemblance of wider Near Eastern magical practices, the archaeological record demonstrates that Israelites utilized amulets in their yearning for YHWH. This suggests that amulets were more present in formalized Israelite religion than is usually acknowledged. A recent article by Spoelstra claimed that the Israelite people's tassels and the high priest's crown were apotropaic objects.⁶ He argued that the crown's rosette, signet-like inscription, and resemblance of other Near Eastern protective headpieces pointed to its apotropaic potential.⁷ This article will seek to build upon these conclusions. Rather than focusing on the headplate's connection to the people's tassels, it will situate the Israelite headplate within a cultic context and provide further examples of the name of God being used to protect holy establishments. For the purposes of this study, it will be accepted that the Priestly strand of the Pentateuch was compiled during the Iron Age.⁸

2. Christopher B. Hays, "The Egyptian Goddess Mut in Iron Age Palestine: Further Data from Amulets and Onomastics," *JNES* 71 (2012): 299–313, here 304.

3. *Ibid.*, 299.

4. Ephraim Stern, "Iron Age-Persian Masks and Protonomes from Tel Dor," in *The Physicality of the Other: Masks From the Ancient Near East and the Eastern Mediterranean*, ed. by Angelika Berlejung and Judith E. Filitz, *Orientalische Religionen in der Antike* 27 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 169–89, here 177.

5. Jeremy D. Smoak, *The Priestly Blessing in Inscription and Scripture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

6. Joshua Joel Spoelstra, "Apotropaic Accessories," in *Dress and Clothing in the Hebrew Bible: For All Her Household Are Clothed in Crimson*, ed. Antonios Finitis, LHBOTS 679 (London: T&T Clark, 2019), 63–86.

7. *Ibid.*

8. For scholars who propose a possible pre-exilic origin for the priestly writings or traditions, see Menahem Haran, *Temples and Temple-Service in Ancient Israel: An Inquiry into Biblical Cult Phenomena and the Historical Setting of the Priestly School* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1985; repr., Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 132–48 and Jonathan S. Greer,

This article will focus on the use of the high priest's inscribed "holy diadem" of Exodus 39:30⁹ as an apotropaic amulet through a study of the ancient function of metal and metallic amulets, the ritual significance of writing, and the purposes of the high priest's clothing within the tabernacle.¹⁰

THE USE OF MAGIC AND AMULETS

Magic was clearly present in Israelite society, as biblical writings contain words such as "magician" or "sorcerer" (מכשף), "charmer" (חובר), "enchanter" (מלחש), "expert in magic" (חכם חרשים), and "divination" (מקס).¹¹ While prophets and biblical writers often used these terms to warn against magic in principle, Römer asserted that in practice the link between prophets and magical acts in ancient Israel was substantial.¹² Examples include prophets purifying waters (2 Kgs 2:18–22), retrieving an iron axe from water (2 Kgs 6:1–7), bringing the dead back to life (1 Kgs 17:17–24 and 2 Kgs 4:32–37), and reverencing deceased ancestors.¹³ While magic was often condemned, especially by Deuteronomistic writers, the Priestly strand seemed to adopt and adapt the rituals of Israel's neighbors.¹⁴ In fact, the Priestly source depicted Aaron as a magician who gained power against Egypt's sorcerers from YHWH's word.¹⁵ Protective, purifying, or evil-warding practices similar to those listed above were also displayed anciently through the use of amulets.

A review of the form, function, and significance of amulets proves useful in understanding the amuletic potential of the high priest's crown. Ancient Near Eastern amulets were often apotropaic devices. While archaeologists have uncovered a limited number of amulets from ancient Israel, wider regional examples are plentiful and may be used to show probable influences on Israelite culture from the time.

Ancient Near Eastern amulets came in a variety of uses and structures. Petrie, a 19th-century archaeologist, asserted that "we must define amulets broadly as

"The 'Priestly Portion' in the Hebrew Bible: Its Ancient Near Eastern Context and Its Implications for the Composition of P" *JBL* 138 (2019): 263–284.

9. All biblical references come from the NRSV.

10. The "holy diadem" is sometimes referred to in scholarship as the "holy crown" or "headplate." These names will be used interchangeably throughout the paper.

11. Thomas C. Römer, "Competing Magicians in Exodus 7–9: Interpreting Magic in the Priestly Theology," in *Magic in the Biblical World: from the Rod of Aaron to the Ring of Solomon*, ed. Todd Klutz (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 12–22, here 13–14.

12. Although Römer prefers a Persian dating for much of the biblical text, the presence of Iron Age apotropaic objects such as the Ketef Hinnom amulets suggest that what is often deemed "magic" did have some hold on Israelite society of the time.

13. Römer, "Competing Magicians in Exodus 7–9," 14–15.

14. For the condemnation of magic, see Exod 22:18 and Deut 18:11–12.

15. Römer, "Competing Magicians in Exodus 7–9," 20.

objects worn by the living, without any physical use but for magical benefits, or placed with the dead, or set up in the house for its magical properties, apart from deities for household worship.”¹⁶ He explained that amulets could be worn by a human, buried with a deceased person, or placed in a home.¹⁷ When used as jewelry, amulets contained holes so that they could be strung through with wire or gold.¹⁸ The Egyptian Oracular Amuletic Decrees were papyri writings in which deities guaranteed protection for specific people. Wilfong proposed that these papyri were formed to a length proportional to the height of their owners and then rolled up and worn as amulets.¹⁹ If this is true, then each amulet may have served to guard the owner's entire body length, from head to toe.²⁰ Middle Kingdom Egyptian amulets in the shape of scarabs warded off evil and also may have been passed down between generations as heirlooms.²¹ They were often made of semi-precious stones.²² Ben-Tor observed that Palestinian settlers appropriated these scarabs for their own purposes, often utilizing them as funerary amulets.²³ Limmer validated another scholar's claim that biblical amulets may have emerged as “plaques or bands” on the forehead.²⁴ Götting likewise claimed that amulets could be worn on the neck, around extremities such as hands and feet, or kept at the bed of a person who was afflicted by demons. She also proposed that amulets could be placed as protectors in the doorways of ancient houses.²⁵ Limmer noted that the efficacy of an amulet could derive from its written contents or the material that formed it.²⁶ Some amulets took form in metal; this phenomenon will be discussed later in the paper.

The main function of Near Eastern amulets was to ward off evil on behalf of an owner. Hays explained that amulets were often associated with guardianship and protection.²⁷ Harris cited Carol Andrews's translation of “amulet” in conjunction

16. W. M. Flinders Petrie, *Amulets*, (London: Constable & Co, 1914), 6.

17. *Ibid.*, 5–6.

18. Abigail Limmer, “The Social Functions and Ritual Significance of Jewelry” (PhD diss., The University of Arizona, 2007), 372.

19. T. G. Wilfong, “The Oracular Amuletic Decrees: A Question of Length.” *JEA* 99 (2013): 295–300, here 295.

20. *Ibid.*, 298.

21. Daphna Ben-Tor, “The Relations between Egypt and Palestine in the Middle Kingdom as Reflected by Contemporary Canaanite Scarabs,” *IEJ* 47 (1997): 162–89, here 165.

22. Ben-Tor, “The Relations between Egypt and Palestine,” 185.

23. *Ibid.*, 188.

24. Limmer, “The Social Functions,” 30.

25. Eva Götting, “Arcane Art: Some Thoughts on the Perception of the Magico-Religious Imagery of Lamaštu-Amulets,” *10 ICAANE* 1 (2018): 455–66, here 456.

26. Limmer, “The Social Functions,” 25.

27. Hays, “The Egyptian Goddess Mut in Iron Age Palestine,” 306.

with the Egyptian meanings “guard,” “protect,” and “well-being.”²⁸ Limmer also referenced these translations in her dissertation on Levantine and Egyptian jewelry.²⁹ Limmer added that Hebrew words that translate as “amulet” could literally mean “rock of grace/favor/charm,” “precious stone,” or “stone with positive power.”³⁰ Harris explored the social, cultic, and apotropaic features of Egyptian diadems and other jewelry. She explained that jewelry was positioned on specific parts of the body that would need special protection due to their susceptibility.³¹ Several of the above examples make it clear that amulets were usually worn and often were created as jewelry. The Israelite high priest’s crown as a piece of jewelry with apotropaic qualities will be explored later in this paper.

Metallic Function in Ancient Near Eastern and Israelite Society

Textual and archaeological evidence suggests that metal was both useful and meaningful to ancient societies. Scholarly investigations suggest that ancient cultures utilized metal for magical rituals with reverence, and at times, caution. Biblical passages portrayed YHWH as the Divine Smith who shapes, purifies, and transforms Israel.³² McNutt explained that the location of Timna in the Levant shows evidence of metalworking in conjunction with Hathor’s Egyptian Temple and other shrines, such as a Midianite shrine.³³ Amzallag and Yona believed that Timna was the site of a sanctuary specified in the book of Numbers.³⁴ Similar to McNutt’s Midianite hypothesis, Amzallag and Yona emphasized Timna’s ties with the YHWH-devoted Kenites.³⁵ This suggests that worship may have played a role in Israelite metalworking.³⁶

A curious Israelite ritual that may have utilized metal for magical purposes is described in the book of Numbers’ *Sotah* prescription (Num 5:11–31). Performed in times of suspected adultery, the *Sotah* prescription involved a priest writing a curse and giving a potion to the accused woman. Amzallag and Yonah suggested that an ingredient of the concoction was “finely crushed copper ore” that would

28. Stephanie J. Harris, “From River Weeds to Regal Fabulous: Iconography and Symbolism of a 12th Dynasty Egyptian Diadem,” *Journal for Semitics* (2016): 253–83, here 259.

29. Limmer, “The Social Functions,” 372.

30. *Ibid.*, 97.

31. Harris, “From River Weeds,” 255.

32. Paula M. McNutt, *The Forging of Israel: Iron Technology, Symbolism and Tradition in Ancient Society* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1990), 239.

33. *Ibid.*, 208.

34. See Num 5:11–31.

35. Gérard Nissim Amzallag and Shamir Yonah, “The Kenite Origin of the Sotah Prescription (Numbers 5.11–31),” *JSOT* 41 (2016–2017): 383–412, here 391.

36. McNutt, *The Forging of Israel*, 208.

have appeared if the sanctuary performed cultic metallurgy.³⁷ Some scholars cited this priestly response to the woman accused of adultery to be an ordeal or magical ritual, while others such as Amzallag and Yonah contested this conclusion.³⁸ Rather than causing future sterility as some scholars proposed,³⁹ Amzallag and Yonah claimed that these copper salts likely resulted in a miscarriage,⁴⁰ thereby describing a process that may have been practical rather than magical or mysterious. While scholars are divided over whether the *Sotah* account described a magical ritual, its literary and contextual proximity to the creation of the high priest's crown deems it relevant to this study. The *Sotah* ritual's possible utilization of metal, ritual writing, and tabernacle space provide compelling evidence that the Israelites used such things for a ritual within a cultic setting. The implications of this ritual for the high priest's crown will be further explored later in this study.

Many precious metals held ritual, decorative, and practical purposes in the ancient Near East. Schorsch explained that gold, silver, and electrum were used the most creatively beginning in the second half of Egypt's Eighteenth Dynasty.⁴¹ They began to be associated with some symbolic meanings. Silver was a mark of wealth and a strong economy, and silver jewelry could be apotropaic. However, it is difficult to ascertain whether silver jewelry was apotropaic due to its material or simply to its form.⁴² Gold was similarly valued in ancient societies. Schorsch detailed the Egyptians' association of gold with the sun, rebirth, the gods' flesh, and solar deities.⁴³ Harris expressed that, to the Egyptians, gold contained "supernatural qualities" and symbolized eternal life. She added that gold was especially connected with deities such as Amun-Re, Hathor, and Isis.⁴⁴ According to Limmer, Israel estimated gold to be a precious object, mark of social status, symbol of permanence, and representative of the throne.⁴⁵ In the case of later Jewish amulets, Kotansky proposed that gold was symbolic of the sun, and silver of the moon.⁴⁶

37. Amzallag and Yonah, "The Kenite Origin of the Sotah Prescription," 390.

38. For discussions on the *Sotah* ritual as magical, see the writings of Morgenstern, Schäfer, Schmitt, Bohak, and Miller as cited by Amzallag and Yonah.

39. Amzallag and Yonah, "The Kenite Origin of the Sotah Prescription," 393.

40. *Ibid.*, 396.

41. Deborah Schorsch, "Precious-Metal Polychromy in Egypt in the Time of Tutankhamun," *JEA* 87 (2001): 55–71, here 55.

42. Limmer, "The Social Functions," 147.

43. Schorsch, "Precious-Metal Polychromy," 57.

44. Harris, "From River Weeds," 266.

45. Limmer, "The Social Functions," 145.

46. Roy Kotansky, "Two Inscribed Jewish Aramaic Amulets from Syria," *IEJ* 41 (1991): 267–81, here 270.

Despite these metals' positive characteristics, Israelites likely fretted over the role of gold and silver in the creation of idols.⁴⁷

As has been previously discussed, the ancient Near East has yielded many varieties of amulets. The symbolic nature of metal and the ritual and personal significance of amulets are amplified as metallic amulets are discovered by archaeologists. One Egyptian temple sported poles with golden tips that served as apotropaic defenses.⁴⁸ Some scholars have found the head piece of the Ugarit Baal to be both apotropaic and possibly formed of gold.⁴⁹ The *atef*-crown of pharaoh housed an apotropaic uraeus that was likely decorated with gold leaf.⁵⁰ Harris analyzed the diadem of Egyptian Princess Khnumet-nefert-hezet, containing symbols of flowers or sky, which would have been seen as protective.⁵¹ The gold from which it was made would have been viewed as symbolic of life, the sun, and the flesh of deity itself.⁵² Finally, the Ketef Hinnom amulets are a prime example of metal used to fashion amulets.⁵³ The abundance of royal and religious metallic amulets in the ancient world suggest that a metallic object as ritually and societally significant as the high priest's crown may have been apotropaic as well.

Writing as a Conveyer of Apotropaic Power

The Ketef Hinnom amulets are a pair of thin, silver scrolls that contain a text downplaying evil, praising YHWH's attributes, and calling for a blessing from YHWH.⁵⁴ The amulets have been set apart as an example of amulets in late Iron Age Israelite society.⁵⁵ Smoak claimed that beyond the oft-studied priestly blessing, the remainder of the Ketef Hinnom amulets' writings may have been used in warding off evil, and that such practices may have played a significant role in Israelite religion.⁵⁶ An intriguing concept is the idea that physically carving a blessing on an amulet grants the object power to ward off evil.⁵⁷ Through Smoak's study of the writing of the priestly blessing, he concluded that scholars must no longer hold

47. Limmer, "The Social Functions," 146.

48. Miroslav Verner, *Temple of the World* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2013), 9.

49. Spoelstra, "Apotropaic Accessories," 68–69.

50. *Ibid.*, 74–75.

51. Harris, "From River Weeds," 264.

52. *Ibid.*, 266.

53. Smoak, *The Priestly Blessing*, 12–15.

54. Jeremy D. Smoak, "May YHWH Bless You and Keep You from Evil," *JANER* 12 (2012): 202–36, here 211.

55. *Ibid.*, 208.

56. *Ibid.*, 219.

57. *Ibid.*, 217.

to the “false dichotomy between text and ritual,”⁵⁸ and that the priestly blessing of Numbers seems to follow a “much broader West-Semitic tradition of inscribed short apotropaic or blessing formulae upon metal for protective purposes.”⁵⁹ This conclusion, when applied to the high priestly headplate, opens the possibility of viewing the writing of the metal crown’s inscription “Holy to YHWH” as a ritual act. While it is possible that any ritual act of writing could have granted power to an object, it seems especially likely to do so when containing a blessing or the name of YHWH. These sacred words, carved on the high priest’s headplate, will be reflected upon in the following section.

The Israelite priests were not only considered spiritual authorities, but also “ritual experts in the use of words, particularly in the use of the divine name.”⁶⁰ Those with the authority to curse, bless, and seek protection from harm would call upon God using carefully selected words in the writing of covenants or blessings.⁶¹ The ancient act of writing blessings may have served several purposes, namely perpetuating words throughout time and transferring the efficacy of a text from its writer to its medium.⁶² The *Sotah* prescription mentioned earlier required a priest to “put these curses in writing, and wash them off into the water of bitterness.”⁶³ This account makes it clear that in the tabernacle’s ritual setting, at least one step in bringing about a desired effect (the disclosure of the guilty) was physically writing a curse. As mentioned before, Smoak claimed that the very act of inscribing lends itself to actual power; the placement of those words in that location will cause the writer’s wish to come to pass.⁶⁴

Other instances of sacred inscriptions and the installation of written blessings have been found in the Levant. An appeal to deity for safeguarding the community came in the form of words carved into limestone in the Philistine city of Ekron.⁶⁵ Inscriptions discovered at the Khirbet el-Qom tombs display apotropaic power as well. The site’s inscription #3 stands out for its duplication of letters and words that may reflect a Mesopotamian utilization of repetition when intensifying one’s appeal to deity for help.⁶⁶ It also invoked the names of YHWH and His Asherah for the

58. Smoak, *The Priestly Blessing*, 129.

59. *Ibid.*, 134.

60. *Ibid.*, 138.

61. Ann Jeffers, *Magic and Divination in Ancient Palestine and Syria* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 246–47. For examples, see the *Sotah* curse in Num 5:19–27, Jacob’s blessing in Gen 48:14–15, or Isaac’s agreement with Abimelech in Gen 26:28–31.

62. Smoak, *The Priestly Blessing*, 143.

63. Num 5:23

64. Smoak, *The Priestly Blessing*, 119.

65. Smoak, *The Priestly Blessing*, 116.

66. Brian B. Schmidt, *The Materiality of Power: Explorations in the Social History of Early Israelite Magic* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 158–9.

protection of Uriyahu.⁶⁷ Even more striking are the inscribed objects at Kuntillet 'Ajrud, which contains images on installed pithoi and walls as well as graffito. These writings and drawings reinforce the ritual efficacy of writing in ancient Israel due to their association of the written names of YHWH and Asherah with images of the Egyptian apotropaic deities Bes and Beset.⁶⁸ Schmidt claimed that the inscription of divine phrases and images elevated the pithoi from mundane objects into ones associated with ritual.⁶⁹ It is possible that certain rites were completed at the site of the installed pithos, such as water libations, offerings, incense burning, and sacred meals.⁷⁰ At the same time, the apotropaic power of these inscriptions was not likely contained within their direct vicinity; the passerby would receive YHWH and Asherah's guarding along their way.⁷¹ The above inscriptions serve as examples of deliberately placed writings in ritual or mortuary contexts.

The inscriptions found at Ekron, Khirbet el-Qom, and Kuntillet 'Ajrud utilized the name of YHWH to bring about protection. Similarly, the inclusion of the name of YHWH in the priestly blessing and appeal to the glistening of His face reminds the worshipper of YHWH's sanctuary.⁷² Smoak argued that the speaking of these references to the temple in the Ketef Hinnom amulets actuated YHWH's guarding force even for those who were away from Jerusalem.⁷³ Examples such as these from the ancient Levant make it clear that words were often seen as efficacious in warding off evil, especially in a ritual setting such as the tabernacle where the high priest's crown remained.

THE HEADPIECE OF ISRAEL'S HIGH PRIEST AS AN APOTROPAIC AMULET

This section will seek to use the evidences explored above—namely, the purpose of protective amulets, the importance of metal, and the ritual use of writing—to prove that the high priest's crown may have been intended, in part, to ward off evil or harm. It will also explore the form of the ancient tabernacle and its association with apotropaic power.

In order to properly explore this claim, one must understand the biblical and scholarly insight regarding the nature of the high priest's crown. Exodus 28 describes the high priest's headplate thus:

67. Ibid., 156.

68. Ibid., 89.

69. Schmidt, *The Materiality of Power*, 24. This practice of animating an object through a formal act brings the Near Eastern mouth-washing ritual to mind.

70. Ibid., 36.

71. Ibid., 219.

72. Smoak, *The Priestly Blessing*, 62.

73. Ibid.

36 You shall make a rosette (רִצָּצִי) of pure gold, and engrave on it, like the engraving of a signet, “Holy to the Lord.” 37 You shall fasten it on the turban with a blue cord; it shall be on the front of the turban. 38 It shall be on Aaron’s forehead, and Aaron shall take on himself any guilt incurred in the holy offering that the Israelites consecrate as their sacred donations; it shall always be on his forehead, in order that they may find favor before the Lord.

Exodus 39 adds:

30 They made the rosette (רִצָּצִי) of the holy diadem of pure gold, and wrote on it an inscription, like the engraving of a signet, “Holy to the Lord.” 31 They tied to it a blue cord, to fasten it on the turban above; as the Lord had commanded Moses.

The above text demonstrates several key features of the high priest’s headpiece: namely, the golden diadem or rosette, the blue cord, and the words “Holy to the Lord.” The text is difficult to interpret regarding the specific form of the high priest’s רִצָּצִי or rosette. Scholars have wrestled with the possibility of a golden flower rosette, a flat, glistening plaque, or a pendant-adornment cascading from the forehead.⁷⁴ Regardless of its form, it is likely that the rosette had a hole to accommodate a blue cord which was strung through it.⁷⁵

Exodus 28:43 makes it clear that the priestly clothing was a means of bearing the people’s burden of iniquity. Scholars have also suggested other possible purposes of the high priest’s rosette. Propp theorized that the high priest’s crown likened Aaron to a sacrifice, enhanced offerings, and appointed Aaron (and thereby the people) as YHWH’s belongings.⁷⁶ The crown benefitted Aaron and the people by bringing YHWH’s name to the community through the high priest.⁷⁷ Haran noted that the high priest’s crown was to be worn “regularly,” and that it called for God’s grace.⁷⁸ He also cited Exodus 28:38 to assert that the diadem represented the people’s offerings, to ensure that they were “acceptable for them” in front of YHWH.⁷⁹ Some scholars have hinted at possible apotropaic abilities of the high priest’s crown. Propp noted that the creation and setting-apart of the high priest’s

74. William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 19–40: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 447.

75. *Ibid.*, 448.

76. Propp, *Exodus 19–40*, 524–525.

77. *Ibid.*, 526.

78. Menahem Haran, *Temples and Temple-Service in Ancient Israel: An Inquiry into Biblical Cult Phenomena and the Historical Setting of the Priestly School* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1985; repr., Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 214–5.

79. *Ibid.*

vestments protected the wearer against the danger that could arise from seeing the face of God. It also served as a reminder to the high priest of the sanctuary's "dangerous aura" that comes with approaching God.⁸⁰ As mentioned before, Spoelstra claimed that the high priest's crown served to ward off evil, due to its rosette.⁸¹

Imes noted that the general lack of clothing descriptions in the Hebrew Bible does not necessarily denote a lack of significance of clothing. She even suggested that the Hebrew Bible's relative silence regarding clothing renders the high priest's intricately-described regalia even more noteworthy.⁸² In her interpretation of the appearance of tabernacle-related clothing items, Imes pointed out that the priests' white garments represented the sanctuary's purity, while the high priest's embellished garments signified the "majesty of YHWH."⁸³ The purity of the ordinary priest's clothing, worn also by the high priest, was to be safeguarded by both parties.⁸⁴ The consequence for not wearing the priestly undergarments was death.⁸⁵ Haran maintained that wearing the sacred vestments was not simply a requirement for the high priest before engaging in ritual; rather, the vestments were a substance and act of ritual of their own right.⁸⁶ Petrie's earlier definition of an amulet as something worn by the living for "magical benefits" sheds light on the apotropaic significance of this ritualic wearing of the high priest's crown.⁸⁷

Similarities to Metallic Ancient Near Eastern Amulets

The previous section of this paper provided examples of apotropaic headpieces utilized by wider Near Eastern societies. As mentioned before, Baal's evil-warding headpiece may have been fashioned from gold.⁸⁸ Also likely covered in gold was the pharaoh's protective *atef*-crown, which held some striking similarities to the crown donned by the Israelite high priest. Spoelstra pointed to both crowns' location (on the forehead), color, connection to flowers, and representation (through words or image) of a sacred deity.⁸⁹ The apotropaic flowers of the Egyptian Khnumet-nefert-hezet's crown are significant because the Israelite high priest's crown also contained

80. Propp, *Exodus 19–40*, 525.

81. Spoelstra, "Apotropaic Accessories," 63–86.

82. Carmen Joy Imes, "Between Two Worlds: The Functional and Symbolic Significance of the High Priestly Regalia," in *Dress and Clothing in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Antonios Finitis, (LHBOTS 679. London: T&T Clark, 2019), 29.

83. Imes, "Between Two Worlds," 37.

84. *Ibid.*, 38.

85. *Ibid.*, 36.

86. Haran, *Temples and Temple-Service*, 212.

87. Petrie, *Amulets*, 6.

88. Spoelstra, "Apotropaic Accessories," 68–69.

89. *Ibid.*, 74–75.

some semblance of a flower or rosette.⁹⁰ The high priest's metallic crown may be seen as protective in the same way as Baal's golden rosette, the pharaoh's golden uraeus, or Khnumet-nefert-hezet's golden, floral diadem. Harris explained that the sensory experience of donning such a piece as Khnumet's diadem would also have affected its purpose and efficacy.⁹¹ One can imagine that while the princess handled the delicate gold wiring and viewed the glinting of the flowery jewels, both familiar apotropaic symbols, her head and body would have felt ritually covered in the object's protective power. Harris's claim regarding the ritual efficacy of putting on the Egyptian crown could certainly hold for the high priest's crown. As each item of the high priest's regalia was dictated by YHWH, it is quite likely that the sacredness of donning the high priest's crown may have brought about its ritual and apotropaic effect. The high priest's unique role in preserving the purity of the sanctuary and the people of Israel was demonstrated by the physical objects he utilized. Exodus's instructions regarding the donning of sacred clothing by Aaron and his sons indicated that the Lord required such things so "that they bear not iniquity, and die."⁹² This wording clearly presents a protective aspect to the priestly clothing. It is even possible that the high priest's wearing of the rosette (רִצָּץ) and the people's donning of tassels (צִיצִת) indicated protection and a reception of the priestly blessing.⁹³ This maintenance of the spiritual and societal order protected YHWH's people from the harm and evil that they could have encountered.

The Power of the Headplate's Writing

Passages in the books of Proverbs and Deuteronomy required the faithful Israelite to write and "bind" YHWH's commandments to one's body.⁹⁴ Smoak cited the Ketef Hinnom amulets as an Iron Age example of such a practice.⁹⁵ Similarly, the inscription on the high priest's headplate placed words specifically chosen by YHWH on the body, including YHWH's name. The Ketef Hinnom amulets and the high priest's headplate were both jewelry items which shared YHWH's name, metal writing, and cultic connections to a tabernacle or temple. If the mere allusion to the Israelite temple (through the shining face of God) granted the Ketef Hinnom amulets such apotropaic power, then surely the high priest, as the one continually before the face of YHWH through sacred ritual and status, may also

90. Harris, "From River Weeds," 264.

91. Ibid., 278.

92. Exod 28:43.

93. Spoelstra, "Apotropaic Accessories," 80, 82, 84.

94. See Prov 3:3; 6:21–22 and Deut 6:6–9; 11:18–21 for the binding of YHWH's *commandments*. Furthermore, Num 6:27 promises blessings to those Israelites who have had the *name* of YHWH placed upon them.

95. Smoak, *The Priestly Blessing*, 136.

have been protected by the divinely appointed use of YHWH's name on his crown. Although the inscription on the high priest's crown is so brief that a set formula can be difficult to detect, the use of the name of YHWH still fits into a general pattern of words with apotropaic power.

Furthermore, the *Sotah* prescription, as described earlier in this paper, serves as a clear example of the ritual writing of words in a cultic setting.⁹⁶ Especially in a context as dictated by deity as the creation of the tabernacle sanctuary, it is not unreasonable to assume that the writing on the high priest's crown as prescribed by YHWH held ritual significance. Both the *Sotah* prescription and the Ketef Hinnom amulets are examples of scribal writing effectively bringing about action or protection through YHWH. One can conclude that the act of inscribing upon the high priest's crown might have also played such a ritual and apotropaic role.

The Tabernacle as a Place of Magical Ritual

The tabernacle was a place of ritual. Jeffers observed that the ancient "tent of meeting"⁹⁷ held magical properties, in that it was either potentially harmful or potentially safeguarding for Israelites it served, depending on its location.⁹⁸ It also was a place of divination, wherein Moses or a priest would consult with the divine.⁹⁹ Scholars have proposed a link between the priestly or high priestly clothing and the material, structure, and function of the ancient tabernacle.¹⁰⁰ Upon following this analogy, one might associate the high priest's golden crown with the magical properties of the sanctuary. The crown may have also represented the precious furniture found within the sanctuary.¹⁰¹ As the high priest's crown bore the name of YHWH upon it, it may be fitting to equate it with the holy of holies wherein YHWH dwelled.

The cultic installations mentioned at Ekron, Khirbet el-Qom, and Kuntillet 'Ajrud called upon YHWH for protection. Rather than the placement of a sacred blessing on a tomb, a wall¹⁰² or in a religious record,¹⁰³ the high priest's sacred clothing and body served as the medium for YHWH's words. YHWH's command to place the inscribed golden crown on the forehead of the high priest may

96. Amzallag and Yonah, "The Kenite Origin of the Sotah Prescription," 369.

97. The "tent of meeting" was the either the precursor to or substance of the ancient tabernacle.

98. Jeffers, *Magic and Divination*, 218.

99. *Ibid.*, 219.

100. Haran, *Temples and Temple-Service*, 169.

101. *Ibid.*

102. See the above discussion on the inscriptions at Ekron, Khirbet el-Qom, and Kuntillet 'Ajrud.

103. Smoak, *The Priestly Blessing*, 129.

be analogous to the installation of sacred blessings within the ancient Levantine sanctuary. Some scholars theorize that while community sanctuaries hosted the power of deities through permanent inscription installations, home shrines or tombs utilized portable markers of the deity's presence.¹⁰⁴ The Israelite high priest's crown, if viewed as an inscription, was certainly not permanent nor confined to one place. While this may appear to challenge the legitimacy of its function as an apotropaic inscription, a deeper look at the tabernacle's purpose may explain the transportability of the high priest's headplate. The tabernacle, the original setting for the Israelite high priest and his sacred clothing, was created to be moveable. As a sanctuary for a transient people, the tabernacle was unable to house a permanent inscription. If the high priest's clothing was a representation of the tabernacle itself, it follows that a temporary sanctuary might have found godly protection by means of a moving object in the form of a wearable amulet. The dynamic nature of the tabernacle was reflected in the high priest. Just as the protective sanctuary traveled throughout the desert to fulfill the will of YHWH, so moved the high priest with his amuletic wear around the sanctuary to perform his divinely appointed duties.¹⁰⁵

The broader ancient Near Eastern customs regarding amulets, golden headpieces, and sacred writing suggest that the high priest's golden crown likely served an apotropaic purpose. Additionally, the figure of the high priest may have acted as a portable medium for YHWH's protection upon his sanctuary. These factors all suggest the presence of an evil-warding function of the holy crown.

CONCLUSION

Evidence of magical amulets, apotropaic metals, sacred writing, and a tabernacle imbued with protective ritual demonstrates that the high priest's crown may be viewed as an amulet. This paper investigated the presence of such artifacts and rituals, first throughout the ancient Near East and then in Israelite society. Upon likening these evil-warding customs to the high priest's jewelry-like, golden, inscribed, cultic crown, it is probable that the donning of the sacred diadem granted the Israelites YHWH's favor. The high priest's central role to the religious community may have utilized protection that covered himself and his people. Accounts of similar phenomena in the form of sacred writings, wearable jewelry, or

104. Albertz and Schmitt, *Family and Household Religion*, 73, 454, 469, as cited in Schmidt, *The Materiality of Power*, 89.

105. With the transition from a portable tabernacle to a permanent Israelite temple, some may argue against the transient nature of the high priest's crown as a symbol of the tabernacle. The author would assert that this would not change the crown's use as a portable inscription and amulet. One may also consider the possibility that the constant moving of the high priest might remind the later Judahite worshipper of Israel's origin as a nation of wanderers who sought protection from God in a cloud. See Exod 13:21–22.

permanent installations make it clear that Iron Age Israel's charge to separate itself from other peoples did not result in the total abolition of magical practice. Scholars would be prudent to research whether other rituals associated with the tabernacle contain apotropaic qualities, thereby demonstrating that the Ketef Hinnom amulets, the *Sotah* prescription, and the high priest's crown were not isolated incidents. This fascinating response to the norms of ancient Near Eastern society hints at the varied religious and cultural motivations of the "set apart" Israelite society. Scholars' acceptance of this fact may allow for a deeper understanding of an Israelite theological and cultic system that was much more complex and nuanced than previously thought. While traditional emphasis on Israel's otherness may have caused the holy crown's amuletic function to be overlooked, the evidence is sufficient to suggest that magical ritual may not have been as foreign to Israel as previously supposed.