

Joseph E. Sanzo, *Scriptural Incipits on Amulets from Late Antique Egypt*, Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum 84; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014. Pp. xiv + 219. ISBN 978-3-16-152965-8. Paperback, €64.

- [1] Often the opening lines or first verses of biblical texts are found on amulets from late antiquity. In editions, monographs, and studies on amulets and magical practices, these incipits are regularly identified as a kind of *pars pro toto* or, in other words, as representing the complete biblical text that they are taken from. In his revised doctoral thesis (from 2012), Joseph E. Sanzo argues for a different kind of metonymy; that is, he advocates the idea that Gospel incipits did not automatically invoke a complete text but only certain textual units from it. Thus, they reminded the individual of known traditions and stories and, consequently, functioned as *pars pro partibus* (“part for parts”). For this, Sanzo distinguishes between multiunit corpora (e.g., a Gospel) and single-unit texts (e.g., certain psalms or the Lord’s Prayer). Moreover, he clearly distinguishes between the function and application of incipits and single initial words of texts. He pays particular attention to LXX Ps 90 as it is, the most widely used Biblical text for apotropaic purposes.
- [2] In chapter 1, Sanzo provides a history of research, develops his own approach and theory, and redefines terms and categories, such as the improper designation “Christian amulets” (and also “pagan,” “Jewish,” “Egyptian,” etc.). He argues that many amulets cannot be attributed to a certain belief and/or religious movement without any doubt. In other words, they do not really represent a single, clearly identifiable religious belief. By employing the phrases *pars pro toto* and *pars pro parte/partibus*, Sanzo develops an appropriate understanding of metonymy based on linguistic theory.
- [2] In chapter 2, the author utilizes miscellaneous codices as role models for understanding why certain textual units were preferred over others for amulets. One wonders, however, if such a comparison is appropriate, because Sanzo compares longer or complete entities (codices with complete works) with small textual units (incipits). From a user’s point of view, the one might not have anything to do with the other. This certainly needs further reflection and research than Sanzo could do as an aside in his monograph.
- [3] Chapters 3 and 4 represent a catalogue of amulets with incipits: there are twenty-five multiunit amulets with Gospel incipits, which Sanzo labels “ritual artifacts with at least four gospel *incipits*,” “with two or three gospel *incipits*,” “with one gospel *incipit*,” and “other possible *incipits* of multiunit corpora” (74–102). Then there are thirty-eight single-unit amulets, most of them with verses from psalms (eighteen with the beginning of LXX Ps 90). Sanzo does not solely rely on papyri, but he analyzes ostraca and inscriptions as well (e.g., in grottos, on walls, on armbands/bracelets). This is fine and welcomed, although his focus on Egypt as provenance is problematic in itself and is an obstacle for enlarging the database even more. The fact that objects were found somewhere in Egypt does not necessarily mean that the objects also stem from Egypt and objects found somewhere else (e.g., Syria, Palestine) might have originally come from Egypt but are catalogued according to the place where they were found. Items of the same category or making such as the armbands/bracelets (nos. 39–41) and the Βουζ tablets (nos. 42–43) might be better understood when explained against the background of other objects within their category. Nonetheless, Sanzo would probably not have drawn different conclusions than those he drew.

- [4] In chapter 5, Sanzo develops criteria to define the term *incipit*: there are titles of works (i.e., the Gospels) and the initial line of a work or textual unit. For Sanzo it appears important to distinguish between various uses of *incipits*. This is how he introduces this chapter: “In the following discussion, I identify, with varying levels of certainty, which opening lines were used as independent units and which were used as *incipits*. I will then examine the implications of this analysis for two aspects of late antique ritual culture: the commonality of psalmic *incipits* and the relationship between rigid faithfulness to inherited traditions and ritual efficacy” (136). He ends up with a chart (147–148) that includes twenty-nine *certain* *incipits*, five *probable* *incipits*, three *improbable* *incipits*, and twenty-five *incipits* of which there is “insufficient evidence for identifying the opening line as an *incipit*” (147 n. 26).
- [5] In chapter 6, Sanzo develops a “Theory of *Incipits* of Multiunit Corpora and Single-unit Texts,” as his headline suggests (150). Once more, but this time in more detail and retrospectively on the basis of the corpora of amulets studied, he addresses the issue *pars pro toto* against *pars pro partibus* with a clear preference for the latter. He exemplifies this with the help of patristic testimony, *PSI* VI 719, and “continuity and innovation in the ancient Mediterranean” (171). However, according to him “the ritual development of *incipits* of multiunit corpora appears to be limited to Greek- and Coptic-speaking communities and restricted to Egyptian ritual culture” (177).
- [6] Sanzo offers a brief summary of his conclusions (178–82) and raises the issue of combining the use of *incipits* with late antique ritual and book culture. This is a topic to be hopefully tackled by someone sooner than later. Here Sanzo himself could have profited from works that are missing in his bibliography (202), for instance, publications by René Mouterde, Campbell Bonner, and Gary Vikan (the latter in: *Sacred Images and Sacred Power in Byzantium*, Variorum Collected Studies Series 778 [Burlington, VT: Aldershot-Burlington 2003]).
- [7] Surprisingly, Sanzo fails in defining the term “amulet”; that is, he seems to ignore any further definitions. This is the more striking as he critically differentiates between all sorts of *incipits* in detail and on the basis of well-grounded criteria (see [4] above). Probably, the publication by T. S. de Bruyn and J. H. F. Dijkstra in 2011 came too late for his dissertation (“Greek Amulets and Formularies from Egypt Containing Christian Elements: A Checklist of Papyri, Parchments, Ostraka, and Tablets,” *BASP* 48 [2011]: 163–216), who provide pragmatic criteria and categories in order to identify and define an “amulet”; but a preliminary version was available earlier (see T. S. de Bruyn, “Papyri, Parchments, Ostraca, and Tablets Written with Biblical Texts in Greek and Used as Amulets: A Preliminary List,” in: T. J. Kraus and T. Nicklas, eds., *Early Christian Manuscripts: Examples of Applied Method and Approaches*, Texts and Studies for New Testament Study [Leiden: Brill, 2010], 145–89). Besides this, Sanzo does not explicitly address the power of the written word, the effect of the word (and *characteres*, *voces magicae*, signs, symbols, and images), and the people who applied and used it for and in ritual practices. Without that, a remarkable aspect of the study of amulets is neglected. Recently and meant for the reader of this review, Vicky Foskolou analyzed this issue impressively (see “The Magic of the Written Word: The Evidence of Inscriptions on Byzantine Magical Amulets,” *Deltion of the Christian Archaeological Society* 35 [2014], 329–48).

- [8] Leaving these points of criticism aside, Joseph E. Sanzo succeeds in formulating his thesis convincingly and in presenting a meticulous study and depiction of amulets with scriptural incipits. This innovative and unique monograph deserves a wide reception among specialists in the field, scholars of relevant disciplines, and, above all, everybody interested in ritual practices in late antiquity. The author is to be thanked for having taken over the painstaking task of collecting and evaluating relevant data *and* for drawing attention to the multifunctional use of incipits and single words on amulets. It is to be hoped that he will dedicate future research to the *desiderata* he formulates in his final chapter.

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