A New Testament Text on a Syriac Incantation Bowl:

Eph. 6:10-17 on IBC 3

Joseph E. Sanzo and Nils H. Korsvoll

Abstract: This article demonstrates the use of Eph. 6:10-17 on a Syriac incantation bowl (IBC 3), thereby challenging the commonly held opinion that there are no direct uses of the New Testament among the Syriac bowls. We then situate the use of this biblical passage on IBC 3 within the context of biblical citation and reference in Mediterranean magic more generally. Finally, we briefly reflect on the significance of the usage of the Bible on IBC 3 for the study of Syriac incantation bowls and for the value of categories of religious identification, such as “Christian,” “Jewish,” and “Pagan,” as it pertains to the study of late antique apotropaia.

Keywords: Magic; Syriac; Incantation bowls; Bible; New Testament; Ephesians; Biblical Reception; Late Antiquity

Biblical traditions figured prominently in the overlapping domains of early Jewish and Christian “magic.” The proliferation of texts taken from the Hebrew and Christian scriptures on Greek, Coptic, Latin, Hebrew, and Jewish-Aramaic amulets and other ostensibly magical materials demonstrates that many ancient practitioners perceived a need to ground ritual efficacy in the authority of holy writ and, by extension, in divinely sanctioned precedents and paradigms of healing, protection from demons, exorcisms, and the like.

While the extant record has disproportionately favored artifacts from late antiquity (especially from Egypt), the relationship between ritual efficacy and scriptural tradition was certainly not a late-antique invention. For instance, one can find in the Dead Sea Scrolls several apotropaic devices (from Cave 11) that cite MT Ps 91. Perhaps even more intriguing is the fact that two silver lamellae dated to the seventh or sixth century B.C.E preserve the earliest attestation of a text that corresponds to our Hebrew Bible. Alongside this rich material evidence, talmudic and patristic sources describe or complain about Jews and Christians utilizing biblical texts and artifacts for ritual efficacy. It is not surprising, therefore, that scholars consider the use of biblical texts to be one of the hallmarks of Jewish and Christian apotropaic practice.

Given the prominence of biblical texts and motifs in ancient and late antique apotropaic, curative, and exorcistic contexts, the dearth of biblical citations in the Syriac...
incantation bowls is worth noting. To be sure, one can certainly find scattered references to Jesus, Moses, and other biblical characters in the extant Syriac bowls. Nevertheless, H. Juusola’s negative assessment of the evidence succinctly captures *prima facie* the situation confronting specialists of Syriac magic: “…no quotations from the New Testament or early Christian literature are encountered, as opposed to the Jewish Aramaic bowl texts which commonly quote the Hebrew Bible and occasionally refer to Talmudic tradition as well.”

Although several Syriac bowls have been published in the intervening years since Juusola penned these words, his position still aptly reflects conventional scholarly wisdom. In fact, one cannot find a discussion or index of biblical citations in Marco Moriggi’s magisterial volume of the Syriac bowls. This perceived absence of biblical texts in Syriac incantations is not without implications for the social context behind this material. In fact, many scholars have used the lack of scriptural texts to buttress their argument that the Syriac incantation bowls reflect a milieu outside of the various Christian traditions.

In this essay, we point out that the New Testament does in fact appear in the extant Syriac magical tradition. Specifically, we demonstrate that prior editions and commentaries of a recently published Syriac incantation bowl (IBC 3) have missed its direct engagement with Eph. 6:10-17 (i.e., the so-called “armor of God” passage). Our observation not only contributes to a better understanding of this particular artifact, but it also requires scholars to nuance – if not to rethink entirely – the perceived contrast between the Syriac materials and other corpora of ancient and late antique magical artifacts as it pertains to the relationship between scriptural citation and ritual efficacy.

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7 E.g., CBS 9012 ll. 2, 4, 7, 8; CBS 16097 l. 6; BLMJ 0070 l. 6.
I. IBC 3 and the Bible: Description and Prior Scholarship

The Mesopotamian “incantation bowls” (a.k.a. “magic bowls”) are ceramic bowls, typically with a diameter between 15 and 20 cm and a depth of 7 to 8 cm, although much larger and smaller examples exist. The incantations are written in ink, mainly on the inside of the bowl, and in most cases the texts are formatted into a spiral shape that moves from the center to the rim.¹¹ What little contextual information we have comes primarily from the excavations at Nippur (Iraq) in the 1880s, where a number of bowls were found in a layer dated to the sixth or seventh century C.E.¹² This information, however, has been confirmed by more recent discoveries of a few incantation bowls in modern, controlled excavations.¹³ The bowls are found in what is thought to have been domestic buildings; several are buried upside-down while in a few cases two bowls are sealed together.¹⁴ It has been suggested that the inverted deposition of the bowls indicates that they were designed to trap the demons inside.¹⁵

The bowl at the center of our discussion – IBC 3 – was recently acquired by the Bibliothèque Centrale de l’Université Saint-Esprit de Kaslik in Lebanon. It was among the many archaeological artifacts that flooded the country’s antiquities markets after the 2003-

¹⁴ H.V. Hilprecht, Explorations in Bible Lands During the 19th Century (Philadelphia 1903) 447-448. On the possible semantics of sealing bowls together, see D. Levene, “This Is a Qybl’ for Overturning Sorceries,” in Continuity and Innovation in the Magical Tradition, ed. G. Bohak, Y. Harari, and S. Shaked (Leiden 2011) 219-244.
invasion of Iraq.\textsuperscript{16} The bowl was first published by Gaby Abousamra in 2010.\textsuperscript{17} Marco Moriggi subsequently reedited IBC 3 in his 2014 corpus of Syriac incantation bowls (no. 49).\textsuperscript{18}

IBC 3 is almost complete, consisting of 17 fragments that have been glued back together. It is 7 cm high and has a diameter of 16 cm. The incantation consists of eight lines that are written in accordance with the typical format (i.e., spiralling outward). IBC 3 is written in Estrangelo and is quite well preserved, although Moriggi notes that the script is “characterized by a considerable inconsistency.”\textsuperscript{19} The incantation of IBC 3 closes with a “doubly written alphabet” – a ritual phenomenon that is also found on other bowls and amulets, Syriac and otherwise.\textsuperscript{20} In addition to text, there is also a drawing of a human-like face in the center, with rays or petals emerging from it. This facial image closely resembles two other bowls (IBC 2 and IM 142513).\textsuperscript{21} There are thus several aspects of IBC 3 that overlap with other, known apotropaic devices.

Such parallels aside, the text of IBC 3 also differs in some ways from the texts of other Syriac bowls. Most important, instead of the typical opening line of incantation bowls, in which the client(s) is presented and the apotropaic device introduced, this incantation starts with an extended invocation ‘sy’ \textit{wmsyn} ‘hy’ (“physician and living healer”).\textsuperscript{22} In fact, the client(s) is not named at all in this incantation, which is quite rare. Instead, the incantation proceeds with an extensive appeal for the healing and protection of an unidentified third person plural (ll. 3-7) and closes with something akin to a doxology (l. 7), an “Amen” and

\textsuperscript{17} Abousamra, “Coupe de prière,” 27-38.
\textsuperscript{18} Moriggi, \textit{A Corpus}, 208-211.
\textsuperscript{19} Moriggi, \textit{A Corpus}, 208.
\textsuperscript{20} Moriggi, \textit{A Corpus}, 210; Abousamra, “Coupe de prière,” 34-35.
\textsuperscript{21} Moriggi, \textit{A Corpus}, 202-203 and 207. We cannot see the drawing in IM 142513 in the photos, but Moriggi notes that traces of “a drawing similar to that of bowls nos. 48 and 49 are visible at the bottom of the basin” (Moriggi, \textit{A Corpus}, 200).
\textsuperscript{22} Moriggi, \textit{A Corpus}, 209.
Trinitarian invocation, and the aforementioned alphabet (II.7-8). Abousamra highlights a few phrases and terms in the appeal that he postulates might have a connection to New Testament texts, and furthermore proposes some parallels with the Maronite breviary. Moriggi does not comment on or suggest any use of biblical text, but agrees with Abousamra that “one is strongly induced to think that it could well be a copy, slightly readjusted, of a Syriac liturgical text or of a section of a Syriac prayer-book.” Both Abousamra and Moriggi, therefore, conclude that IBC 3 bears more resemblance to Syriac prayers or liturgical texts than to the incantations used in other Syriac bowls.

Abousamra and Moriggi’s identification of possible liturgical parallels is indeed worthy of note. Yet, the terms and phrases in IBC 3, which Abousamra tentatively claims have some kind of connection to New Testament texts, are unlikely to be in a direct relationship with the biblical text. In line 3, IBC 3 starts with *swm ly{k}hw nydy kwqh* (“Put on them your holy hands”), which Abousamra reads in connection with Matt. 9:18: *t’ sym ydk lyh wth* (“come put your hand on her and she shall live”) or Acts 13:3/19:6: *swm lyhwn yd* (“put hands on them”). Abousamra suggests *lbrššhw gwy* (“to their interior man”) in line 4 echoes the discourse in 2 Cor. 4:16: “even if our external person is wearing away, our inner person is renewed day by day.” He also proposes that the use of *dbsr “dlbyšyn* (“of the fleshes which they are dressed with”) in line 4 echoes the description of Christ’s incarnation in Heb. 5:7. Finally, he suggests that *zynyk ’lhy* (“your divine arms”) in line 5 evokes the discussion on the weapons of the faithful in 2 Cor. 10:4 or Rom. 13:12: *nḷbš zynh*

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24 Abousamra, “Coupe de prière,” 33-34.
26 This resemblance (combined with the recent acquisition and uncertain provenance) raises the possibility that IBC 3 could be among the many forgeries that are found on the antiquities market. That said, Moriggi notes that there are two parallel formulae in Ford’s forthcoming publications, hailing from the Schøyen and other collections, which then speaks for the authenticity of this bowl (Moriggi, *A Corpus*, 208).
27 Moriggi, *A Corpus*, 209. Moriggi and Abousamra here read *ydþk*. Yet, it seems from the photograph in Moriggi’s *Corpus* at least, that the dots they interpret as a seyame are in fact marks or dirt in the clay.
29 Abousamra, “Coupe de prière,” 33-34.
dnwhr’ (‘put on the weapons of light’). We find that these possible references are too general and too fragmentary to indicate a specific biblical passage. Instead, we think they merely reflect general Christian idioms.

Nevertheless, we suggest that IBC 3 does in fact engage with a New Testament text. In the analysis that follows, we argue that ll. 5-6 of this bowl consist of a sequence of parallels with Eph. 6:10-17 (“the armor of god” passage), thus reflecting the direct usage of a biblical passage. Despite engaging with Eph. 6:10-17, however, the bowl’s text and the biblical text differ in marked ways. In order to contextualize such differences, we situate IBC 3 within the world of biblical citation on late antique amulets and spells more generally, highlighting the creative ways late antique practitioners engaged with the Bible for ritual efficacy. We conclude with a few brief remarks on the broader implications of IBC 3’s biblical usage for the study of Syriac incantation bowls and the bowls’ relationship to the broader world of late antique Mediterranean magic.

II. IBC 3 and Eph. 6:10-17

It must be stressed at the outset that the reference to Eph. 6:10-17 on IBC 3 is not tantamount to a quotation proper, but constitutes a series of phrases derived from this biblical passage: (1) the gospel of peace; (2) arrows of evil; (3) helmet of salvation; and (4) the armor of God. We present Moriggi’s transcription and translation of the bowl, which he did based on photographs provided by Abousamra. We then compare the bowl’s text to the Peshitta-text of Eph. 6:10-17. Since there are a few differences between the readings of Moriggi and Abousamra, we include both transcriptions and translations in our discussion. It should also be noted that, given the specific parameters of our study, we will not provide a complete and

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30 Abousamra, “Coupe de prière,” 34.
detailed analysis of IBC 3, ll. 5-6 and the Peshitta-text of Eph. 6:10-17, but restrict our
discussion to the elements shared by these two texts.

II. 1. The Text IBC 3, ll. 5-6 and the Peshitta Text of Eph. 6:10-17

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IBC 3</th>
<th>Ephesians 6:10-17</th>
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<tr>
<td>(...)</td>
<td>(10) mkyl 'ḥy. 'ḥylyw bmrn wbtwq' dhylh (11) wlbšw k ḥ lhlh</td>
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<tr>
<td>ʾṭʿ yp 'nwn (5) zynyk ʾlhy  dm n  ymynhwn smlhwn swm bryšhwn s[n]wrwt' dhy' dbh {dbh} ntḥṭ ḥylḥ dbyš’ (6)</td>
<td>zyn’ d’lh’, ‘ykn’ dtškhwn lmqm lwqbl šn’tḥ d’kl qrs’. (12) mṭl dktkwškwn l’hw’ ‘m bsr’ wdm’ l’ ‘m ῶks w’m šlŷtn’. w’m ῶḥydy ‘lm’ dhn’ ḥšwk’. w’m ῶwḥ’ ῶjšṭ’ dṭḥyt šmy’. (13) mṭl hn’ lbbšw kḥl zyn’ d’lh’, dtškhwn t’r’wn bṣyš’. wkd m’tryn ’ntwn bklmdm tqwmn. (14) qwmw ḥkyl. ḥwzwq ḥṣŷkwn bqwš’t. wlbšw šryny’ dzqytw’t. (15) ws’nw b严格的kykwn ῶt wndh’ d’wnglywn dṣlm’. (16) w’m ḥlyn sbw lkwn skr’ dhymnwt’, dbh ttmšwn hyl’ lmd’kw klhw g’rḥy yqd’ dbyš’. (17) wsymw swrmt’ dpwrqn’. w’ḥwdw syp’ drwḥ’ d’ytywh mlt’ d’lh’.</td>
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<tr>
<td>d’ytyh33 dṣlm’ nhw’ bdmwt šwr’ myl’ mn kwły gy르why dbyš’,</td>
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<td>(...)</td>
<td>(10) Therefore my brothers be strengthened in our Lord and in the force of his power (11) and put on the whole armor of God, so that you will be able to stand against the scheme of slander (12) because your fight will not be against flesh and blood, but against the Principalities and against the Rulers and against the powers of the world of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dress them (5) of your divine armor,34 in order that they will be on their right (and) left sides,</td>
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33 d’ytyh d’ytyh is likely to be one of the several instances in IBC 3 in which the practitioner seems to have made a false start, or some other mistake, leading to a doubling of a word (Abousamra, “Coupe de prière,” 29; Moriggi, *A Corpus*, 209.
34 Moriggi translates zynyk with “arms,” which is certainly a possible translation. Nevertheless, since the verb here is “to dress” (ʾṭʿ yp), it seems more appropriate to translate it to “armor.”
**put on their heads helmets of life,** by means of which it is abolished the strength of evil (6) and the preparation of the **Gospel which is of peace,** may it be a in the form of a wall raising against all darts of evil (...) this darkness, and against the evil spirits under heaven. (13) Because of this **put on the whole armor of God,** so that you will be able to encounter the evil one. And when you are ready in all things you will stand. (14) Stand then and gird your loins with truth and put on the breastplate of righteousness. (15) And put on your feet the **preparation of the gospel of peace.** (16) And with these, take to you the shield of faith, so that with it you will have the power to put out all the burning arrows of the evil one. (17) And **put on the helmet of salvation.** And take the sword of the spirit that is the word of God.

II.2. Eph. 6:10-17 on IBC 3: Analysis

The most striking parallel is perhaps in line 6 in IBC 3, which starts with the sub-clause *wt[w]h d’wnglywn dʾythy dʾyth dšlm,* “and the preparation of the Gospel which is of peace.” This phrase parallels Eph. 6:15: *wsʾnw bรกglykwn twybh dʾwnglywn dšlm,* “and put on your feet the preparation of the gospel of peace.” Unfortunately, there are several cracks in the bowl across this sentence (as well as some wear), which make it difficult to read. In the first publication of IBC 3, Abousamra had some difficulty reading this portion of the bowl and suggested a different reconstruction than the one above (which is based on Moriggi’s subsequent edition). 35 Moriggi bases his reading and reconstruction of the lacunose words on a parallel, unpublished bowl (JNF 221:6), 36 and his reconstruction is plausible in light of our analysis of the photograph. Moreover, given the other parallels to Eph. 6, which we will

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35 For the first word he proposes [wtwhy]h from the root thʾ (“wonder, marvel”) or alternatively wilhyh dʾwnglywn (“la force de l’Évangile”). He then reads ʾyn (“powerful, mighty”) instead of dšlmʾ (“of peace”). Altogether, his translation reads: “Et que la merveille du puissant Évangile,” (Abousamra, “Coupe de prière,” 31-32). This explains why Abousamra then misses the reference to Eph. 6:15 here.

discuss below, the clear reference here to Eph. 6:15 constitutes another indication that Moriggi’s reconstruction is correct.

Line 6 of IBC 3 then continues with the phrase \textit{nhw’ bdmwt šwr’ myl’ mn kwl gyrwhy}\footnote{Both Abousamra and Moriggi note that \textit{gyrwhy} is likely to be a misspelling or phonetic spelling of \textit{g’rwhy} (Abousamra, “Coupe de prière,” 29; Moriggi, \textit{A Corpus}, 210).} \textit{dbyš’} (“may it be a in the form of a wall raising against all darts of evil”). Here there is no significant difference between readings of Abousamra and Moriggi. While this phrase does not stand in direct parallel with Eph. 6:10-17, there is a similar appeal to overcome attack in the form of darts or arrows in verse 16: “take to you the shield of faith, so that with it you will have the power to put out \textit{all the burning arrows of the evil one} (or “of evil”): \textit{sbw lkwn skr’ dhymnw:t’, dbh ttmswn hyl’ lmd’kw klhwn g’rwhy yqd’ dbyš’}. To be sure, references to protection from darts or other weapons constitute a common motif in apotropaic contexts – including but not limited to Syriac bowls.\footnote{Abousamra, “Coupe de prière,” 34. Weapons are used in analogies of apotropaic rituals in various bowls (e.g., CBS 2943, BM 91712, IM 44107 and VK 5738:3).} Nevertheless, the close proximity of the phrase “darts of evil” to “the Gospel which is of peace” in l. 6 of IBC 3 significantly increases the likelihood that there was a direct connection between the use of the word “darts” (\textit{g’rwhy}) on the bowl and in the Peshitta-text of Eph. 6:15-16.

In the middle of line 5, IBC 3 reads \textit{swm bryšhwn s[n]wrw’t’ dhy’} (“put on their heads helmets of life”), which corresponds to Eph. 6:17: \textit{wsymw snwrt’ dpwrq:n’} (“and put on the helmet of salvation”).\footnote{Again, Abousamra’s reading obscures the reference to Eph. 6:10-17, as he reads \textit{sym b’ydhwn s[‘wr?]wt’ dhy’} (“mets dans leur main le trésor de la vie”) (Abousamra, “Coupe de prière,” 31-32).} Admittedly, the biblical text does not mention \textit{bryšhwn}, “on their heads,” but Barbara Aland and Andreas Juckel note in their critical edition of the Pauline letters in Syriac that Aphrahat opens with \textit{nsym bršn snwrt’ dpwrq:n’} (“we shall put on our heads the helmet of salvation”) when he renders this verse in \textit{Demonstrations} 1/224,2. Likewise, Cyrus of Edessa in his \textit{Six Explanations of the Liturgical Feasts} 33,24 quotes it as
wsym bršh snwrt dpwrqn’ (“and put on his head the helmet of salvation”).

IBC 3’s inclusion of “head” here, therefore, seems to have been part of the verse’s reception in late antiquity – even if it is not included in the Peshitta. Similarly, although ḥyʾ in IBC 3 is not lexically the same as dpwrqn’ in Eph. 6:17, ḥyʾ is commonly used to refer to salvation.

Moreover, it is the word used when this imagery is taken up briefly in 1 Thess. 5:8: … wsym snwrt’ dsbr’ ḥyʾ (“…and take as a helmet the hope for salvation”). We, therefore, consider it likely that the practitioner is alluding to the helmet of salvation from Eph. 6:17.

All in all, this list of parallels between IBC 3, ll. 4–6 and Eph. 6:10-17 leads us to the conclusion that IBC 3 is the first published Syriac incantation bowl that directly engages with a biblical text. This direct engagement with a biblical text stands in contrast to the purported “echoes” and topical parallels that Abousamra associates with IBC 3. To be sure, the text in IBC 3 is not a quotation in the purest sense of the word. Nevertheless, these parallels suggest that the practitioner is intentionally and explicitly interacting with a biblical text. This manifest approach to a specific biblical passage thus moves beyond the two other known instances of biblical reference in Syriac bowls, in which a biblical story or topic is simply mentioned en passant.

III. The Creative uses of Biblical Texts and References in Late Antique Apotropaia

Biblical texts and references came in a variety of forms and variations in late antique apotropaia. In some cases, practitioners rendered biblical texts in relative agreement with our

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40 Aland and Juckel, Das Neue Testament, 331.
42 We would like to thank Hilde Brekke Møller for pointing out this parallel. For an amulet that conflates Eph. 6:16 and 1 Thess. 5:8, see P. Vindob. G 26034 + 30453 (see discussion below).
43 This segment of IBC 3 opens with ūʾyp ṣwn (5) zynyk ḥyʾ (“dress them of your divine arms”), which parallels the opening of Eph. 6:11, wlbšw kwlh zynʾ dʾlhʾ (“and put on the whole armor of God”). This theme is also repeated in Eph. 6:13. As we mentioned above, Abousamra claims this text references 2 Cor. 10:4 or Rom. 13:12 (Abousamra, “Coupe de prière,” 34). Nevertheless, given the close correspondences to the “armor of God” passage that we have already observed, we find that an allusion to Eph. 6:11 is far more likely here.
44 CBS 9012 invokes Moses and the parting of the Red Sea, and BLMJ 0070 appears to invoke the resurrection.
In other cases, however, the biblical texts and traditions mentioned deviate quite significantly from these editions. Theodore de Bruyn and Jitse Dijkstra have stressed that on Greek amulets from late antiquity “[o]ften several [biblical] passages are juxtaposed one with another, and sometimes they are quoted in an incomplete or confused manner.”

Indeed, in addition to changing the orthography or other elements of biblical texts and inserting words into well-known passages, such as the Lord’s Prayer and LXX Ps 90:1, late antique practitioners writing in Greek and Coptic could invent their own “biblical” traditions, in which Jesus inter alia stops the Euphrates River or has a conversation with a “unicorn” (ⲡⲁⲡⲓ̈ⲧⲁⲡ ⲛⲟⲩⲧ) while hanging on the cross.

Similar variation is found in the Jewish-Aramaic incantation bowls. While some bowls cite the biblical text more or less in accordance with the Masoretic text, Dan Levene has observed that a practitioner might “adapt” a biblical verse “to fit the subject of the

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45 E.g., Brit. Lib. Or. 4919(2); P. Berol. 22 235.
46 de Bruyn and Dijkstra, “Greek Amulets and Formularies,” 172.
47 E.g., P. Princ. II. 107; BGU III. 954; BKT VI. 71; PSI VI 719; SB I 1576; P. Oxy. 2684. Christa Müller-Kessler notes that the spelling on the incantation bowls sometimes differs so much from the later Masoretic text that the quotes in the bowls “können wohl nicht im Sinne textlicher Varianten verstanden werden” (C. Müller-Kessler, Die Zauberschalentexte in der Hilprecht-Sammlung, Jena, und weitere Nippur-Texte anderer Sammlungen, vol. 7 in Texte und Materialien der Frau Professor Hilprecht Collection of Babylonian Antiquities im Eigentum der Friedrich-Schiller-Universität, Jena (Wiesbaden 2005) 11).
48 E.g., BGU III 954 (= PGM P9), P. Duk. inv. 778, and Athens Nat. Mus. nr. 12 227 (= PGM O4).
49 E.g., P. Princ. II 107 (= Suppl.Mag. 29) and PSI VII 759.
52 E.g., Naveh and Shaked, Amulets and Magic Bowls, 184-187, B11. Indeed, some scholars have characterized many of the incantation bowls as basically corresponding to the Masoretic text – though with variation in spelling and orthography. See Shaked, Ford and Bhayro, Aramaic Bowl Spells, 18; C. Müller-Kessler, “The Use of Biblical Quotations,” 228.
Moreover, as Joseph Naveh and Shaul Shaked once noted about the Jewish-Aramaic incantation bowls, the “practice of inverting the order of the words of verses is quite widespread.” All in all, the selective and creative approach to Eph. 6:10-17 – which, we propose, is operative in IBC 3 – resonates with the complex ways late antique practitioners engaged with biblical traditions to achieve efficacy on behalf of their clients.

**IV. The Implications of a Biblical Text on IBC 3**

This rendering of Eph. 6:10-17 in the incantation of IBC 3 is significant because it represents a clear attempt on the part of a Syriac practitioner to engage directly with a biblical text. Accordingly, this bowl helps bridge the Syriac incantation bowls with the Greek amulets from late antique Egypt. In his useful catalogue of Greek amulets that utilize biblical passages, Theodore de Bruyn lists one amulet which cites a portion of Eph. 6:10-17. This sixth-century C.E. Greek amulet, P. Vindob. G 26034 + 30453, includes the following phrase: “Take up the breastplate of faith and a helmet the hope of salvation” (θώρακα πίστεως ἀναλάβω καὶ περικεφαλαίαν ἐλπίδα σωτηρίας).

As Brice Jones notes, the text cited on this amulet is an apparent conflation of Eph. 6:16 (cf. the shared use of ἀναλαμβάνω) and 1 Thess. 5:8 (cf. “the breastplate of faith” and “the hope of salvation”). On the balance, however, the text cited is more closely connected with 1 Thess. 5:8 than with Eph. 6:16.

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53 D. Levene, *A Corpus of Magic Bowls: Incantation Texts in Jewish Aramaic from Late Antiquity* (London 2003) 11. This variety has led some scholars inappropriately to deny the citation of biblical texts on incantation bowls. James A. Montgomery, the first to publish extensively on the incantation bowls, held that these artifacts included almost no biblical quotations. Instead, he claimed that they simply contained a number of references to biblical stories (Montgomery, *Aramaic Incantation Texts*, 63-64).


55 de Bruyn, “Papyri, Parchment,” 173.


In addition to P. Vindob. G 26034 + 30453, P. Cair. inv. 10236 (= PGM P13), an early fifth-century C.E. Greek amulet, includes the phrase, “the principalities and powers and cosmic rulers of darkness”: “αἱ ἀρχαὶ καὶ ἐξουσίαι καὶ κοσμοκράτορες τοῦ σκότους” (l.15). This phrase seems to be alluding to Eph. 6:12: “For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic rulers of this darkness…(NRSV [modified]): ὅτι οὐκ ἐστιν ἡμῖν ἡ πάλη πρὸς αἷμα καὶ σάρκα ἀλλὰ πρὸς τὰς ἀρχὰς, πρὸς τὰς ἐξουσίας, πρὸς τοὺς κοσμοκράτορας τοῦ σκότους τοῦτού...” The text of the amulet and that of the biblical text slightly differ: for instance, the practitioner has changed the case of the preternatural “powers” from nominative to accusative; the practitioner has removed the preposition πρὸς before each of the “powers”; and the practitioner has removed the genitive demonstrative pronoun τοῦτος from the final clause. Nevertheless, Ágnes Mihálykó’s claim – that this reference to Eph. 6:12 “remains intact except for the changes necessary to fit it into the [amulet’s] grammatical structure” – is basically correct. IBC 3 thus falls within this broader Mediterranean magical tradition, in which elements derived from – or corresponding to – the “armor of God” passage from Eph. 6:10-17 were deemed relevant for achieving ritual efficacy. Nevertheless, by including “helmets,” “the preparation of the Gospel which is of peace,” and “darts,” the practitioner has directly engaged with more elements from the “armor of God” passage than any other practitioner from the late antique Mediterranean more generally – at least according to the extant record of magical objects.

Moreover, that the Syriac practitioner has engaged with a New Testament text is important since the presumed absence of New Testament texts on the incantation bowls has

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played a considerable role in the scholarly debate on the socio-religious context of the Syriac incantation bowls. While identifying the religious self-identification of a practitioner behind a specific ritual artifact is a difficult task, the fact that the ritual expert behind IBC 3 does not merely reference “Christian” characters en passant, but engages directly with a single biblical passage, makes it likely the practitioner or his or her client – or both – self-identified as “Christian” in one way or another. Thus, at the very least, IBC 3 complicates arguments against the circulation of Syriac incantation bowls within “Christian” communities.

To be sure, IBC 3 is an outlier among the published Syriac incantation bowls. Nonetheless, James Nathan Ford is currently working on a series of previously unpublished Syriac incantation bowls that utilize various “Christian” elements, including perhaps New Testament references. When published, therefore, these new witnesses will demonstrate that the approach to the Bible in IBC 3 was not completely anomalous within the Syriac tradition. What is more, many of its others features (e.g., the double alphabet and the drawing of the face in the center) help place IBC 3 firmly in the magical milieu of other Syriac incantation bowls.

At the same time, when we place IBC 3 alongside the other extant Syriac incantation bowls, we ought to be reminded that our facile categories of ancient religious affiliation (e.g., “Christian,” “Jewish,” and “Pagan”) simply do not do justice to the complex ways ancients constructed their religious identities and negotiated those identities in dialogue with religious,

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60 On the problems with the label “Christian” as it relates to ancient magic, see e.g., Sanzo, *Scriptural Incipits*, 10-14.
61 James Nathan Ford presented editions of many of these bowls at the European Association for Jewish Studies in Paris, France in 2014. We are most grateful to him for sharing the handout from his presentation. One of the artifacts he lists on his handout (T 027989: 5-6) seems to be referencing Matt. 4:23 (as Ford suggests). For the edition of this particular bowl, see J.N. Ford and O. Abudraham, “Syriac and Mandaeic Incantation Bowls,” in *Finds Gone Astray: ADCA Confiscated Items*, ed. D. Regev (Jerusalem forthcoming). Matt. 4:23 is well known among the extant Greek amulets from late antiquity. For a survey of the use of this passage on such amulets, see T. de Bruyn, “Appeals to Jesus and the One ‘Who Heals Every Illness and Every Infirmity’ (Matt 4:23, 9:35) in Amulets in Late Antiquity,” in *Reception and Interpretation of the Bible in Late Antiquity*, ed. L. DiTommaso and L. Turcescu, vol. 6 in *The Bible in Ancient Christianity* (Leiden 2008) 65-81.
ethnic, and cultural “others.” From this perspective, our analysis of the use of Eph. 6:10-17 on IBC 3 does not necessarily lend itself to simple conclusions concerning the religious environment behind the Syriac incantation bowls. Instead, we hope that this study opens up further avenues of research within the ongoing exploration of the traditional, social, and religious contexts of apotropaic practices in late antiquity.