4.3. Biblical Quotations

The corpus of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic incantation bowl texts displays both a widespread use of biblical quotations and allusions to biblical themes.[[1]](#footnote-1) These quotations are interesting not only for their magical use within the incantation bowl texts. They also represent a valuable source for the study of the formation of the Biblical canon, because “these quotations constitute the earliest versions of many verses in the Hebrew Bible after the Dead Sea Scrolls, although there is a gap of half a millennium or more between the Dead Sea Scrolls and the magic bowls” (Shaked et al. 2013, p. 18). From a linguistic point of view as well, the biblical quotations within the magic bowl texts are an enriching resource due to the fact that the spelling of the words in these verses does often display smaller divergences and should mainly be considered phonetic. Strikingly, most verses are written in *plene*. These minor variations underline the assumption that the scribes, involved in the composition of magic bowl texts, often had memorized the Biblical text and did not quote the verses from a scroll or manuscripts and that the Biblical corpus circulated, outside synagogues and academies, mainly orally. Interestingly, the Hebrew verses quoted within the incantation bowls are rather close to the Masoretic variat, although there might be some minor variants and some non-standard orthography regarding the *plene* writing conventions.

Direct quotations from the Tanakh appear either in the original Hebrew or in the Aramaic version of the Targum (Shaked et al. 2013, pp. 18–20).[[2]](#footnote-2) Given Alexander’s assumption that the Bible was mostly circulating in its Aramaic Targumic version in Late Antique Babylonia, namely in the versions of Targum Onqelos and Jonathan (Alexander 2019, p. 39), it is notable that the incantation bowls which were selected for this study only display Biblical verses in Hebrew.

Besides the direct quotations, the magic bowl texts also feature allusions and references to Biblical texts, as well as the use of biblical phraseology . By doing so, intertextuality is created by pointing to biblical pre-texts rather than by quoting them directly. According to Alexander 2019, 46f., allusions to Biblical themes normally refer to the Targumic texts.

The following table illustrates the use of biblical quotations within the selected corpus of this dissertation:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Bowl  | Quotation |
| BM 91763 | Ps. 46:8 Ps. 86:5Ps. 116:6  |
| BM 91767 | Dt. 29:22 |
| VA 2416 | II Kings 19:15 orIsa. 37:16 |
| VA 2423 | Ps. 91:1 |
| VA 2484  | Dt. 6:19 |
| VA 2509 | Ps. 46:8 Ps. 86:5 |

Of the twelve incantation bowl texts that form the corpus of the present study, six bowls display biblical quotations. One bowl features three quotations, one bowl two, and the other four bowls one quotation each.

4.3.1 Biblical Quotations from a Linguistic Perpective

Biblical quotations within the corpus of Jewish Babylonian incantation texts are an important source for the study of Biblical Hebrew orthography before the final formation of the Masoretic text and must be considered the earliest attestation of biblical verses after the Dead Sea Scrolls. Parallel to the scrolls from Qumran, which display a great number of small writing variations, both among themselves and vis-à-vis the Masoretic text, the orthography of biblical verses within the corpus of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic incantation bowls too is variable and seems to a greater extent to be based on phonetic concerns. Nevertheless, the concordance with the Masoretic text is surprisingly high, and orthographic variations primarily concern *plene*-writing conventions and the spelling of the divine name. Having in mind that the Masoretic writing traditions were only invented between the seventh and eleventh century in Palestine, the predominance of *plene* *scriptum* in texts originating from Babylonia is not very remarkable. What is remarkable is the generally high conformity regarding the use of consonants. This might be further strong evidence to suggest that the incantation bowl scribes were highly trained professionals who were familiar with both Biblical Hebrew and Jewish Babylonian Aramaic text traditions. The Hebrew language attested in the incantation bowl texts was analyzed by Mishor 2007, who also pointed out that incantation bowl texts are the only written source that survived directly from Jewish Babylonia, because, on the one hand, papyrus and parchment were not preserved due to climactic conditions and, on the other hand, no Jewish inscriptions have been found in public buildings or on gravestones (Mishor 2007, p. 205).

In the following chapter, each occurrence of a biblical verse within the present corpus will be discussed individually regarding its orthography.

**Dt. 6:19** is quoted in VA 2484,19:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Dt. 6:19 (Masoretic text) | לַהֲדֹ֥ף אֶת־כָּל־אֹיְבֶ֖יךָ מִפָּנֶ֑יךָ כַּאֲשֶׁ֖ר דִּבֶּ֥ר יְהוָֽה |
| VA 2484,19 | להדוף א)ית( כל איביך מיפנך כאשר דבר יהוה |

There are some minor spelling divergences between the Masoretic text and the verse as cited in VA 2484, 19 that could be explained by different preferences regarding the *plene* writing.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Masoretic text | VA 2484,19 |
| לַהֲדֹף | להדוף |
| אֶת־כָּל־אֹיְבֶיךָ | א)ית( כל איביך |
| מִפָּנֶיךָ | מיפנך |

Dt. 6:19 is quoted not only in VA 2438, but also in the hitherto unpublished bowl VA 3088 that is also housed in the Vorderasiatisches Museum in Berlin (Bhayro et al. 2018, p. 29).

**Dt. 29:22** is quoted twice at the end of BM 91767. After the actual quotation of the verse in line 15, it is repeated in reverse order:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Dt. 29:22 (Masoretic text) | גָּפְרִ֣ית וָמֶלַח֮ שְׂרֵפָ֣ה כָל־אַרְצָהּ֒ לֹ֤א תִזָּרַע֙ וְלֹ֣א תַצְמִ֔חַ וְלֹֽא־יַעֲלֶ֥ה בָ֖הּ כָּל־עֵ֑שֶׂב כְּֽמַהְפֵּכַ֞ת סְדֹ֤ם וַעֲמֹרָה֙ אַדְמָ֣ה וצביים [וּצְבוֹיִ֔ם] אֲשֶׁר֙ הָפַ֣ךְ יְהוָ֔ה בְּאַפּ֖וֹ וּבַחֲמָתֽוֹ׃ |
| BM 91767,15 | גופרית ומלח סריפה כל ארצכם לא תיזרע ולא תצמיח ולה יעלהבה כל עשב כמהפכת סדום ועמורה אדמה וצבואם אשרהפך יהוה באפו ובחמתו  |
| BM 91767,16 (reverse order)  | ובחמתו ויבפו יהוה הפך אשר וצבואים אדמא ועמורא סדום כמהפכת עשבכל בה יעלה ולתצמיה ולתזרע ארצכם כל שריפה ומלח גופרית |

There are some minor spelling divergences between the Masoretic text and the verse as cited in BM 91767, which are displayed in the following table:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Masoretic text | BM 91767 | BM 91767 (reverse order) |
| גָּפְרִית | גופרית | גופרית |
| שְׂרֵפָה | סריפה | שריפה |
| כָל־אַרְצָהּ֒ | כל ארצכם | כל ארצכם |
| לֹא תִזָּרַע | לא תיזרע | ולתזרע |
| וְלֹא תַצְמִחַ | ולא תצמיח | ולתצמיה |
| ְלֹא־יַעֲלֶה | ולה יעלה | יעלה |
| סְדֹם | סדום | סדום |
| וַעֲמֹרָה | ועמורה | ועמורא |
| וצביים [וּצְבוֹיִם] | וצבואם | וצבואים |
| בְּאַפּוֹ | באפו | ויבפו |

The majority of those spelling divergences could be explained by *plene* writing. Nevertheless, there are some forms that deserve further explanation, especially the differences between the spellings of the same word within the incantation bowl text itself. The quotation given in reverse order displays significantly more phonetic spellings than the standard quotation of the verse. This observation can be easily explained by the fact that the concentration of a scribe, who is writing a verse in reverse order, is taken by the effort to write every single word. However, the present scribe did forget to write the word ולה in the reverse order repetition of the verse.

Whereas the spelling of שרפה in the first quotation is, despite the *plene* writing, in accordance with the Masoretic text, the second spelling employs a ס instead of the ש, with both apparently representing the same phonetic value. Especially interesting in the reverse order quotation is the omission of א in the negation particle לא that seems to be assimilated to the proceeding word.

The divine epithet אלהי ישראל ישב הכרבי, which is also used in **2 Kings 19:15** and **Isa. 37:16**, is quoted in VA 2416,14.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 2 Kings 19:15 (Masoretic text) | וַיִּתְפַּלֵּ֨ל חִזְקִיָּ֜הוּ לִפְנֵ֣י יְהוָה֮ וַיֹּאמַר֒ יְהוָ֞ה אֱלֹהֵ֤י יִשְׂרָאֵל֙ יֹשֵׁ֣ב הַכְּרֻבִ֔ים אַתָּה־ה֤וּא הָֽאֱלֹהִים֙ לְבַדְּךָ֔ לְכֹ֖ל מַמְלְכ֣וֹת הָאָ֑רֶץ אַתָּ֣ה עָשִׂ֔יתָ אֶת־הַשָּׁמַ֖יִם וְאֶת־הָאָֽרֶץ׃ |
| Isa. 37:16 | יְהוָ֨ה צְבָא֜וֹת אֱלֹהֵ֤י יִשְׂרָאֵל֙ יֹשֵׁ֣ב הַכְּרֻבִ֔ים אַתָּה־ה֤וּא הָֽאֱלֹהִים֙ לְבַדְּךָ֔ לְכֹ֖ל מַמְלְכ֣וֹת הָאָ֑רֶץ אַתָּ֣ה עָשִׂ֔יתָ אֶת־הַשָּׁמַ֖יִם וְאֶת־הָאָֽרֶץ׃ |
| VA 2416,14 | יהוי אלהי ישראל ישב הכרבים |

Within the present corpus, Ps. 46:8[=12], Ps. 86,5, Ps. 91:1, and Ps. 116:6 are quoted. **Ps. 46:8**, identical to Ps. 46:12, is quoted in BM 91763 and VA 2509[[3]](#footnote-3).

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Ps. 46:8 (Masoretic text) | יְהוָ֣ה צְבָא֣וֹת עִמָּ֑נוּ מִשְׂגָּֽב־לָ֝נוּ אֱלֹהֵ֖י יַעֲקֹ֣ב סֶֽלָה |
| BM 91763, 20-21 | הוה צבאות עימנו [משגב לנו אל]הי יעקוב |
| VA 2509, 21 | ... יעקוב סלה |

There are two minor spelling divergences between the Masoretic text and the verse given in BM 91763 that could be easily explained by *plene* writing conventions and the use of the divine name:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Masoretic text | BM 91763 | VA 2509 |
| יהוה | הוה |  |
| עִמָּנוּ | עימנו |  |
| יַעֲקֹ֣ב | יעקוב | יעקוב |

Within the present corpus, **Ps. 86:5** is quoted in BM 91763 and apparently in VA 2509.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Ps. 86:5 (Masoretic text) | כִּֽי־אַתָּ֣ה יהוה ט֣וֹב וְסַלָּ֑ח וְרַב־חֶ֝֗סֶד לְכָל־קֹרְאֶֽיךָ׃ |
| BM 91763, 21 | כי אתה יהוה טוב לסלח ורוב חסד לכל קוראיך |
| VA 2509, 21 | כי אתה הי חנון וט… |

There are two minor spelling divergences between the Masoretic text and the verse given in BM 91763 and VA 2509, namely:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Masoretic text | BM 91763 | VA 2509  |
| יהוה | יהוה | הי |
| ט֣וֹב | טוב | חנון וט… |
| וְסַלָּ֑ח | לסלח |  |
| וְרַב־חֶ֝֗סֶד | ורוב חסד |  |
| ְכָל־קֹרְאֶֽיךָ | לכל קוראיך |  |

Whereas the last two spelling divergences could be easily explained by the preference for *plene* writing in the incantation bowl texts, the three other examples do need further explanation. The first one perfectly illustrates different writing options for the divine name. Whereas BM 91763 uses the tetragrammaton, VA 2509 employs the abbreviated form הי. Regarding the use of the adjective טוב, the Masoretic text and BM 91763 do not vary. Strikingly, VA 2509 seems to employ two adjectives, namely חנון and טוב. Although only the first two letters וט can be read in VA 2509, there is no doubt that the second adjective must have been טוב. The expression וטוב חנון כי אתה הי is also based on Ps. 86:5, but also shows the influence of a passage from Jewish liturgy, more precisely from the weekday[[4]](#footnote-4) and Yom Kippur *‘Amida* prayer, where the two adjectives are used next to each other:

|  |
| --- |
| **סְלַח** לָֽנוּ אָבִֽינוּ כִּי חָטָֽאנוּ, מְחוֹל לָֽנוּ מַלְכֵּֽנוּ כִּי פָשָֽׁעְנוּ, כִּי אֵל טוֹב וְסַלָּח אָֽתָּה: בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יֶהֶוֶהֶ, חַנּוּן הַמַּרְבֶּה לִסְלֹחַ: |

Whereas BM 91763,21 displays the entire verse (Ps. 86:5), it is, due to the state of text preservation, not entirely certain whether VA 2509,11 displayed the entire verse or only the divine epithet. Due to the other formulaic parallels between BM 91763 and VA 2509, it is relatively likely that the entire verse was represented in VA 2509. It should be mentioned that the divine epithet חנון ורחום is widely used within biblical literature, e. g. in Jon. 4:2, Joel 2:13, Ps. 145:8, Ps. 111:4, Neh. 9:17, Neh. 9:31, Ps. 112:4, and 2 Chron. 30:9. Salzer 2010, p. 294 identifies the epithet as a “geprägte Wendung” (coined term) that was so widely used that it was no longer associated with a specific biblical context.

The use of the entire Psalm verse instead of a coined term illustrates that incantation bowl scribes must have been very familiar with biblical and liturgical literature. The expression כי אתה יהוה is also found in an incantation bowl from the Moriah Collection (Moriah Collection 2,3).

Within the corpus on which this thesis is based, **Ps. 91:1** is quoted in VA 2423:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Ps. 91:1 (Masoretic text) | יֹ֭שֵׁב בְּסֵ֣תֶר עֶלְי֑וֹן בְּצֵ֥ל שַׁ֝דַּ֗י יִתְלוֹנָֽן׃ |
| VA 2423,23 | יושב בסתר עליון בצל שדי יתלנין |

Apart from two minor spelling variants that concern the *plene* writing, there are no differences between the Masoretic version of the verse and that given in the bowl text. Within the whole corpus of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic incantation bowl texts, Ps. 91:1 is also quoted in the hitherto unpublished bowls VA 2436 and VA 2515. According to Bhayro et al. 2018, p. 122, VA 2515 seems to be written by the same hand as VA 2423. Further, JNF 124 displays the verse as a palindrome.

In BM 91763 **Ps. 116:6** is quoted:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Ps. 116:6 (Masoretic text) | שֹׁמֵ֣ר פְּתָאיִ֣ם יְהֹוָ֑ה דַּ֝לּוֹתִ֗י וְלִ֣י יְהוֹשִֽׁיעַ׃ |
| BM 91763,21 | שומיר פתאים יהוה דלותי ולי הושיע |

Although only partial and complete quotations of biblical verses within the present corpus have been considered in this chapter, it is important to point to the fact that not only Hebrew biblical verses are used within the corpus of incantation bowl written in Jewish Babylonian Aramaic, but also single Hebrew words within sentences written in Aramaic (Mishor 2007, p. 208). However, it is important to note that the language of the bowls presented within this study is clearly Jewish Babylonian Aramaic and that it should not be compared with the mixed language of some magical fragments from the Cairo Genizah.

4.3.2 Magical Use of Biblical Verses

Biblical verses were widely used for magical purposes, as noted by Trachtenberg 2013, p. 110, who differentiates between verses that were used because “they contained the name of God or spoke of His power and His mighty deeds, [and] had come to be regarded as themselves possessed of power; and those which seemed to have a more or less direct bearing […] upon the immediate situation.” Within the present corpus of קיבלא bowls containing biblical quotations, the majority (*circa* 2/3) employ verses from Psalms. This number seems relatively consistent with the predominant use for magical purposes of Psalm verses, which “were very highly regarded for their potency, as well as for their beauty and religious fervor” (Trachtenberg 2013, p. 110). In this context, *Sefer Shimmush Tehillim*, a handbook for the magical use of Psalms verses, edited with a critical commentary and translation by Rebiger 2012 , should be mentioned. Although Rebiger’s edition is based on early modern manuscripts, it is undoubtable that the tradition of *Sefer Shimmush Tehillim* can be traced back to Late Antiquity. The compendium lists for each psalm its magical use. In a preface added at a late stage, attested only in the *textus receptus* and probably added by the printer of the *edition princeps* in the 16th century (Rebiger 2012, p. 206), the apotropaic purpose of the book is explained: “The entire Torah is composed of the names of God, and in consequence it has the property of saving and protecting man.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Due to the fact that the Psalms have been used liturgically, they have been commonly known not only to well-educated scribes and sages, but also to other population classes. Although the liturgical use of some psalms, e. g. the Hallel, composed of Ps. 113-118, started early, the majority of the book of Psalms was mainly read individually and only relatively lately included in the liturgy (Rebiger 2012, p. 3). Rebiger 2012, following Stemberger 1998, p. 221, assumes that the initial refusal to incorporate the Psalms into liturgy and individual prayer was mainly founded on their prominent use for magical purposes.

Interestingly, some incantation bowl texts do directly point to the use of Psalms as individual prayer, e. g. Moussaieff 145,13:

 בההיא שעתא בההוא יומא בההוא עידנא אזיל כרעית וזגדית קדם ב)י(ת אילהי שבחית וזמרת) ב(מזמוריה דדויד

As we have seen, within the corpus of Jewish Babylonian incantation texts, Dt. 6:19 (לַהֲדֹ֥ף אֶת־כָּל־אֹיְבֶ֖יךָ מִפָּנֶ֑יךָ כַּאֲשֶׁ֖ר דִּבֶּ֥ר יְהוָֽה) is quoted in VA 2484 and in the unpublished bowl VA 3088. The magical use of the verse seems to be based on the its literary meaning, the chasing away of enemies.

Dt. 29:22 is quoted twice at the end of BM 91767, in proper sequence (line 15) and then in reverse order. The double quotation of this verse underlines the magic power that must have been attributed to it. The use of biblical verses in reverse order is well known from several magical handbooks, e. g. from *Sefer Shimmush Tehillim*, where the reverse use of Ps 91:1 is recommended as a countercharm (Rebiger 2012). The practice of inverted writing was believed to be a useful device to counteract evil charms and to change their direction (Trachtenberg 2013, p. 116; Blau 2011, p. 85).

From today’s point of view and based on the available corpus of Jewish Aramaic magic bowl texts, Dt. 29:22 is neither used in any other קיבלא bowl text nor in any other incantation bowl text. This could be considered rather astonishing not only due to the fact that the topic of the verse, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, is quite frequently alluded to, e. g. in VA 2509, but also because, within the biblical narrative, Dt. 29:22 is in local proximity of the curses uttered in Dt. 28.

Dt. 29:22 was also used magically on a oil lamp found in the area of Beth Shean. In the oil lamp’s inscription the verse was combined with Dt 7:26. The biblical curse was “aimed at the person who might steal the lamp, reminiscent of the warnings and curses written on books or tombs” (Naveh 1988, p. 37).

The divine epithet אלהי ישראל ישב הכרבי, which is also used in 2 Kings 19:15 and Isa. 37:16, is quoted in VA 2416,14. Additionally, the expression ישב הכרבים can be also found in 1 Sam. 4:4, 2 Sam 62 and 1 Chr. 13:6. This epithet is also attested in several magical texts from the Cairo Genizah, e. g. in T.-S. 1.127, fol. 1a/1 (Salzer 2010, p. 295), but, from today’s point of view, not in any other incantation bowl text.

As already mentioned above, Psalms are quite frequently quoted within Jewish Babylonian Aramaic bowl texts – a fact that is not very remarkable due to the widespread use of Psalms verses within magical texts.

Besides the quotations in the present corpus, Ps. 46:8 is also quoted, in phonetic spelling, in the hitherto unpublished incantation bowl text CBS 8823,4. It was further used within the magic texts found in the Cairo Genizah, e. g. in T.-S. AS 143.106, fol. 1b/3-4, and in several amulets, e. g. in a silver amulet for healing from Tiberias and in a bronze amulet from Irbid, and even in modern times, e. g. in a nineteenth century birth amulet from Germany (Salzer 2010, p. 114). Thus, it should be emphasized that the magical use of Ps. 46:8 was widespread not only geographically, from Palestine to Babylonia, but also chronologically, and seems to be one of the most prominent verses used magically in the Cairo Genizah, as was demonstrated by Salzer 2010, p. 166, who identified three quotations.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Ps. 86:5, quoted in BM 91763 and apparently in VA 2509, speaks of the divine charity and is therefore used within the incantation context.

The magical use of Ps. 91, to which Rebiger 2012, p. 268 refers as the “klassische Psalm der jüdischen Magie,” is widely attested from antiquity until the modern era. According *to Sefer Shimmush Tehillim* §100, Ps. 91 was used not only against demons and other evil supernatural powers, but also against magic, when it is employed in reversed word order. Salzer 2010, p. 118, following Rebiger 2012, 23f., states that Ps. 91 was magically used even before its incorporation into the biblical canon.

Ps. 91 was already used magically in the Second Temple period as can be seen from 11Q11, although the version of Ps. 91 presented in the leather roll from Qumran differs to some extent from the Masoretic text of Ps. 91 (Bohak 2008, p. 108). 11Q11 contains four incantations that might “be identified with the four Davidic songs that are mentioned at the end of the Great Psalms Scroll (11QPsa = 11Q5) as being […] ‘for the stricken’” (Bhayro and Rider 2017, p. 90). These four compositions aim to exorcise a demon (van der Ploeg 1965; Fröhlich 2012). The fourth incantation is not only a slightly modified version of Ps. 91 listing three sequences of plagues threatening the righteous, but also displays an addition, namely the attribution of the incantation to King David. Due to fact that “the structure of Songs 1–3 is very different from that of Psalm 91 [and that] the three songs contain typical exorcistic formulae and show general characteristics of incantations” (Bhayro and Rider 2017, p. 90), it might be possible to conclude that Ps. 91 was also understood as an exorcistic composition by the writers of 11Q11. According to Fröhlich 2012, p. 44, it is obvious that the composition was “recited antiphonically in a liturgical context.”

Ps. 91 was also used within the *Havdala de-Rabbi ‘Akiva* and from today’s point of view, four allusions to it are attested in the fragments from the Cairo Genizah.[[7]](#footnote-7) According to Salzer 2010, p. 119, the first verse was often used as a *pars pro toto* for the entire psalm. This explanation also fits the use of the verse within VA 2423.

In bShevu 15b[[8]](#footnote-8) the anti-demonic power of Ps. 91, which is called שיר של פגעים “song of the evil spirits” or שיר של נגעים “song of the plagues,” is discussed:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| … and the song of the evil spirits and there are some who call it the song of the plagues. (The reason) of the one who calls it (the song) of the plagues is that it is written: “Nor shall any plague come near your dwelling” (Ps. 91:10). The reason) of the one who calls it (the song) of the evil spirits is that it is written: A thousands shall fall at your side…” (Ps. 91:7). And they recited (the Psalm from): “He that dwells in the secret place of the Most High shall abide in the shadow of the Almighty” (Ps. 91:1) till (they reached the verse): “Because You, O Lord, are my refuge; you have made most High Your habitation” (Ps. 91:9). […] Rabbi Yehoshua‘ ben Levi recited theses (verses) (to protect him from evil spirits during the night) and falls asleep. (The Gemara asks:) How could he do that? Did Rabbi Yehoshua‘ ben Levi not say (himself): One is prohibited from healing himself with Torah words. (The Gemara answers:) To protect is different.(The Gemara adds:) But rather, when (Yehoshua ben Levi) said that it is prohibited, (he was referring to) an already existing wound. If there is a wound, it is prohibited.  | …ושיר של פגעים ויש אומרין שיר של נגעים מאן דאמר דנגעים דכתיב) תהלים צא, י (ונגע לא יקרב באהלך ומאן דאמר פגעים דכתיב) תהלים צא, ז (יפול מצדך אלף ואומר) תהלים צא, א (יושב בסתר עליון בצל שדי יתלונן עד) תהלים צא, ט (כי אתה ה' מחסי עליון שמת מעונך וחוזר  […]רבי יהושע בן לוי אמר להו להני קראי וגאני היכי עביד הכי והאמר ר' יהושע בן לוי אסור להתרפאות בדברי תורה להגן שאני .ואלא כי אמר אסור דאיכא מכה אי דאיכא מכה אסור. |

Interestingly, bShevu 15b seems to attribute the antidemonic power of Ps. 91 only to its first nine verses, but does not explain this restriction. The custom of reciting special verses for apotropaic purposes before going to bed was widespread, and antidemonic power was also attributed to the Shema‘ in bBer 5a. The night was considered to be the time of the impurifying demons.[[9]](#footnote-9) It is very likely that Ps. 91 was recited before going to bed because of verse 5:לֹא־תִ֭ירָא מִפַּ֣חַד לָ֑יְלָה מֵ֝חֵ֗ץ יָע֥וּף יוֹמָֽם . Although the antidemonic power of Ps. 91 is not explicitly stated in bShevu 15b, it is undoubtable that its apotropaic power was meant due to both the context and to the parallel tradition in bBer 5a, where it is explicitly stated that the Shema‘ should be recited in order to keep the evil spirits (מזיקין) away. Further, the Midrash BamR 12,3 points to the apotropaic function of Ps. 91 and explicitly states that Moses recited it against the מזיקין:

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| Moses said (this verse) during the ascent of the mountain (Sinai) because he was afraid of the evil spirits.  | אָמַר משֶׁה בְּשָׁעָה שֶׁהָיָה עוֹלֶה לָהָר, שֶׁהָיָה מִתְיָרֵא מִן הַמַּזִּיקִין |

Interestingly, two incantation bowl texts combine Dt 6:4, the beginning of the Shema‘ , with Ps 91:1: In MFA 1983.590[[10]](#footnote-10), formerly known as Zion Research Library 48, and H-2544[[11]](#footnote-11), formerly known as Aaron Bowl B, and Belgrade 242/1[[12]](#footnote-12), parts of Ps. 91:1 are used in combination with Dt. 6:4, the beginning of the Shema‘. A magic formula is created by intertwining the two verses: “The two verses […] are joined together into a single text by taking one word from one verse followed by one word from the other text” (Naveh and Shaked 1985, p. 187). The same principle is also used in a fragment from the Cairo Genizah, T.-S. K 1.95.

Ps. 116:6, which underlines the divine graciousness and compassionateness, was used not only usd at the end of BM 91763 but in several other magical texts as well, e. g. in two amulets against premature delivery from the Cairo Genizah (T.-S. K 1.143, fol. 17a/18 and T.-S. K 1.143, fol. 19a/2-3).[[13]](#footnote-13) It is also used in a bronze amulet from Irbid[[14]](#footnote-14) that was created for the same purpose.[[15]](#footnote-15) The prominence of Ps. 116 in magical texts might be based on the fact that Ps. 116 is part of the Hallel and was therefore included in the liturgy relatively early.

According to *Sefer Shimmush Tehillim* §125, Ps. 116 was recited against premature death.

Although the corpus on which the present study is based is quite limited, the overview of the biblical verses used within it perfectly illustrates the use and the magical function of the biblical material. As already pointed out by Polzer 1986, p. 87, incantation bowl text tend to display biblical quotations either at the beginning or at the end of an incantation. Within the present corpus, all six bowls displaying biblical quotations do so at the end of an incantation. Whereas BM 91763, BM 91767, VA 2423 and apparently VA 2509 do so at the end of the whole text, VA 2416 and VA 2484 do so at the end of the first incantation which is followed by a second incantation.

For the biblical quotations present in the incantation bowl texts of this corpus, three main functions can be identified: First, divine epithets based on biblical phraseology are used. These epithets might be used in order to gain divine support by reminding God of his own power and grace that has been shown to human beings before. Second, biblical verses such as Dt. 6:19 are used to underline the purpose of the incantation bowl text by using it as a typological precedent: just as God acted in the biblical verse, so should he now act. Third, quotations—e.g. Dt. 29:22, recalling the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah— are used to underline God’s power in the past. The fact that most biblical verses are quoted in Hebrew underlines the status of Hebrew as לשון הקדש, as pointed out by Mishor 2007, p. 207, who also underlines the importance of the Tanakh as a source for complete and partial quotations of verses, divine names and other expressions.

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1. For an extended analysis of the use of biblical verses within selected Jewish Babylonian Aramaic bowl texts cf. Polzer 1986. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The use of biblical verses for magical purposes is a common phenomenon and by no means limited to the incantation bowls. According to the regional linguistic situation, biblical verses are quoted either in Hebrew or in the vernacular language, i.e. Aramaic in Mesopotamia and Greek in Palestine. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Although VA 2509 is not well preserved and only two words of Ps. 46:8 could be read, it is beyond doubt that Ps. 46:8 was quoted here due to the use of the form in the parallel text BM 91763. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For the weekday *‘Amida* prayer cf. Ehrlich 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The Kabbalistic claim that “the entire Torah is composed of the names of God” goes back to Nahmanides’ introduction to his commentary on the Torah (cf. Idel 1988). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. According to Salzer 2010 there are only 15 other biblical verses attested three times in the Cairo Genizah. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. T.-S. NS 153.162, fol. 1b/17; T.-S. AS 143.106, fol. 1b/11; T.-S. K 1.18, fol. 1a/21-25; T.-S. K. 1.26 fol. 1a/11-12. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. yShab 6:2 also discusses this aspect. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In Tosefta Yadayim 4:8 it is stated:
אומרים טובלי שחרין קובלני עליכם פרושים שאתם מזכירים את השם מן הנוף שיש בו טומאה [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. This incantation bowl text was published by Gordon 1978. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This incantation bowl text was published by Geller 1986. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. This incantation bowl text was published as Bowl 11 by Naveh and Shaked 1985. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. T.-S. K 1.143 was published as Geniza 18 by Naveh and Shaked 1993. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. This amulet was published as amulet 30 by Naveh and Shaked 1993. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The reason why Ps. 116 was considered powerful against premature delivery is explained by Naveh and Shaked 1993, 105 f.: “The weakening of the gutturals caused פתחים (“openings, apertures”) to be pronounced פתהים, which made it identical in sound to פתאים. The identity of pronunciation made it possible to use this verse in a spell for preserving the embryo.” [↑](#footnote-ref-15)