
Joseph Sanzo’s well written and thoroughly detailed book about the usage of scriptural incipits in amulets is an important addition to an oft overlooked aspect of antique textual culture and is a worthwhile read for anyone interested in the way ancient texts could be utilized in a ritual context. Sanzo’s theories are couched in linguistic theory and are geared towards textual specialists who are familiar with text critical issues and different types of text adaptations (historiolae, inscriptions, scriptural miscellany ritual contexts, etc.).

A main issue Sanzo addresses early on is what exactly an incipit is and how scholarship has come to view them. He delineates two main camps: wherein an incipit refers to the greater corpus of scriptures in general (pars pro toto); or that an incipit invokes a particular biblical corpus (e.g. Gospels), book (e.g. Gospel of John) or unit (e.g. a psalm). Sanzo identifies two types of texts with corresponding theories used in amulets: multi-unit corpora (pars pro parte/partibus) and single-unit texts (pars pro toto). This division complicates previous classifications that viewed an incipit as deriving its power from the scriptures in general (pars pro toto). The primary difference to note is that the first theory conceives of the incipit invoking power from general power associated with holy text (the Bible as a whole) while the second, championed by Sanzo, understands the incipit only to invoke the power of the immediate text, that is a specific pericope, psalm, or contiguous text sections.

Through his analysis, Sanzo rejects the pars pro toto as an overarching approach to incipits, preferring to use this theory only for identifiable incipits representative of smaller units such as a specific psalm or apotropaic or curative Gospel pericopae. His conclusion takes into account the ritual context of these documents and does away with the tendency of modern scholarship to view text units in light of whole compositions. This type of paradigm shift opens the discussion regarding text taxonomy and usage, particularly small units, which are frequently found in Late Antique Egypt but are commonly dismissed as fragments without considering their place in the larger text culture.

Sanzo looks to the content of the incipits to see why certain passages gained popularity in ritual contexts, what he terms a hierarchical approach to scripture (Ch. 1.II, Ch.2). For instance, he cites LXX Ps 90:1 and the Lord’s Prayer as the most frequently used incipits that illustrate the purpose of these ritual objects. He notes that these passages both employ second person language, directly addressing God, and even employ imperatives in the Lord’s Prayer. This language embodies a client/suppliant-to-patron/deity relationship that was traditionally utilized in ritual settings. LXX Ps 90 also uses language that positions oneself as the divine, which has precedent in the amuletic record (PGM I, ll.247-61, Rylands 104.4 (no. 9). From this, Sanzo concludes that Christian scriptures were blended into local curative rituals to create a “coherent demonology.” (70). This standardization of spiritual ailments and their corresponding remedies also gave rise to the trade of ritual specialists, who were familiar with scripture and knew how to properly deploy them as prophylactics. Again this supports his claim that incipits were used with specific and individualized purpose; if the Bible was not hierarchically divided, any passage could be deployed by anyone with equal efficacy.

Chapters 3.1 and 4.1 offer 63 lemmata showing ritual artifacts of multi-unit corpora (incipits including the four Gospels) and single-unit texts such as Psalm 90. In both data sets Sanzo notes that there is no clear pattern regarding the number, order or length of the incipit (102). The information laid out
in this section is helpful to get a sense of the length and ordering of each incipit but it would have been beneficial to include a few plates with pictures of the actual artifacts. Since Sanzo stresses the ritual context of these texts, it would have made sense to include some visual data. The inclusion of plates, for example, would allow the reader to have a better grasp of paleographic style and text arrangement. Given that the book employs critical linguistic theory and is geared towards specialists, this would be a reasonable inclusion. Sanzo’s theory regarding the specific use of pericopae is compelling yet at times appears circumstantial. The claim that a ritual specialist is invoking specific a particular curative pericope from a Gospel incipit is difficult to substantiate without specific use of that pericope, even though it makes sense in terms of other evidence and the atmosphere of ritual prophylactics. These minor criticisms aside, Sanzo makes a compelling and meaningful contribution to an otherwise neglected area of textual study.

Patrick Stange
Department for the Study of Religion
University of Toronto


It is curious for a book about the field of religious studies, often methodologically defined in opposition to theology, to begin with a discussion of a theological text. Tyler Roberts opens his book, Encountering Religion, with a reference to Rowan Williams’ short reflective text on September 11th. Thinking critically about the movement of the field into more social-scientific and ‘secular’ methodologies, Roberts asks whether these current paradigms limit the depth of the field’s potential engagement with a reflection like Williams’. Can a text like Williams’ be engaged as anything other than simply an object of study? And does Williams’ text itself, which seeks to inhabit the impossibility of “living in the presence of the void,” (1, cf. Weil) take scholars beyond the expected terrain of what religion is? A work of quietly provocative transgression, Encountering Religion challenges the boundaries of academia and religion by beginning with its own “crossing,” (235, cf. Tweed) demonstrating one of the key tenets of his book: that religious texts and practices can and should be engaged not just as objects of study, but also as “potential methodological resources for the study of religion and for cultural criticism” (20). It is not just the book’s vast and visionary critique and proposal that makes this work stand out; it is the way that the book itself calmly embodies so many of the proposals being made. Roberts’ work here practices a kind of “pious attention” (232, cf. Santner) to the field of religious studies that allows the field to appear strange again, simultaneously revealing the inadequacies of our current maps and also the sagacity of Robert’s critically humanistic proposal.

Roberts builds his argument through three relatively discrete sections: the first describing and critiquing the current predominantly social-scientific map of the field, the second offering his own proposal for the humanistic study of religion, and the third considering the potential pathways for such a humanistic discipline through conversation with several scholars who themselves cross methodologically-assumed boundaries between religious studies and religion. In Part 1, Roberts offers a genealogical account of the field that identifies three key movements: the late 19th century’s “academically restrained version of the hermeneutics of suspicion (Marx, Nietzsche, Freud)” (13), through the counter-suspicion of the mid-20th century