

Psalm 91 and demonic evil

1. Introduction

Anyone who looks at the history of use and reception of Psalm 91 can make some interesting observations. In the first place, the fact that the psalm – or fragments of it – can be found on amulets and magical plates meant to protect people from evil spirits and demons.

It is known that in the Jewish tradition Psalm 91 is one of the most popular psalms used for magical purposes. To certain texts from the book of Psalms (and from the Torá) special power was attributed to protect people from demonic threat and evil.¹ Figure 1 shows a copy of an ancient Jewish amulet which contains several phrases of Psalm 91.² On the frontside of the amulet we can read the *Shema* (Deut. 6,4-7), intermingled with Ps. 91,1, and the last vers of the *Shema* is followed by Prov. 18,1: 'The [Lord] is a mighty tower where his people can run for safety'. The combination of these biblical texts was probably intended to protect travelers from all kind of perils.



Figure 1: Copy of Jewish silver amulet from 5-6 century AD, with Psalm 91,1 (provenance unknown).

Another example of the use of Psalm 91



Figure 2: Aramaic magic bowl of terra-cotta from the 6th century AD.

for magical purposes can we find on the so called Jewish 'magic bowls', dating from the 6th to 8th century AD.³ These magic or incantation bowls have been found on several locations in the modern-day Irak and Iran. The bowls were made to function as some kind of end known as some kind of demon trap. The bowls were usually inscribed in a spiral, beginning from the rim and moving toward the center. Most are inscribed in Aramaic languages. The bowls were buried face down and were meant to capture demons. They were commonly placed

under the threshold, courtyards, in the corner of the homes of the recently deceased and in graveyards. See figure 2 for an example of early Jewish protective magic.⁴ The bowls were used to protect the residents of a house and the possessions of the familie against demonic intruders. On one of the bowls we can read the following text: 'Incantations: suppressed are all demons, all no-good-

1 J. Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition*, Philadelphia 1961, 112.

2 See for definition of 'amulet': C. Herrmann, *Ägyptische Amulette aus Palästina / Israel* (OBO 138), Göttingen 1994, 2: 'Das Amulett ist ein kleines Objekt, das den Träger durch seine magische Kraft schützen und Böses von ihm ablenken, ihn mit Gesundheit und anderen Gütern ausstatten und ihn überdies seiner magischen Kraft teilhaftig werden lassen soll'.

3 J. Naveh, S. Shaked, *Amulets and Magic Bowls: Aramaic Incantations from Late Antiquity*, Jeruzalem/Leiden 1985, 184-187 en 237-238.

4 See <URL: <http://www.archaeological-center.com/images/auction41/41-592g.jpg>>.

ones, all pebble-spirits, and liliths, and mevakkaltas, and idols and goddesses, and barren ones, and pregnant ones. This is the suppression by which heaven and earth is suppressed. You are all suppressed by your names, whether their names are mentioned or are not mentioned. All those who dwell within his house and reside over their threshold and who kill and harm and appear in hateful shapes which are not good'.⁵

A third example of a Jewish incantation text is coming from the Geniza of Caïro. These fragments were found in the geniza or storeroom of the Ben Ezra Synagogue in Old Cairo, Egypt. The texts are written in various languages, especially Hebrew, Arabic and Aramaic. Among these texts was found an amulet in which Psalm 91 plays a very important role. Although the amulets TS K1.18 and 1.30 were written on different pieces of paper, they clearly belong together.⁶ The Jewish Childbirth-amulet was intended to protect the wearer (or user) against all ailments and complications.⁷ The amulet mentions the name of the woman: Ḥabibah bint Zurah. It is possible that amulet was worn as a kind of necklace or that the amulet was located near the place where she would give birth to her child.⁸ On the first column the purpose of the amulet is stated, namely: 'to drive away all kinds of demons and demonesses, lilis and liliths, evil diseases, harmful male spirits and harmful female spirits, and evil spirits, male and female ... so that she be healthy and protected from any harm for all time'.⁹ Between the lines of the incantation, we find on the first column a reference to Psalm 91. The psalm is cited according the principles of *notarikon*.¹⁰ On the amulet one can read the initial letters of the words of Ps. 91,1-9a.

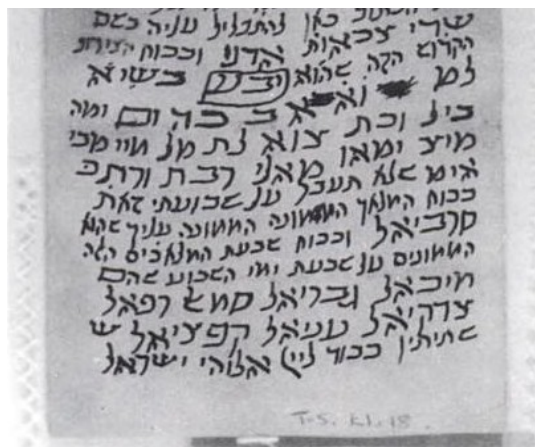


Figure 3: Fragment of Amulet TS K1.18, from: Schiffmann, Swartz, *Hebrew and Aramaic Incantation Texts from the Cairo Genizah*, blz. 70.

The beginning of the psalm-quotation is marked out by encircling the Hebrew letters יבע, which represents first colon of Ps. 91,1: *בסתר עליון: ישב yōšēb b^esēter 'elyōn* (see figure 3). The abbreviated quotation of Psalm 91 is preceded by an instruction to pray for the woman 'in the name of Šadday Še bā'ōt ^adonay and in the power of the holy combination (of the letters)', followed by the *notarikon*

5 Inscription coming from bowl MS 2053/198 out of The Schøyen Collection. See URL<<http://www.schoyencollection.com/magical2.html>>. See also J.A. Montgomery, 'Aramaic Incantation Texts from Nippur', 1913; C.D. Isbell, *Corpus of the Aramaic Incantation Bowls* (SBL diss. Series 17), Montana 1975, 118-119; D. Levene, *A Corpus of Magic Bowls. Incantation Texts in Jewish Aramaic from Late Antiquity*, London 2003.

6 See for discussion L.H. Schiffmann, M. Swartz, *Hebrew and Aramaic Incantation Texts from the Cairo Genizah: Selected Texts from Taylor-Schechter Box K1* (Semitic Texts and Studies 1), Sheffield 1992, 69-79.

7 See for some recent examples of Jewish Childbirth amulets: M. Folmer, 'A Jewish Childbirth amulet from the Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana', in: *Tradition and Innovation in Biblical Interpretation*, (FS E. Talstra), W.Th van Peursen, J.W. Dyk (eds.), Leiden 2011, 223-241.

8 Schiffmann, Swartz, *Hebrew and Aramaic Incantation Texts*, 32-40.

9 Translated by Schiffmann, Swartz, *Hebrew and Aramaic Incantation Texts*, 73.

10 The word 'notarikon' is borrowed from the Greek language (νοταρικόν), and was derived from the Latin word 'notarius', which means 'shorthand writer'. It is a method of deriving a word, by using each of its initial (or final) letters to stand for another, to form a sentence or idea out of the words.

of Ps. 91,1-9a.¹¹ The combination of the letters of Psalm 91 apparently give additional and extra power to the person who recites the psalm.

The above examples illustrate how Psalm 91 has been used in magical texts or contexts. The use of the psalm as some kind of apotrophic text has ancient roots. Very early in Jewish history, in the translation of Psalm 91 by the Septuagint, we find a reference to a demonic interpretation of the psalm. The phrase of Ps. 91,6b: **ישׁוֹר צְהַרִים מִקֶּטֶב** *miqqeṭeb yāšūd ṣohorāyīm* '(don't be afraid) for the destruction that wasteth at noonday' is translated by the Septuagint as: *ἀπὸ συμπτώματος καὶ δαιμονίου μεσημβρινοῦ* 'for calamity, and the evil spirit at noon-day'.¹²

Besides this early demonic interpretation of Psalm 91,6, the manuscripts of Qumran reveal also a practice of seeing Psalm 91 in demonic light. In the small manuscript 11QApocrPs we find a collection of extra-canonical psalms plus Psalm 91. The psalms of exorcism were completed by a special reworked version of Psalm 91. The psalms contain incantations against demons, the so called **שְׂדִים** *šēdīm*, whereby the name of God is called on directly and the demons were interrogated. A brief illustration of the manuscript will suffice:

Col. I 2. [Of David. Concerning the words of the spell] in the name of [YHWH...] 3 [...] of Solomon, and he will invoke [the name of YHWH] 4 [to set him free from every affliction of the spirits, of the devils, [Liliths,] 5 [owls and jackals.] These are the devils, and the prince of enmity 6 [is Belial,] who [rules] over the abyss [of dark]ness...

Col. IV 5...[When] Beli[al] comes upon you, [you] shall say to him: 6 Who are you, [accursed amongst] men and amongst the seed of the holy ones? Your face is a face 7 of futility, and your horns are horns of a wre[tch]. You are darkness and not light, 8 [s]in and not justice. [against you] the chief of the army. YHWH will [shut] you 9 [in the] deepest She[ol,...].¹³

The extra-canonical compositions are clearly exorcism psalms. The expressions and vocabulary of these psalms resemble later magical texts. It is not clear to what extent these texts belong to the mainstream of the thoughts and mindset of the community of Qumran. Concerning the presentation of Psalm 91, it is interesting to note that the psalm – at the beginning and the end – is enclosed by liturgical exclamations as 'Amen' and 'Sela'. The psalm is fully integrated into the composition of the exorcistic texts and linked with the protection against demons and demonic evil.¹⁴

More examples of demonic interpretation of Psalm 91 can be given. For instance, the Targum of the Psalms paraphrases Ps. 91,5-6 in the following way:

11 From: Schiffmann, Swartz, *Hebrew and Aramaic Incantation Texts*, 73.

12 It is probable that the Septuagint reads **ישׁוֹר** in stead of **ישׁוֹר צְהַרִים**. See for detailed discussion: M.E. Tate, *Psalms 51-100* (WBC 20), Texas 1990, 446-459; and G.J. Riley, 'Midday Demon', in: *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, K. van der Toorn, B. Becking en P.W. van der Horst (eds.), Leiden 1999², 572-573; H. Kaupel, 'Qui habitat in adjutorio Altissimi', *Theologie und Glaube* 16 (1924), 174-179; Th. Booij, *Psalmen, deel III* (POT), 115-116; and P. Hugger, *Jahwe meine Zuflucht: Gestalt und Theologie des 91. Psalms*, Münsterschwarzach 1970, 40.

13 Fl. García Martínez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated: The Qumran Texts in English*, Leiden 1996², 377.

14 For an attempt to reconstruct the Hebrew text see O. Eißfeldt, 'Eine Qumran-Textform des 91. Psalms', in: *Bibel und Qumran*, H. Bardtke (ed.), Berlin 1968, 82-85; and also M. Henze, 'Psalm 91 in Premodern Interpretation and at Qumran', 186-192; H. Lichtenberger, 'Demonology in the Dead Sea scrolls and the New Testament', in: *Text, Thought, and Practice in Qumran and Early Christianity*, R. Clements & D.R. Schwartz (eds.), Leiden 2009, 267-280.

לא תדחל מן הלוחא דמוזיקי דאזלין בליליא מן גיררא דמלאך מותא דשרי ביממא:
מן מותא די בקיבלא מהלך מסיעת שידין דמחבלין בטיהרא:

5. Be not afraid of the terror of demons who walk at night, of the arrow of the angel of death that he looses during the day; 6. Of the death that walks in darkness, of the band of demons that attacks at noon.¹⁵

The terms שידין and מוזיקין (and probably also מלאך מותא) seem to be familiar words for demons in the Jewish tradition.¹⁶ The threat which Psalm 91 presupposes, is explicitly linked to the reality of demons in the targumic paraphrase.

In the New Testament we find also an explicit reference to Psalm 91 in the context of the temptation of Jesus by satan (Mat. 4:1-11; Luc. 4:1-13). In Mat. 4:6 we read:

καὶ λέγει αὐτῷ· εἰ υἱὸς εἶ τοῦ θεοῦ, βάλε σεαυτὸν κάτω· γέγραπται γὰρ ὅτι τοῖς ἀγγέλοις αὐτοῦ ἐντελεῖται περὶ σοῦ καὶ ἐπὶ χειρῶν ἀροῦσίν σε, μήποτε προσκόψῃς πρὸς λίθον τὸν πόδα σου.

and said unto Him: If you are (really) God's Son, cast thyself down. For it is written: *He shall give his angels charge concerning thee: and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone.*

The same can be said for the Jewish Talmud, where Psalm 91 is called a פנעים של שיר *šir šel p^e-ga'im* 'song for the possessed'. The reciting of the psalm is intended to offer protection against demons. As a song of protection, Psalm 91 was very popular and recited just before going to sleep.¹⁷ In the tractate שבעות *Š'ebū'ot* it is said of rabbi Jozua ben Levi, that he had the custom to recite some verses of Psalm 91 before going to bed: 'A thousand may fall at your left side...You who dwell in the shelter of the Most High...for you, O Lord, are my refuge' (Ps. 91:7-8) to be safeguarded from harmful entities.¹⁸ I think Evans is right, as he observes: 'Given the Aramaic paraphrase of Psalm 91, the later rabbinic understanding of it, and its quotation in the temptation of Jesus, the appearance of Psalm 91 in 11Q11 strongly suggests that this psalm was understood as an exorcism psalm not only at Qumran but among many Jews in the time of Jesus. The targumic and rabbinic understanding of Psalm 91 as an exorcism psalm may well represent late traditions, but these traditions appear to be based on an ancient interpretation, attested in 11Q11...'¹⁹

2. Crucial questions

The examples above mentioned, ask for an explanation: why is Psalm 91 so often used in a demonic context? Why *this* psalm? Is it because of the protection that the psalm profiles? Is it because the threat the psalm presupposes is a form of demonic doom? Does it have to do with the central message of the psalm? What was the supposed original context of the psalm, the so-called *Sitz im Leben*?

15 See for the text of the Targum: *The Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon*, <URL:<http://call.cn.huc.edu/>> and for the translation: E.M. Cook, <URL: <http://targum.info/pss/ps4.htm>>.

16 See 'Demons' in: *Encyclopedia Judaica* (CD-Rom Vers. 1.0), Jerusalem 1997.

17 Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition*, 112-113.

18 Babylonian Talmud, tractate *Shavuot* 15b.

19 See Graig A. Evans, 'Jesus and Psalm 91 in Light of the Exorcism Scrolls', in: P. W. Flint, J. Duhaime, and K. S. Baek (eds.), *Celebrating the Dead Sea Scrolls: A Canadian Contribution* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011) 541-55.

Several scholars have suggested a demonic interpretation for Psalm 91. So comments Tate in his commentary on Psalm 91, 5-6 for instance:

Despite all this, the exact nature of the concepts in vv 5–6 remains elusive; probably intentionally elusive. The language is metaphorical and designed to encompass a whole range of potentially lethal happenings. Nevertheless, there is no reason to doubt that the content of the psalm reflects a thought world in which the presence of demons, demonical possession, and malignant spirits and powers was considered commonplace. The text of the psalm reflects a sense of synergistic inner connection between ordinary life and the sinister powers of the occult. The demons and powers were especially manifest during epidemics and unexpected physical attacks, along with other varied catastrophes which threaten human existence.²⁰

According to Tate, there is an inner connection from Psalm 91 to 'the sinister powers of the occult'. I agree with this suggestion, but the question is: how do you prove it? Supposing is one thing, proving quite another thing.

In my research-project of the last seven years I have been trying to prove that Psalm 91 – in his original setting – indeed has to do with the fear for and threat of evil spirits and demons. The results of my research can be found in the monograph I wrote (regrettably only available in Dutch) *Onheil dat voorbijaat: Psalm 91 and the (near-eastern) threat of demons*.²¹

3. Outline of my research project

In order to answer the questions above mentioned, it was highly important to investigate (1) the *text* as well as (2) the (original) *context* of the Psalm.

Before getting into a detailed analysis of the psalm, we dedicated two chapters to the background of the Near Eastern worldview concerning spirits and demons. In chapter 2 we looked at the (demonic part of the) worldview of Egypt, Canaan and Mesopotamia, countries that played a major part in the history of Israel. Especially we tried to respond questions as: which part was assigned to demons in these cultures? Were they the cause of diseases, accidents and catastrophes? How could one determine the presence of demons? How could one protect himself against them? It became clear that Near Eastern people do not flinch from seeing demonic activity in sickness and doom. The vulnerability and fragility of human life on the one hand, the presence of spirits and demons on the other hand, make people live in constant fear. It was therefore not surprising that they developed various means and rituals to protect themselves against the detrimental influence of demons. Prayers, incantations and magical rituals were the means that are at their disposal. Studying the Mesopotamic incantations *Utukkū Lemnūtu*, we came to the conclusion, that the Mesopotamic people mainly locate the demonic threat (1) in and around the house, (2) on the way and at lonely places, (3) in conflicts and mutual fights, and (4) in sickness and doom.

The same procedure applies for ancient Israel. In chapter 3 we asked: Which place do demons have in the world view of (the ancient) Israel? What did the Israelite men and women think of demons? Did they play a part in everyday life? On which fields of life did they experience the activities of demons? It was remarkable to see that more recent authors were very much reticent in interpreting Psalm 91 demonically. However, archaeologically, there appear to be many examples of objects

20 M.E. Tate, *Psalms 51–100* (WBC 20), Texas 1990, 455.

21 Published by Boekencentrum, in October 2013 (http://www.boekencentrum.nl/shop_details.php?productId=24549).

such as amulets, beads, pendants and images to which protective power was attributed. Although the *text* of the Old Testament is quite summary and reticent about the reality of spirits and demons, the amulets and apotropaic objects nevertheless show that people from ancient Israel also had to cope with the fear of evil and demonic doom in their everyday lives. Based on a several considerations made by Albertz, who did extensive research on the personal piety in the ancient Near East and Israel, we analyzed the category of individual lamentations, because enemies play a large part in them and this raises the question whether these enemies could be an indication of demonic threat.²² Analysis of the individual lamentations showed that the four areas we came across in the texts *Utukkū Lemnūtu* also could be found in these psalms. The areas, in Near Eastern texts, in which demons are active show large similarities to the way in which the individual lamentations talk about and refer to the enemies. More could not be said, because an explicit identification of enemies with demons is not made in the biblical lamentation Psalms.

For the study of the Hebrew *text* of Psalm 91 we used several (three) exegetical methods. First of all, in chapter 4, we analyzed Psalm 91 according to (a) Talstra's model of syntactic analysis, which integrates structure, syntax and semantics in its approach of the psalm, and (b) on the basis of the analytical method of *delimitation criticism*, which approaches the text from the text arrangement and paragraph marking of Hebrew, Greek, Syrian and Latin manuscripts. The idea behind the use of these two different methods, was their complementary character. These methods complement each other because they analyze the text on the level of the earliest phases of text transmission and also on the level of the composition of the psalm (the division of roles of actants, rhetorical structure, etc.). The results of both analysis largely correspond and show that Psalm 91 not only splits into two head parts: verses 1-8 and 9-16, but also figures out verse 9a 'Yes, You, YHWH are my refuge', which fills a central part in the whole of the psalm. It became clear that at least three and possibly four participants appear in the psalm: (a) someone looking for protection, (b) YHWH, (c) someone who represents YHWH (priest or prophet) and (d) bystanders as *implied audience*. I suppose that vers 9a is an independent colon and contains the only words spoken by the fearful man himself.

The question to which genre Psalm 91 belongs was not easy to answer. In chapter 5, various propositions with which the genre of Psalm 91 is characterized in the research of the Psalms are discussed, but soon we learned that the psalm does not fit any of the categories mentioned. Presumably, the psalm has a compound genre. Furthermore, a remarkable discovery is that there is a lack of explicit references to king, people and temple and themes concerning the traditions characteristic of the official Israelite religion (Exodus, Sinai, taking of land, kingdom, Sion, etc.) are absent in this psalm. This leads one to suspect that this psalm should be situated in the smaller circle of family religion. Research of personal names mentioned on archaeological artefacts and epigraphic texts (675 names in total) shows, according to Albertz, that protection was an important theme in the family and household religion of ancient Israel. The verbs and nouns used in the personal names show a close terminological connection to expressions in Psalm 91 on the subject of protection. All this makes situating the psalm in the context of family and household religion of ancient Israel likely.

22 See R. Albertz, *Religionsgeschichte Israel in alttestamentlicher Zeit 1: Von den Anfängen bis zum Ende der Königszeit*, Göttingen 1992; *Persönliche Frömmigkeit und offizielle Religion*, Stuttgart 1978; and more recent R. Albertz, R. Schmitt, *Family and Household Religion in Ancient Israel and the Levant*, Winona Lake 2012.

The fact that a representative of YHWH is speaking in the psalm could mean that, when situations exceed the capacity of the family and household religion, they turn to a local or regional sanctuary where this representative of YHWH can be found or works. Psalm 91 seems to be written for those situations where family domestic religion no longer suffices and a visit to a representative of YHWH is necessary or desirable. As such the psalm is an instructive text which intends to work on, enlarge or recover faith in YHWH in situations of actual distress and fear of (possibly demonic) doom.

To answer the question whether Psalm 91 talks about a demonic form of doom we used in chapter 6 methodological principles from the field of cognitive linguistics, which studies both the cultural background of words and concepts and their actual use. For the use of words and concepts comes with inherent and intrinsic background knowledge. Words are in that case ‘Tips of Encyclopedic Icebergs’. An important element of this method is that it studies and interprets words against the background of the cognitive domains they are part of. The semantic meaning of words is broader and more extensive than expressed in the actual text by a word, term or expression. When analyzing words one must take into account the base of the concept and its place in the cognitive domain. In the following chapters, the *matrix* developed and described in chapter 6 was applied to terms and expressions of Psalm 91 concerning threat (chapter 7) and protection (chapter 8). Our main focus was the semantic meaning and connotations of the concepts and the question whether and to what extent the influence of the *umwelt* could be heard.

With regard to the images of threat mentioned in chapter 7 – the ‘snare of the fowler’ and ‘perilous pestilence’ (verse 3); ‘terror by night’, ‘arrow’, ‘pestilence’ and ‘destruction’ (verse 5-6); ‘evil’ and the ‘plague’ (verse 10); and finally the ‘lion’, ‘cobra’ and ‘serpent’ (verse 13) – we established that associations from the *umwelt* from the Ancient East resound in many of these terms and found that these associations often had to do with sorcery and magic, incantations and curses, diseases and underworld, death and shades and demonic threat. The terms used in the psalm mostly have demonic connotations for the Near Eastern people. The mental image they have of these concepts is extremely negative. This conclusion points out why Psalm 91 has repeatedly been linked to the reality of demons.

In chapter 8 we analyzed those images, which profile protection: the concepts of ‘shelter’(verse 1,2,9); ‘shadow’ (verse 1); ‘wings’ (verse 4); ‘shield’ (verse 4); and the verbs ‘take refuge’ (verse 4); ‘deliver’ and ‘set on high’ (verse 14). Analysis made be clear that all these concepts imply and profile a form of protection against doom and imminent danger. The images of protection showed a certain development: (1) from a shelter inaccessible for evil, (2) through God’s protection in the form of wings as a shield around the believer, (3) to the promise of God’s interference and action on behalf of the believer. With these images of protection and the message they profile, the threatened people are offered a way out. They do not have to remain in the misery of human existence, but may trust that YHWH is near and will not forsake who comes to him in distress (Ps. 91,15). The believer may live in the certainty that YHWH will protect him and help him on his way (Ps. 91,11). Contrary to the images of threat, the images of protection do not have anything to do with demons explicitly. For these images, the authors draw from the terms and expressions that belong to the range of faith, beliefs and thoughts of Israel and which were placed in the Psalms in particular.

Finally, in chapter 9 we draw up the balance of this study. It has become clear why Psalm 91 so often has been connected with demons. The doom the psalm addresses is indeed of demonic origin. The psalm not only takes distress and threat by demons seriously, but furthermore points also to the power and faithfulness of YHWH, by whom protection can be found. The psalm calls on fearful people to trust YHWH and confess that *coram deo* and *publico*. It is an important fact that Psalm 91 marks this expression of faith. Apparently, publicly expressing faith in God exerts a liberating power in the context of spirits and demons, of demonic doom or occult infection.

In the final chapter 10, by means of current examples we offered some (theological) reflections on the question what the exegetic analysis and conclusions of our investigation mean hermeneutically for the way in which we read and interpret the psalm nowadays. We also indicated how an interpretation of Psalm 91, from the Near Eastern context of spirits and demons, can critically improve our present understanding of demons and demonic powers.

Dr. G.C. Vreugdenhil, *Onheil dat voorbijgaat: Psalm 91 en de (oudoosterse) bedreiging door demonen*, Zoetermeer 2013 ((http://www.boekencentrum.nl/shop_details.php?productId=24549)

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