

AN AMULET CONTAINING ACTS 9:1¹

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Abstract. — Edition of a previously unpublished New Testament papyrus in the J. Rendel Harris Collection at the University of Birmingham. The papyrus preserves a single verse from the book of Acts (9:1) and likely dates to the late third or fourth century. Given the physical characteristics of this papyrus it seems likely that it was manufactured as an amulet. However, the use of Acts 9:1, a verse about Saul “breathing out threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord,” is rather curious and deserves some elucidation.

Introduction

Over the past three years I have had the opportunity to work on the unpublished papyri in the J. Rendel Harris Collection at the University of Birmingham. While this collection has been thoroughly picked over,² there are still a number of interesting pieces among the unpublished fragments.³ During my work on the collection this past year, I came across a papyrus bearing the inventory number P.Harr. inv. 486 and was able to determine that it contained a single verse from the book of Acts (9:1); at present it is the only New Testament papyrus to be identified in the collection.⁴

¹ I would like to thank Susan Worrall, Director of Special Collections and University Archivist, Cadbury Research Library, University of Birmingham, for permission to edit, image, and publish this papyrus. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers of this article for their comments and suggestions that have greatly improved it.

² E.g. *P.Harr.* 1-2; see also N. Gonis, “Eight Fragmentary Harris Papyri,” *AnalPap* 10-11 (1998-1999) 65-78; N. Gonis, “A Declaration of Artificially Inundated Land,” *ZPE* 142 (2003) 171-175; L.H. Blumell, “P.Birmingham inv. 317: An Addendum to the Fourth-Century Bishops of Oxyrhynchus,” *JJP* 44 (2014) 75-83; L.H. Blumell, “Two Greek Letters from the Petrie and Harris Collections,” *AnalPap* 27 (2015) 19-27; L.H. Blumell and M.R. Trotter, “Three New Fragments from the J. Rendel Harris Collection (Birmingham),” *AnalPap* 28 (2016) 19-27. I have also been informed by Nikolaos Gonis that he is currently preparing a third volume (*P.Harr.* 3) that will contain about 70 texts and will be published as an *APF* Beiheft.

³ By my count there are about 2,750 unpublished papyri, most of which are quite fragmentary, in the collection.

⁴ Other biblical or early Christian texts published thus far include: *P.Harr.* 1.128 (Shepherd of Hermas, *Vis.* 5-7; fifth century CE); *P.Harr.* 1.161 (ecclesiastical circular;

While there is no specific catalogue record for P.Harr. inv. 486, it was almost certainly acquired at the same time as the other papyri in the collection.⁵ In 1922/1923 James Rendel Harris, then curator of manuscripts at the Rylands Library, traveled to St. Catherine's Monastery in the Sinai to study/procure some Syriac manuscripts. En route he purchased a large number of papyri that he subsequently brought back to England and presented to Woodbrooke College, Selly Oak, Birmingham, in 1925.⁶ It is recorded that texts were purchased through dealers in Cairo as well as "Behnesa" (Oxyrhynchus).⁷ On this point it is worth noting that a number of the texts in this collection for which a provenance can be established come from Oxyrhynchus or the Oxyrhynchite nome.⁸ Therefore, even though the present text is strictly speaking without provenance, it is possible that it may have originally come from Oxyrhynchus.

The papyrus contains four lines of Greek that are written against the fibers; there is no writing on the reverse side. The top, bottom, and left margins are preserved but the right margin is broken off in ll. 1-3. In l. 4 the text only occupies half of the line so it is unaffected by the break. The left margin of the text is uniform at roughly 1.5 cm from the left edge of the papyrus, the top margin is roughly 1.5 cm from the top edge and the bottom margin is roughly 1.7 cm. Average line height is about 1.0 cm and average letter width is almost 0.5 cm. Given the amount of text lost where the papyrus breaks off at the right margin and, assuming that the right margin was equal to the left margin of about 1.5 cm, it could be that roughly 4 cm are lost so that the papyrus may have originally been 12 or

sixth century CE); *P.Harr.* 2.166 (LXX Exod. 22-23; third century CE); *P.Harr.* 2.167 (unknown Christian literary text; fourth century CE).

⁵ For a cursory overview of the papyri in this collection see J.E. Powell, "I papiri greci Rendel Harris," in *Pap.Congr.* 4 (1936) 23-25; see also "Appunti e notizie," *Aegyptus* 16 (1936) 351.

⁶ A brief description of the acquisition is given in *P.Harr.* 1, pp. v-vi.

⁷ *P.Harr.* 1, p. v: "As regards provenance, no more can be said than that the papyri were acquired partly from dealers in Cairo and partly at Behnesa."

⁸ *P.Harr.* 1.64-65, 71, 74-76, 78, 80-82, 85-86, 95, 99, 103, 131, 136-138, 142, 144-145, 166; *P.Harr.* 2.191, 193-196, 198, 201, 207-208, 212-219, 224-225, 228, 230-239; Gonis (n. 2, "Eight Fragmentary Harris Papyri"), nos. 1-2, 5-6; Gonis (n. 2, "A Declaration of Artificially Inundated Land"); Blumell (n. 2, "P.Birmingham inv. 317"); Blumell and Trotter (n. 2, "Three New Fragments"), no. 3; *P.Harr.* 1, p. v: "The majority [of the papyri] are of Oxyrhynchite origin." My own work on the unpublished papyri in the collection has revealed that a number of them come from Oxyrhynchus or the Oxyrhynchite nome. As is well known, Oxyrhynchus has yielded a number of early Christian papyri. For a comprehensive treatment see L.H. Blumell and T.A. Wayment, *Christian Oxyrhynchus: Texts, Documents, and Sources* (Waco, TX 2015).

13 cm in width thus giving it a distinctly rectangular shape where it was about twice as wide as it was tall. This approximate measurement seems to confirm how it was folded. Given that there is a vertical fold at roughly 4.0 cm from the left edge it appears that it was folded into thirds; the right edge of the papyrus that is broken off is quite straight and suggests that it broke along a fold, thus the papyrus seems to have been folded in increments of about 4 cm (see Fig. 1 below).⁹ Lastly, with respect to the physical remains of the papyrus, there are a number of holes and breakages of various sizes; at the top there are a series of six small holes that could line up if the papyrus was folded over. Though it is tempting to suppose that they might have been deliberate, and so the papyrus was folded and strung, this cannot be determined.¹⁰

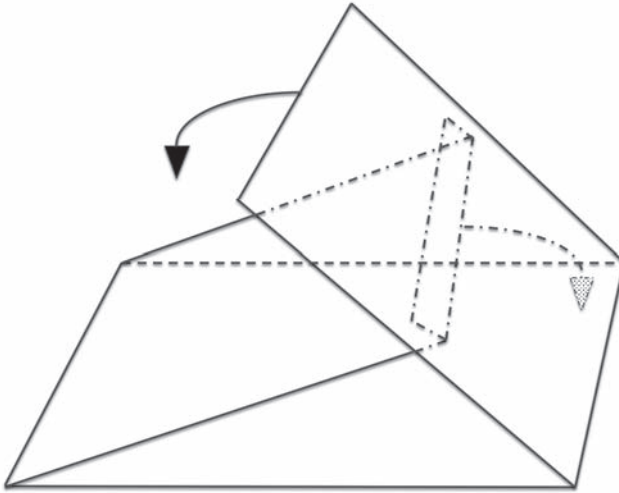


Fig. 1: How P.Harr. inv. 486 may have been folded

⁹ There is an additional fold line about 0.5 cm from the left edge of the papyrus where it seems to have been folded back when the left flap was folded over: see Fig. 1.

¹⁰ In the case of strung amulets the standard practice was to tie the folded packet itself with a string and not puncture the papyrus: e.g. *P.Oxy.* 8.1151 (= *PGM P* 5b; fifth century CE) or *BGU* 3.956 (= *PGM P* XVIIIb; fourth/fifth century CE). On the folding, tying, and wearing of amulets see J. Dieleman, "The Materiality of Textual Amulets in Ancient Egypt," in D. Boschung and J.N. Bremmer (eds.), *The Materiality of Magic* (Paderborn 2015) 23-58; see also J.G. Cook, "Ⲫ⁵⁰ (P.Yale I 3) and the Question of Its Function," in T.J. Kraus and T. Nicklas (eds.), *Early Christian Manuscripts: Examples of Applied Method and Approach* (Leiden 2010) 120.

The text is written with dark brown ink in a single hand and may be described as fluid and practiced. It has affinities with documentary hands as the writer tends to write letters with a single stroke and does not lift his hand often in the writing of individual letters. For the most part it appears that the writer strived for bilinearity, although the left leg of the λ (l. 1) and vertical descender of the τ (l. 3) dip noticeably below the line. The text is generally well spaced although some letters touch; for example, the crossbar on the ε (l. 1) and the crossbar of the θ (l. 3) are extended and touch the subsequent letter. Given the little amount of text to work with any paleographic assessment must proceed with caution. One graphic trend apparent in this papyrus is the slight rightward slant in the script. As this general trend really emerges in the third century, it offers the starting point for a *terminus post quem*.¹¹ Another trend that can be detected in the text is that certain letters have especially long legs, like the left oblique of the λ (l. 1) and perhaps the upper right hasta of the κ (l. 2, though not as elongated as the leg of the λ). This phenomenon begins to occur in texts of the middle and later part of the third century and continues into the fourth century and beyond, when it becomes even more elaborate.¹² As a result of these features, I do not think that this papyrus dates before the middle or later part of the third century. It may also be noted that because this hand does not display an overall tendency toward elaboration and decoration I would not date it to a period after the fifth century, when this trend becomes especially pronounced. The best paleographic parallels I have been able to locate are found in texts dated to the fourth century CE. For example, certain letters in *P.Abinn.* 60 (July 28, 346 CE) like the υ , the inclining σ , the single-stroke ν , the δ with an extension at the top (but without the flourish) or the ϕ with serifs provide close parallels to the letters in the present text.¹³ Of the texts regarded as amulets and bearing a New Testament passage(s) *P.Schøyen* 1.16 (fourth-fifth century CE) offers the closest parallel; the ε is at times similarly written, the crossbar of the θ extends on both sides, and the $\tau\alpha$ combination appearing in both texts is similar.¹⁴ Given these overall parallels, I would tentatively

¹¹ P.H. Comfort, *Encountering the Manuscripts: An Introduction to New Testament Paleography and Textual Criticism* (Nashville, TN 2005) 117. See also Turner, *GMAW*² 40 (no. 14) and 118 (no. 70).

¹² E.g. *P.Coll.Youtie* 2.66 (= *P.Oxy.* 47.3366; 258 CE) and *P.Oxy.* 50.3593 (238-244 CE).

¹³ An image of this text can be accessed online at <http://www.pappal.info/sample/show/6261>.

¹⁴ B.C. Jones, *New Testament Texts on Greek Amulets from Late Antiquity* (London 2016) 115 describes the hand of *P.Schøyen* 1.16 as “an early Byzantine type.” Other texts regarded as amulets and that share some paleographic features include *P.Oxy.* 34.2684

date the text to the fourth century, although I would not completely rule out a late third-century date.

The papyrus contains Acts 9:1; in the NA²⁸ this verse reads as follows:¹⁵ ὁ δὲ Σαῦλος ἔτι ἐμπνέων ἀπειλῆς καὶ φόνου εἰς τοὺς μαθητὰς τοῦ κυρίου, προσελθὼν τῷ ἀρχιερεῖ (NRSV: “Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest”). The text of the papyrus accords with the standard reading with the sole exception that it drops τῷ ἀρχιερεῖ at the end of the verse. This is a rather unusual omission since προσελθὼν (l. 3) anticipates an object. While there is no known variant of this passage that omits τῷ ἀρχιερεῖ, it may be noted that some amulets have a tendency to cut off mid sentence.¹⁶ The other minor variant in this text, which is strictly orthographical, is ἀπιλῆς (l. 2) for ἀπειλῆς.

Text and Commentary

P.Harr. inv. 486

H × W = 6.5 cm × 8.6 cm

Provenance unknown
Late third/fourth century

↓ ὁ δὲ Σαῦλος ἔτι [ἐμπνέων]
ἀπιλῆς καὶ φόγ[ου εἰς τοὺς]
μαθητὰς τοῦ [κ(υρίο)υ, προσελ-]
4 θῶν *vacat*

2 l. ἀπειλῆς

1 The initial ο is faint and is noticeably more effaced than the surrounding letters. The left diagonal leg of the λ descends below the line and the crossbar of the first and second ε extend and touch the following letters. After ἔτι there is about 1 cm of papyrus before the break but I cannot make out any letters.

(Jones no. 24; fourth-fifth century CE), cf. υ, δ, line initial α; *P.Köln* 4.171 (Jones no. 14; fifth century CE), cf. α; *P.Köln* 4.171 (Jones no. 17; fifth century CE), cf. π.

¹⁵ NA²⁸ = Nestle-Aland, *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 28th ed. (Stuttgart 2012).

¹⁶ For example, *P.Oxy.* 76.5073 (third/fourth century CE) breaks off mid-sentence near the end of Mark 1:2 with κατασκευάσει but does not include τὴν δόδον σου that immediately follows. In *P.Vindob.* G 29831 (*MPER* N.S. 17.10; sixth/seventh century CE) John 1:5-6 breaks off about half way through verse 6; it ends with ἀπεσταλμένος παρὰ but does not include θεοῦ, ὄνομα αὐτῷ Ἰωάννης that follows. Likewise, in *P.Ant.* 2.54 (third/fourth century CE) Matt. 6:10-12 cuts off mid-word in verse 12 with ἄφες ἡμῖν τὰ ὀφειλήμ<ατα>. Additionally, both *P.Berl.* inv. 11710 (sixth/seventh century CE) that has John 1:29, 49 and *P.Vindob.* G 2312 (*Stud.Pal.* 20.294; fifth/sixth century CE) that has John 2:1a-2 and Rom. 12:1-2, break off mid-sentence in the verses.

2 The α at the beginning of ἀπιλῆς is written with a distinctly larger script and differs in style from the other *alphas* in the text as it is written with two separate strokes (more like λ than α). The spelling ἀπιλῆς for ἀπειλῆς is not unusual and the itacistic shift $\epsilon\iota > \iota$ is a common one: see Gignac, *Gram.* 1.189-190. The same phonetic spelling for this word is also found in the following manuscripts at Acts 9:1:¹⁷ \mathfrak{K}^* C 181 1828* C; other spellings for ἀπειλῆς in Acts 9:1 include: 1704 απλης; 1735 απηλεις; 1751 and 1838 απειλεις.

The $\alpha\iota$ of καί is partially effaced but readable; ϕ is written with serifs at the top and bottom of the vertical; only the left vertical stroke and the beginning of the diagonal of the ν are visible before the papyrus breaks off.

3 While the papyrus is damaged at the start of the line, traces of the μ are still visible. The crossbar of the θ extends to the following letter. The ν at the end of the line is slightly effaced but is partially visible. Given the proposed layout of the text it seems most likely that κυρίου was contracted as a *nomen sacrum*, i.e. κ(υρίο)υ. Assuming the text follows the NA²⁸ there are six letters lost in l. 1 and 9 letters lost in l. 2; with the use of the *nomen sacrum* only 8 letters would be lost in l. 3, comparable to ll. 1 and 2, instead of 12 letters if one assumes that κυρίου was left uncontracted. In \mathfrak{B}^{74} \mathfrak{K} B A κυρίου is contracted as a *nomen sacrum* in this passage; in \mathfrak{B}^{45} it cannot be determined because the papyrus is damaged in this portion of the verse.

4 The damage at the beginning of the line has resulted in nearly the complete loss of the θ but its extended crossbar that touches the following ω is still extant. After the ν the remainder of the line is blank and the phrase τῷ ἀρχιερεῖ that always follows in the manuscripts and is anticipated by the participle προσελθὼν is not written on the papyrus. While there is no known variant that leaves out τῷ ἀρχιερεῖ, it is rendered variously in some manuscripts. A few manuscripts add the *iota* adscript to the definite article (τῷ ἀρχιερεῖ: \mathfrak{B}^{45} 1270 1891 424 441) and a few phonetically spell the dative masculine singular article τῷ as το (το ἀρχιερεῖ: 1729 1751).

¹⁷ For *sigla* of New Testament manuscripts I have used those given in NA²⁸ and R.J. Swanson, *New Testament Greek Manuscripts: Variant Readings Arranged in Horizontal Lines against Codex Vaticanus. The Acts of the Apostles* (Sheffield 1998).

The Apotropaic Use of P.Harr. inv. 486 and Acts 9:1

Given the content of Acts 9:1 and the fact that this passage is not otherwise attested in any known amulet employing a New Testament text, the classification of the papyrus as an amulet could be questioned.¹⁸ On the other hand, the fragment does not fit very well as a writing exercise, an *aide-mémoire*, or a personal prayer.¹⁹ Furthermore, it is unlikely that it is a liturgical piece, and if it was simply written for devotional purposes the use of Acts 9:1 is rather peculiar. Alternatively, the physical characteristics of the papyrus accord remarkably well with texts otherwise classified as amulets:²⁰ (1) the fragment is relatively small and contains a non-continuous block of text; (2) it contains a fold; (3) it is written against the fibers, a feature that is not uncommon in papyri identified as amulets;²¹ and (4) the exclusion of τῷ ἀρχιερεῖ, which is a rather unusual omission that is without precedent, might lend added weight to the fact that this is an amulet given that amulets that contain biblical texts at times have a tendency to cut off mid-sentence or mid-verse.²²

¹⁸ For a recent list (with accompanying edition) of amulets that contain New Testament passages see Jones (n. 14) 60-180 who includes twenty-four amulets in total. To this I would add the recently published amulet by T.A. Wayment, "A Christian Amulet Containing Colossians 3:9-10," *VC* 69 (2015) 528-533.

¹⁹ The hand of the present text mitigates against it being identified as a writing exercise since it is clearly more practiced. Cf. T.S. de Bruyn, "Papyri, Parchments, Ostraca, and Tablets Written with Biblical Texts in Greek and Used as Amulets: A Preliminary Checklist," in Kraus and Nicklas (n. 10) 157.

²⁰ For useful discussions regarding methodology and criteria for identification of amulets see M.J. Kruger, *The Gospel of the Savior: An Analysis of P.Oxy. 840 and Its Place in the Gospel Traditions of Early Christianity* (Leiden, Boston 2005) 23-40; T.J. Kraus, "P.Oxy. V 840 – Amulet or Miniature Codex? Principal and Additional Remarks on Two Terms," in T.J. Kraus (ed.), *Ad fontes. Original Manuscripts and Their Significance for Studying Early Christianity* (Leiden 2007) 47-67; T.S. de Bruyn and J.H.F. Dijkstra, "Greek Amulets and Formularies from Egypt Containing Christian Elements: A Checklist of Papyri, Parchments, Ostraka, and Tablets," *BASP* 48 (2011) 167-173.

²¹ The implication here is that the present papyrus was perhaps a leftover scrap from another text where the "verso" provided the best side for writing. While it has occasionally been suggested that because amulets were intended to invoke supernatural powers they were prepared on previously unused material, and that the use of previously written text lessens the probability that the biblical material was written for an amulet (see H. Förster, "Heilige Namen in heiligen Texten," *Antike Welt* 33 [2002] 321-322), such reasoning should not be pushed too far. In J. van Haelst's list of amulets in *Catalogue des papyrus littéraires juifs et chrétiens* (Paris 1976), which numbers 120 "Christian" amulets, almost one quarter are written on the backs of documents with completely unrelated text. Furthermore, there are various texts identified as "amulets" that are written *transversa charta*: see de Bruyn and Dijkstra (n. 20) nos. 50, 83, 143, 185. To this list of amulets I would also add *P.Oxy.* 76.5073 (third/fourth century CE), Wayment (n. 18) 528-33, and L.H. Blumell, "A Christian Amulet Containing a Doxology with Sketches on the Back," in *PapCongr.* 27 (2016) 2.745-754.

²² See n. 16 above.

While the physical characteristics of the papyrus point toward it being an intentionally manufactured amulet, the use of Acts 9:1 is curious as the verse hardly seems to possess any apotropaic value.²³ With many texts identified as amulets, and that bear a New Testament passage, the apotropaic function of a specific passage, or passages, is often relatively straightforward. For example, of the twenty-five published Greek amulets that contain one or more New Testament passages, almost half (11 of 25) quote from the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:9-13). The use of various portions of this prayer, like the phrase "deliver us from evil" (Matt. 6:13b: ῥῦσαι ἡμᾶς ἀπὸ τοῦ πονηροῦ), readily lend themselves to an apotropaic context.²⁴ Likewise, the second most common New Testament passage cited in Greek amulets, Matthew 4:23 (cf. 9:35),²⁵ also lends itself to an apotropaic context with respect to malady and sickness.²⁶ Similarly, the apparent apotropaic context behind a number of other amulets bearing New

²³ On amulets as principally apotropaic/prophylactic devices see R. Kotansky, "Incantations and Prayers for Salvation on Inscribed Greek Amulets," in C.A. Faraone and D. Obbink (eds.), *Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion* (Oxford 1991) 107-108; de Bruyn (n. 19) 149 notes that for papyri with biblical text to be regarded as amulets the text quoted should have some apparent "protective or beneficial effect." In amulets bearing LXX passages the most common quotations come from Psalm 90. For a useful discussion of Psalm passages having apotropaic power see P. Collart, "Psaumes et amulettes," *Aegyptus* 14 (1934) 463-467; C. Préaux, "Une amulette chrétienne aux Musées royaux d'Art et d'Histoire de Bruxelles," *Cd'É* 20 (1935) 365-367; T.J. Kraus, "Psalm 90 der Septuaginta in apotropäischer Verwendung – erste Anmerkungen und Datenmaterial," *PapCongr.* 24 (2007) 1.497-514.

²⁴ The Lord's Prayer, or part of the Lord's Prayer, is invoked in the following amulets: *PSI* 6.719 (sixth century CE); *P.Princ.* 2.107 (= *Suppl.Mag.* 1.29; fifth/sixth century CE); *P.Iand.* 1.6 (fifth/sixth century CE); *SB* 28.16910 (seventh century CE); *P.Col.* 11.293 (fifth century CE); P.CtYBR inv. 4600 (sixth-eighth century CE); *BGU* 3.954 (sixth century CE); *P.Schøyen* 1.16 (fourth/fifth century CE); *P.Ant.* 2.54 (third/fourth century CE); *P.Köln* 8.336 (sixth century CE); *P.Köln* 4.171 (fifth century CE).

²⁵ Matt 4:23: καὶ περιῆγεν ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ Γαλιλαίᾳ διδάσκων ἐν ταῖς συναγωγαῖς αὐτῶν καὶ κηρύσσων τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τῆς βασιλείας καὶ θεραπεύων πᾶσαν νόσον καὶ πᾶσαν μαλακίαν ἐν τῷ λαῷ (NRSV: "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people"); Matt 9:35: καὶ περιῆγεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς τὰς πόλεις πάσας καὶ τὰς κώμας διδάσκων ἐν ταῖς συναγωγαῖς αὐτῶν καὶ κηρύσσων τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τῆς βασιλείας καὶ θεραπεύων πᾶσαν νόσον καὶ πᾶσαν μαλακίαν (NRSV: "Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness").

²⁶ Matt. 4:23 is invoked in the following amulets: *P.Oxy.* 8.1077 (= *PGM* P 4; sixth/sixth century CE); *BKT* 6.7.1 (fifth/sixth century CE); *P.Turner* 49 (= *Suppl.Mag.* 1.31; fifth/sixth century CE). See also T.S. de Bruyn, "Appeals to Jesus as the One 'Who Heals Every Illness and Every Infirmary' (Matt 4:23, 9:35) in Amulets in Late Antiquity," in L. DiTommaso and L. Turcescu (eds.), *The Reception and Interpretation of the Bible in Late Antiquity: Proceedings of the Montréal Colloquium in Honour of Charles Kannengiesser* (Leiden 2008) 65-82.

Testament material is often discernable.²⁷ Therefore, the present text, which is currently the only instance of an amulet invoking a passage from Acts, is all the more curious.²⁸

To consider the potential apotropaic value of Acts 9:1 it is worthwhile to begin by surveying how this passage was used in patristic literature – though on the whole it did not garner much attention. In Tertullian’s brief and passing commentary on this passage he sees in it a fulfillment of a prophecy from LXX Genesis 49:27 that reads, “Benjamin is a ravenous wolf; in the morning he shall devour the prey, and at the evening he shall impart nourishment.”²⁹ This passage is then taken by Tertullian to refer to Saul, who, from the tribe of Benjamin (Phil. 3:5), at first ravaged the church, but later, after his conversion, nourished and educated it.³⁰ Both Ambrose and Asterius will subsequently take a similar approach to this passage.³¹ Origen, along with some later commentators like John Chrysostom, comments on Acts 9:1 while discussing the change of name from Saul to Paul.³² At other times, Origen references this passage to highlight how wicked and murderous men can be changed through the gospel of Christ.³³ On this point Cyril of Jerusalem similarly cites the passage to show the “power” (δύναμις) of Christ as it had the capacity to turn ardent persecutors into faithful disciples.³⁴

²⁷ On the apotropaic value of Gospel incipits (e.g. *P.Oxy.* 76.5073, Mark 1:1-2 [third/fourth century CE]; *P.Oxy.* 8.1151, John 1:1, 3 [= *PGM* P 5b; fifth century CE]; *P.Köln* 8.340, John 1:1-11 [fifth/sixth century CE]) see J.E. Sanzo, *Scriptural Incipits on Amulets from Late Antique Egypt: Text, Typology, and Theory* (Tübingen 2014).

²⁸ For a time it was argued that Ψ⁵⁰ (= *P.Yale* 1.3), which contains Acts 8:26-32, 10:26-31, was an amulet: see van Haelst (n. 21) no. 482 where he notes that it is “probablement une amulette”; S.E. Porter, “Textual Criticism in the Light of Diverse Textual Evidence for the Greek New Testament: An Expanded Proposal,” in T.J. Kraus and T. Nicklas (eds.), *New Testament Manuscripts: Their Texts and Their World* (Leiden 2006) 319, where it is suggested that this fragment was both a miniature codex and an amulet. More recently, however, it has been proposed that this fragment likely functioned in a different context altogether and may have simply been a scriptural note: see Cook (n. 10) 118-125.

²⁹ LXX Gen. 49:27: Βενιαμιν λύκος ἄρπαξ τὸ πρωῖνὸν ἔδεται ἔτι καὶ εἰς τὸ ἑσπέρασ διαδώσει τροφήν.

³⁰ Tertullian, *Marc.* 5.1.2; see also *Scorp.* 13.1.

³¹ Ambrose, *Patr.* 12.57; Asterius, *Hom.* 8.20.1-3.

³² Origen, *Comm. in Rom.* Pref.; John Chrysostom, *Hom. 1-4 in Ac. 9:1*, where Chrysostom frequently cites this passage in a larger discussion of name change (Saul to Paul) and its religious significance.

³³ Origen, *Cels.* 9.1; *Or.* 6.5.

³⁴ Cyril, *catech.* 10.17: ἐξῆλθεν ἐπὶ τὸ διώκειν· καὶ μετὰ τρεῖς ἡμέρας ἐν Δαμασκῷ κήρυξ ὁ διώκτης, ποῖα δύναμι; ἄλλοι μὲν οὖν οἰκείους ὑπὲρ οἰκείων καλοῦσι μάρτυρας· ἐγὼ δὲ σοὶ μάρτυρα τὸν πρότερον ἐχθρὸν παρέστησα. ἔτι ἀμφιβάλεις; (“He [Saul] went forth to persecute and after three days the persecutor is a preacher in Damascus. By

One way to broach the apotropaic function of Acts 9:1 could be in the context of persecution,³⁵ where it may have been employed to deflect dangers (i.e. “threats and murder”) stemming from persecution.³⁶ Though there are no explicit examples of amulets manufactured specifically against persecution, this suggestion has been raised on occasion in connection with certain artifacts thought to possess apotropaic power.³⁷ Of course, if such were the case, the question that remains is: why would someone fearing persecution – or some kind of danger stemming from persecution – not simply invoke a passage where divine protection is more readily manifest? Perhaps an answer to this vexing question might be found in certain amulets that sought to ward off βασκανία – the effects of the “evil eye.” While some amulets protected the bearer from the evil eye by offering some kind of incantation, where the evil eye is directly mentioned, others stared down or diverted the harmful gaze of the evil eye by depicting an

what power? Others call friends as witnesses for/on behalf of friends; but I have presented to you the former enemy as a witness, and do you still doubt?”).

³⁵ Both Eusebius and Basil invoke the verse to describe acts of persecution in their own time: Eusebius, *h.e.* 8.7.5; *v.C.* 2.1.2; Basil, *Ep.* 237.2.

³⁶ While this suggestion might sound farfetched, there are amulets from Egypt that are roughly contemporaneous that were designed to protect the bearer from demons, robbers, evildoers, and murderers, to name just a few. See R. Kotansky, “Greek Exorcistic Amulets,” in M. Meyer and P. Mirecki (eds.), *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power* (Leiden 1995) 243-277; *PGM* III 479-483, 483-488, 488-494. It is also reported that Christians periodically affixed the apocryphal *Letter of Christ to Abgar* to city gates to protect the urban residents from plunder and attacks: see E. von Dobschütz, “Charms and Amulets (Christian),” *ERE* 3 (1910) 425, where it is stated that Christians in Edessa did this to ward off Persian attacks. For a useful listing of the different types of amulets see H.D. Betz (ed.), *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation Including the Demotic Spells* (Chicago, IL, London 1986); W.M. Brashear, “The Greek Magical Papyri: An Introduction and Survey; Annotated Bibliography (1928-1994),” in *ANRW* 2.18.5 (1995) 3480-3482 and 3492-3493. For a cursory treatment of the range of amulets see M. Meyer and R. Smith (ed.), *Ancient Christian Magic: Coptic Texts of Ritual Power* (Princeton 1999); A.D. Vakaloudi, “Δεισιδαιμονία and the Role of the Apotropaic Magic Amulets in the Early Byzantine Empire,” *Byzantion* 70 (2000) 182-210, gives a detailed survey of various amulets and their diverse apotropaic functions in the Byzantine period.

³⁷ For example, it has been argued that an ostrakon from the Faiyum that broadly dates to the third century CE that contains an excerpt of LXX Judith 15:2-7 could have been produced in connection with the mid-third-century persecutions of Decius or Valerian. The editor raised the possibility of whether the excerpted text, which contains a brief account of the Israelite victory over the army of Holofernes after they had been badly oppressed and persecuted, was thought to possess some kind of apotropaic value because it assured miraculous deliverance from persecution: see J. Schwartz, “Un fragment grec du livre de Judith (sur ostrakon),” *RB* 53 (1946) 534-37. This apotropaic view of the ostrakon has more recently been endorsed by E.A. Judge, “The Magical Use of Scripture in the Papyri,” in E.W. Conrad and E.G. Newing (eds.), *Perspectives on Language and Text: Essays and Poems in Honor of Francis I. Andersen’s Sixtieth Birthday* (Winona Lake, IN 1987) 346.

eye on the amulet.³⁸ Therefore, to ward off something malevolent, amulets sometimes depicted something very similar, or even the same, to neutralize the threat. This “homeopathic” tendency, where like counteracts like, is also evinced in certain Byzantine amulets that acted as prophylactics against animals such as lions, snakes, and scorpions and that were made from some part of the animal.³⁹ The apparent thinking was that if you wore some part of a lion, snake, or scorpion, you were therefore protected and immune from their harmful attacks. Along the same lines, is the reason that this papyrus quotes Acts 9:1 because it was thought that like countered like and that a verse talking about “threats and murder” could protect the wearer from these very things?⁴⁰

Alternatively, there may be a more straightforward explanation for the apotropaic use of this verse. Could it be that this text is attempting to draw on Christ’s “power” (δύναμις) for the wearer by showing that it had the potential to not only subdue one who “breathed out threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord,” but also to turn such a person into a disciple? If such is the case, this passage might then be regarded

³⁸ For examples see C. Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets Chiefly Graeco-Egyptian* (Ann Arbor, MI 1950) 96-99. For the Christian use of the image of the eye to counteract the effects of the evil eye see W. Bowden and J. Mitchell, “The Triconch Palace Butrint: The Life and Death of a Late Roman *Domus*,” in L. Lavan et al. (eds.), *Housing in Late Antiquity: From Palaces to Shops* (Leiden 2007) 460. For Christians and the evil eye in general see M.W. Dickie, “The Fathers of the Church and the Evil Eye,” in H. Maguire (ed.), *Byzantine Magic* (Cambridge, MA 1995) 9-34. There are also various Christian letters preserved on papyrus from the fourth or fifth century where ἀβάσκαντος appears: *P.Mich.* 8.519 (fourth/fifth century CE); *P.Oxy.* 20.2276 (fourth/fifth century CE); *P.Wisc.* 2.76 (mid-fourth century CE); *SB* 12.10841 (fourth century CE). On the use and meaning of ἀβάσκαντος in the papyri see H.C. Youtie, “Critical Trifles VIII,” *ZPE* 36 (1979) 75-76; D. Bonneau, “L’apotropaïque ‘abaskantos’ en Égypte,” *RH* 199 (1982) 23-36.

³⁹ Vakaloudi (n. 39) 190.

⁴⁰ To give another similar example, when one surveys the onomastic evidence from Egypt during the Roman and Byzantine periods, one is struck by the number of persons bearing a copronym – i.e. a name that incorporates the Greek κόπρος or “dung.” Why anyone would name their child “dung head” was initially inexplicable, and so the explanation was that persons bearing these names were either slaves or orphans who had been abandoned and subsequently rescued from the dung heaps. More recently, however, it has been convincingly shown that the context behind these offensive names is neither servitude nor orphanhood but that such names actually had an apotropaic component and were given to ward off the harmful effects of the evil eye: see D. Hobson, “Naming Practices in Roman Egypt,” *BASP* 26 (1989) 163-65; also Pestman, *Prim.*² 256. In particular Hobson cites the anthropological practice of “derogatory protective naming” whereby an individual is given what appears to be an offensive name because it was thought to protect the bearer from malevolent forces; thus, two negatives equaled a positive. For a more recent discussion of “copronyms” see *P.Paramone*, pp. 230-237.

as a kind of *historiola* – a short narrative used for ritual power⁴¹ – and that the larger story of Saul’s conversion was also being invoked, where just a few verses later this same persecutor was being overpowered by Christ. Keeping with this interpretation, it is interesting to note how the rendering of Acts 9:1 abruptly ends with the verb προσελθών. As has been noted in recent scholarship on amulets bearing New Testament passages, it is not uncommon for some amulets to periodically cut off abruptly, even mid-sentence, in grammatically awkward positions in the text.⁴² Though earlier scholarship tended to attribute such examples to faulty copying, more recently it has been argued that this was not necessarily the case, and that the scriptural extract may be acting as a *pars pro toto* signaling that sufficient text had been marshaled for apotropaic efficacy to take effect and was sufficient for the larger narrative.⁴³ Seen in this light, the text of Acts 9:1 may have been invoked to highlight Christ’s “power” over any threats and dangers as evidenced by the larger narrative of Acts 9: Saul the fervent enemy of the church would soon become the even more zealous proponent, making the power behind the text all the more efficacious.

To conclude, it seems best to regard P.Harr. inv. 486 as an amulet, albeit a unique one. The physical characteristics of the piece accord with texts otherwise identified as amulets and though the use of Acts 9:1 is curious, it can certainly have an apotropaic function.⁴⁴ While it seems most likely that the verse should be regarded as a *historiola* and that the larger narrative of Acts 9 and Saul’s conversion is implied, where the power of Christ had the ability to turn an ardent persecutor into an even more devout convert, there might be other contextual possibilities.⁴⁵ Nonetheless, the

⁴¹ D. Frankfurter, “Narrating Power: The Theory and Practice of the Magical *Historiola* in Ritual Spells,” in Meyer and Mirecki (n. 36) 451-470.

⁴² See n. 16 above.

⁴³ Jones (n. 14) 80, 182.

⁴⁴ I am disinclined to take this papyrus as an example of “aggressive magic” where it was meant to inflict harm in some way.

⁴⁵ It could be wondered whether it was merely the use of scripture that provided protection without necessarily addressing a single context or one perceived function. Based on a survey of patristic literature it seems that scriptural text alone was thought to possess innate apotropaic powers. John Chrysostom referred to the scriptures as “divine charms” (θεϊαί εἰσιν ἐπώδαι τὰ γράμματα) and argued that neither the devil nor an evil spirit would dare to approach a house where a Gospel is lying (εἰ γὰρ ἐν οἰκίᾳ, ἔνθα ἂν εὐαγγέλιον ᾗ κείμενον, οὐ τολμήσει προσελθεῖν ὁ διάβολος ...; *Hom. in Jo.* 32.3). Furthermore, he asserted that the hanging of the gospels near one’s bed could offer protection from harm (*Hom. in 1 Cor.* 43.7). However, elsewhere he chides Christian women who “now wear Gospels hung from their necks” (νῦν τῶν γυναικῶν εὐαγγέλια τῶν τραχήλων ἔξαρτῶσαι ἔχουσι; *Hom. in Mt.* 72.2; see also *stat.* 19.4). Augustine reports that certain Christians believed that physical ailments like headaches could be cured by putting a copy of John’s

content of this papyrus is secure; it provides a valuable addition to the current amulets bearing New Testament passages and is among the earliest extant attestations of this verse.

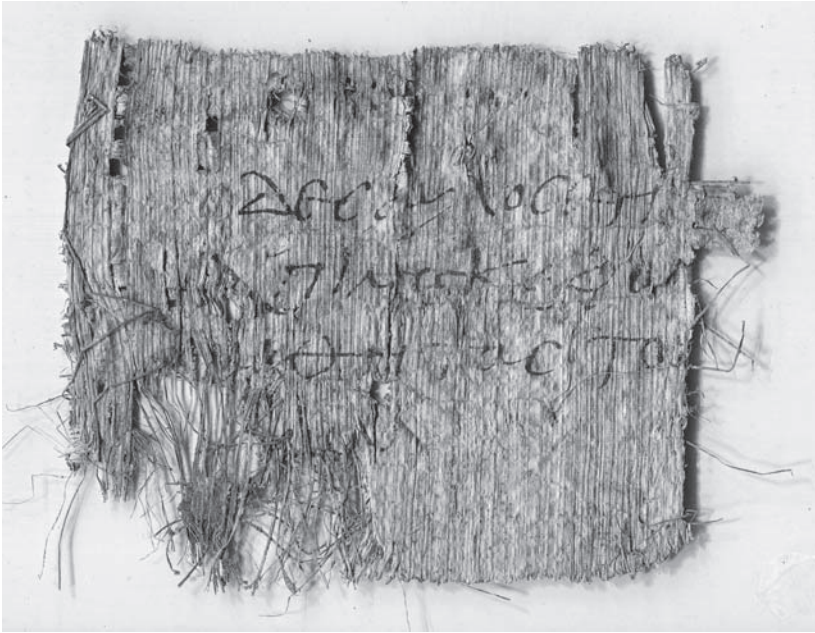


Fig. 2: P.Harr. inv. 486, courtesy Cadbury Research Library, University of Birmingham

gospel next to their head (*Tract. Ev. Jo.* 7.12). Isidore of Pelusium, *Ep.* 2.150 notes that just as the “teachers of the Jews” (οἱ τῶν Ἰουδαίων κατηγηταί) wore “phylacteries” (φυλακτήρια) Christian women now wore “small gospels” (εὐαγγέλια μικρά). In the *Acts of Andrew* 23 a Christian woman is protected through the wearing of a gospel. Nonetheless, it seems that the scriptural texts (i.e. εὐαγγέλια) described in the mentioned patristic passages and that supplied protection contained appropriate apotropaic content (see also *P.Bingen* 16, an amulet containing LXX Ps. 43-44), whereas Acts 9:1, on the contrary, is quite threatening.

