Early Christian Epigraphy, Evil, and the Apotropaic Function of Romans 8.31

Abstract

Epigraphic evidence offers an important and yet oft-neglected dimension to the history of biblical reception. One of the most curious cases of epigraphic incidence of a biblical text is the use of Romans 8.31. Within early Christian writings, this Pauline passage is used approximately 20 times across nine different writers before 604 CE. However, the words of Romans 8.31 may be found on at least 23 epigraphic artifacts from this same period, and in particular, on the door lintels of homes. This article explores what might account for the discrepancy between the literary and epigraphic use of Romans 8.31, the possible apotropaic function of this phrase, and how such evidence might inform the interpretation and reception of this Pauline passage.

Key Words

Romans; Paul; Christian epigraphy; biblical reception; door lintels; apotropaic use of Scripture

Writing in the 4th century, Evagrius of Pontus describes a problem that early Christians faced, namely that "the words which are required for speaking against our enemies, that is, the cruel demons, cannot be found quickly in the hour of conflict, because they are scattered throughout the Scriptures and are difficult to find." However, he continues, "we have, therefore, carefully selected words from the holy scriptures, so that we may equip ourselves with them and drive out the [enemies]

forcefully."[1] Evagrius is clear that certain passages of Scripture have the power to protect, empower, and, in particular, to route evil forces.

A significant number of studies have focused on these carefully selected passages that were used by early Christians. Such studies tend to centre on extant papyrus texts and especially those texts which have been identified as Christian amulets; however, the use of Scripture for protection is not limited to the medium of the amulet.[2] Rather, in an oft-neglected part of biblical studies and its reception, Scripture is used for similar purposes epigraphically and, in particular, on door lintels. Of the approximately 800 inscriptions which have been identified as containing an excerpt from Scripture, almost half of these texts "are found on the doors or windows of homes."[3] These inscriptions are generally carved into stone or marble in Latin, Greek, or Coptic and date from the 3rd century to the end of Gregory the Great's reign in 604 CE. Nevertheless, by limiting this study primarily to door lintels, we also limit

[1] Evagrius of Pontus, *Antirrhêtikos*, Prologue, 3 (D. Brakke, transl. *Talking Back, Antirrhêtikos; A Monastic Handbook for Combating Demons* [Trappist, KY. 2009] 50).

[2] These texts are, more specifically, those which are "believed to convey in and of itself, as well as in association…supernatural power for protective, beneficial, or antagonistic effect, and that is worn on one's body or fixed, displayed, or deposited at some place." See T. de Bruyn, "Papyri, Parchments, Ostraca, and Tablets written with Biblical Texts in Greek and Used as Amulets: A Preliminary List" in *Early Christian Manuscripts: Examples of Applied Method and Approach,* T.J. Kraus and T. Nicklas, ed. (Leiden. 2010) 145-190; 147.

[3] D. Feissel, "The Bible in Greek Inscriptions" in *The Bible in Greek Christian Antiquity,* P.M. Blowers, ed. (Notre Dame, IN. 1997) 289-298; 292.

this study geographically and linguistically since almost all of the evidence for such inscriptions comes from expeditions in Syria where almost all of the inscriptions are in Greek.[4]

This article will focus on one particular text from the Pauline epistles – Romans 8.31: "If God is for us, who can be against us" – and will examine its use on door lintels, as well as more widely in early Christian literature. From this examination, conclusions will be drawn about what this evidence contributes to the reception and use of this Pauline excerpt and its interpretation.

Early Christian Epigraphy

As Fergus Millar is clear, few major civilizations exist in which the writing of words on stone has not played a role, although this, he argues, is a particularly distinctive feature of Graeco-Roman civilization in antiquity.[5] Epigraphic references are unusual in that they are not literary or documentary texts, but rather they are inscriptions on house lintels, columns, tombs, sarcophagi, and even pottery although the latter is often claimed within the domain of papyrological documentary texts. Moreover, even

[4] Exceptions to this claim include a 6th century door lintel which contains words from Romans 8.31. This particular lintel has been reused as a pillar in a Byzantine fort in Tigzirt, Algeria, where it was discovered. See entry 736 in A.E. Felle, *Biblia Epigraphia: La sacra scrittura nella documentazione epigrafica dell'*Orbis Christianus Antiquus *(III-VIII secolo)* (Bari. 2006) 347. See also entry 455 (Felle, *Biblia Epigraphia*, 215) which is another 6th century Latin door lintel; however, this lintel contains words from Luke 23.42.

[5] F. Millar, "Epigraphy" in *Sources for Ancient History*, M. Crawford, ed. (Cambridge. 1983) 80-136; 80.

though the words of many inscriptions are similar to the contents of literary texts such as excerpts from Scripture, these inscriptions are rarely included in text critical or reception historical studies of the New Testament.

Furthermore, epigraphic texts present some significant issues for biblical scholars and especially for biblical reception. Firstly, much of the material is not complete and what is inscribed is often only part of a text: "if God is for us who can be against us" is only part of Romans 8.31. Inscriptions are not continuous texts like a manuscript and, as Peter Head concludes, these texts "were never anyone's Bible."[6] Rather, they were adapted to fit a particular and often limited physical space.

Another potential issue is the relatively late date of many of these inscriptions, as is the very dating of this evidence in the first place. While some inscriptions can be precisely dated based on a date or political marker within the text itself, a number of inscriptions are impossible to date even approximately. Thus, the date for most epigraphy is limited to the 3rd to 7th centuries, usually concluding in 604 CE with the death of Gregory the Great. Many early inscriptions cannot be placed in a smaller window than this 400-year spread. As Mark Humphries clarifies, while this evidence "is often very telling of the processes of social transformation, it is more difficult than historians might wish to link it with precise chronological markers drawn from literary data."[7]

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[6] P.M. Head, "Additional Greek Witnesses to the New Testament (Ostraca, Amulets, Inscriptions, and other Sources)" in *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research: Essays on the Status Quaestionis,* B.D. Ehrman and M.W. Holmes, ed. NTTSD 42 (Leiden. 2013) 429-460; 431.

[7] M. Humphries, "Material Evidence (1): Archaeology" in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies,* S. Ashbrook Harvey and D.G. Hunter, ed. (Oxford. 2008) 87-

However, these issues do not mean that inscriptions that use Scripture should be neglected. In fact, some scholars go so far as to argue that inscriptions with Scripture provide a better view of the early Christian world "than do texts such as the writings of the Church Fathers" because "domestic objects [such as door lintels] and their imagery provide an insight into the attitudes and concerns of ordinary people, including those who could not read or write (which would have been the majority of people at this time)."[8] While it might seem like epigraphic texts can be discounted when compared with the wealth of knowledge we can draw from a literary text from the same period, neither kind of text can be detached from its wider context and both represent part of the reception history of the words of Scripture they contain.[9] For scholars from Millar to David Lincicum are clear that "every scrap of information, from a couple of letters scratched on a potsherd onwards, potentially has a place in some wider framework of understanding."[10] What is needed, however, is "someone

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103; 96. DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199271566.001.0001. For difficulty with dating epigraphic inscriptions, see also Felle, *Biblia Epigraphia,* 23-25, 34.

[8] E. Dauterman Maguire, H. Maguire, M.J. Duncan-Flowers, *Art and Holy Powers in the Early Christian House* (Urbana-Champaign, IL. 1989) 1.

[9] Millar, "Epigraphy," 110. For an example of the importance of context for documentary and literary texts see A. Luijendijk, "A New Testament Papyrus and Its Documentary Context: An Early Christian Writing Exercise from the Archive of Leonides (*P.Oxy.* II 209/P[10])". *JBL* 129, no. 3 (2010) 575-596**.** DOI: 10.2307/25765953.

[10] Millar, "Epigraphy," 110. See also D. Lincicum, "The Epigraphic Habit and the Biblical Text" *Bulletin of the International Organization for Septuagint and Cognate Studies* 41 (2008) 84-92.

with energy and vision" to come along and "to gather up a whole mass of disparate fragments of information and combine them to form an intelligible pattern."[11]

Romans 8.31: Literary evidence

When we turn to epigraphic catalogues and the use of Scripture, we find that approximately 115 extant inscriptions use words and phrases from a Pauline letter although very few of these are repeated verses. While some instances do occur of a Pauline verse being used more than two times,[12] one text stands apart from the rest in this regard: Romans 8.31. Excerpts from this text appear in at least 23 different epigraphic contexts, including at least ten door lintels. While this might not appear to be significant, it is especially curious when we first look at the use of this same passage in literary texts from the same time period.

In terms of literary texts, Romans 8.31 is used approximately 20 times across nine different writers before 604 CE. When compared with the reality that Romans 8.35-39, for example, is used more than 280 times by early Christian writers, we can begin to grasp how little this verse is used with reference to those around it. Within early Christian writings, Romans 8.31 is used five times by Origen and John Chrysostom, twice by Eusebius, a few times by Didymus and Ambrose, and once by Basil, Ambrosiaster, Augustine, and Cyril of Alexandria.

Origen, for example, uses the words of Romans 8.31 to exegete another scriptural text in his *Commentary on John* as he tries to explain what the Prologue

[11] Millar, "Epigraphy," 110.

[12] According to Felle's comprehensive survey, 1 Cor 10.26 and 1 Cor 16.22 may each be found in four different epigraphic contexts (see Felle, *Biblia Epigraphia*, 526). My own research also identified four epigraphic examples of 1 Cor 3.16.

means by "and the darkness did not overcome it" (John 1.5). For Origen, this means, at least "for those who have the intellectual capacity to understand it,"[13] that "the darkness pursued the light on the basis of the things which both the Saviour and his own children who received his teaching suffered, since the darkness operated against the sons of light and wished to chase the light away."[14] Origen then continues with the words of Romans 8.31, "if God is for us, no one will be able to be against us, even if he wishes."[15] Here, Origen clearly understands this phrase from Romans to mean that with God on the side of the Christian, darkness cannot overtake the light even if it tries. Thus, this excerpt from Romans is used to confirm his point that the darkness actually does attempt to pursue the light, but nevertheless with God "for us" it cannot chase the light away.

In his *Commentary on Romans*, Romans 8.31 appears once again, perhaps not surprisingly, but this time with a catena of texts to describe the adversarial forces that must be overcome. Origen firstly states, "in what way God is for us is plain from what he has set forth...because the Spirit of God dwells in us and because the Spirit of Christ, or Christ, is in us; or because the Spirit of him who raised Christ from the dead dwells in us, or because we are being led by the Spirit of God, or because we have received the Spirit of adoption...or because the Spirit himself intercedes for us with unutterable groanings (Rom 8.22-30)."[16] Origen reframes Paul's question to read "for if God is for us to such an extent that he has bestowed all these things upon us, who

[13] Origen, *Comm.Jn.* 2.168 (*SC* 120).

[14] Origen, *Comm.Jn.* 2.169 (*SC* 120).

[15] Origen, *Comm.Jn.* 2.169 (*SC* 120).

[16] Origen, *Comm.Rom.* 7.9 (*SC* 543).

could be against us?"[17] Such a question, he is clear, does not mean that we have no adversaries because "what was said by Peter stands, your adversary the devil prowls about like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour (1 Pet 5.8)." Rather, Origen explains that "what [Paul] is making known is this, our adversary will be rendered detestable and will be nullified when God goes into action on our behalf."[18] In other words, what Paul means by Romans 8.31 is that God will go into action for us and against our enemy, the devil. For Origen, we will always have adversaries in this life who seek to devour us like a ravenous lion or to overcome us like the darkness, and yet the words of Romans 8.31 give the assurance that with God being for us, God's protection, defense, and intercession are ensured.

For Augustine, the words of Romans 8.31 are also used in the context of God's intervention against evil forces and once again, this text helps to exegete another passage of Scripture. Augustine writes in his exposition on Psalm 45 that it is, "not any person whatsoever, not any power, not even any angel, not any creature whether earthly or heavenly, but the Lord of hosts who is with us, our protector is the God of Jacob." He then proclaims, "if God is for us, who is against us" as he encourages those whom he addresses in this text that "therefore, we may be secure."[19] The words of Romans 8.31 are used to confirm that it is God and not any other power, principality, or person who defends and supports the Christian against evil. This Roman text, therefore, points to protection and security, both of which are given by God who "is for us."

[17] Origen, *Comm.Rom.* 7.9 (*SC* 543).

[18] Origen, *Comm.Rom.* 7.9 (*SC* 543).

[19] Augustine, *Exposition on the Psalms* 45.11 (*PL* 36).

With these brief examples from Origen and Augustine, we can begin to see how early Christians – even though the use of this text is limited and scattered – turn to Romans 8.31 to describe how God is the one who intervenes on behalf of the Christian against evil and God alone is the one who stands with us. While this use does not explain why this text appears on a number of epigraphic inscriptions, it does point to an understanding of how this text was used by some early Christian writers to underscore God's power to protect against evil.

Romans 8.31: Epigraphic evidence

Where the use of Romans 8.31 is curious can be seen when the focus shifts to epigraphy. Concentrating on how little this text is used within early Christian writings is interesting but not by itself unusual. In fact, a number of passages from the Pauline epistles do not appear in early Christian writings, at least in a form that is clearly identifiable.[20] Thus, what is significant is not that Romans 8.31 is used only 20 times across nine different writers, but that it appears at least 23 times in epigraphic inscriptions.[21] Moreover, of these 23 instances, at least ten have been identified as

[20] Examples include 1 Cor 12.19, 1 Cor 16.18-19, 2 Cor 4.15, 2 Cor 7.7, Phil 1.1, Phil 1.10, Romans 7.21 and Romans 14.7.

[21] The only other New Testament text that appears more than 20 times is Luke 23.42 which has 23 epigraphic instances (see Felle, *Biblia Epigraphia*, 525-526). For a comparison that ranges beyond door lintels, six New Testament texts may be found six or more times in an epigraphic context and yet only one of these instances is Pauline. These six texts include: John 19.15 (6 times), Luke 1.28 (10 times), John 1.19 (10 times), Luke 2.14 (19 times), Luke 23.42 (23 times), and Romans 8.31 (23 times). Of these 91 instances, 20 have been identified as possible door lintels, five of

door lintels. As such, Romans 8.31 is the most frequently cited New Testament text which adorns the threshold of a home. For comparison, the only other New Testament text that appears on door lintels more than three times is a part of Luke 2.14 – "Glory to God in the highest" – which appears five times. However, some scholars argue this text could have been drawn from a liturgy and thus might not intentionally be from the Lucan Gospel itself.[22]

What is difficult and disappointing but perhaps not surprising is that no photographs of these ten door lintels are extant. Sketches of two of the lintels can be found in catalogues from the turn of the 20th century, but otherwise, the only source for these lintels are short entries in epigraphic catalogues with the text and, if we are

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which are comprised of excerpts from Luke 2.14 and ten of which are identified with excerpts from Romans 8.31. Other epigraphic objects include items of personal devotion, icons, mosaics, bracelets, cameos, sepulchral inscriptions, marble stele, and at least 17 objects whose function is not known. See Felle, *Biblia Epigraphia*, 525-526 (index for the above texts).

[22] This connection with liturgy is affirmed by Felle, though questioned by Duval. See Felle, *Biblia Epigraphia,* 327 and 339. The most popular texts from Scripture on extant door lintels are from the Psalms. Thus, Psalm 121.8 LXX ("the Lord will guard your coming in and your going out") appears 43 times; Psalm 118.20 ("this is the gate of the Lord") is used 31 times; Psalm 29.3 ("the voice of the Lord is over the waters") is used 17 times; and Psalm 91.1 ("the one who dwells in the shelter of the most high") appears 15 times. The Trisagion ("holy, holy, holy is the Lord God of hosts") from Isaiah 6.3 is also found on a number of door lintels, often understood as an inscription based on liturgy. See Head, "Additional Witnesses," 443-444.

lucky, a brief description of the location.[23] Even these brief descriptions are not always helpful. Within publications from the Princeton University Archaeological Expeditions, in which many of these inscriptions are found, we find entries such as: "At the right of the disk is the beginning of a plate, similar to the first, containing a cross and probably more letters. But it was impossible to dig out the rest of the stone without tools, which our servants had at last succeeded in leaving behind."[24] Another of our entries includes: "Another inscription was found at this place by one of the servants, about a hundred yards north of the present fragments: but through a misunderstanding it was not seen by any member of the expedition. It was said to contain only letters."[25]

Despite the limitations of the evidence, ten door lintels are recorded as containing almost identical words to a portion of Romans 8.31. Two of these are

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[23] See Felle, *Biblia Epigraphia*, 526; W.K. Prentice, "The Character and Purpose of the Inscriptions of Northern Central Syria," in *Greek and Latin Inscriptions, Part III of the Publications of an American Archeological Expedition to Syria in 1899-1900* (New York.1908); L. Jalabert, "Notes d'épigraphie chrétiennes" in *Recherches de science religieuse* 1 (1910) 68-71 and (1911) 59-61; L. Jalabert, "Citations bibliques dans l'épigraphie grecque" in *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie,* vol. 3. F. Cabrol and H. Leclercq, ed. (Paris. 1914) cols. 1731-1756; and L. Jalabert and R. Mouterde (with C. Mondésert), *Inscriptions grecques et latines de la Syrie, vol. 4: Laodicée, Apamène* (Paris. 1955).

[24] W.K. Prentice, *Syria: Publications of the Princeton University Archaeological Expeditions to Syria in 1904-5 and 1909,* Division III, *Greek and Latin Inscriptions* (Leiden. 1922) 37.

[25] Prentice, *Princeton University Archaeological Expeditions,* 38.

house lintels from Herâkeh, Syria and can be dated to the 5th century. Lintels from a similar period are also found on houses in two nearby villages, with one also containing a series of crosses and the letters ΧΜΓ which early scholars generally agree is shorthand for the Christological statement "Jesus born of Mary" (Χριστὸς Μαρίας Γέννα or Χριστὸς Μαρίας γεννηθείς or Χριστὸν Μαρία γεννᾶ).[26] Within

[26] While scholars agree that ΧΜΓ is a Christian symbol and Christological statement, some scholars have claimed that these letters are an acrostic (Prentice) whereas others propose that it is an isopsephism or group of letters with a numerical value that adds up to a specific phrase (Llewelyn). Options offered by scholars also include Χριστὸς Μιχαὴλ Γαβριήλ (Christ Michael Gabriel) and Χριστὸς μάρτυς γεγόνεν (Christ was made a martyr). However, two pieces of evidence lead to the agreed conclusion that ΧΜΓ is Christological. The first is a series of 20 seals on the bottom of the tomb in Praetexatus's catacomb which, according to Ferrua, accompany the word BINCES (understood to be the equivalent of VINCES). Ferrua concludes that this statement of hope is aimed at ΧΜΓ and thus ΧΜΓ must be Christological (see A. Ferrua, *Sigilli su Calce nelle Catacombe* [Vatican City. 1986] 72-73). Such a conclusion is confirmed by Beševliev who identifies ΧΜΓ on a weathered inscription from the 6th century where the phrase Μαρία Χριστὸν γεν(ᾶ) is found. This phrase is thus proposed to be the correct resolution to this controversial acronym (see V. Beševliev, *Spätgriechische un spätlateinische Inschriften aus Bulgarien* [Berlin. 1964] 105). See also P. Keegan, *Graffiti in Antiquity* (Oxford. 2014); L. Blumell, *Lettered Christians: Christians, Letters, and Late Antique Oxyrhynchus* (Leiden. 2012) 47-49. DOI: 10.1163/9789004180987; A. Gostili, "Una nuova ipotesi interpretativa della sigla cristiana ΧΜΓ," *Studia Papyrologica* 22 (1983) 9-14; S.R. Llewelyn, *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity 8: A Review of the Greek Inscriptions and Papyri*

Dellôzā (also Syria), there are three door lintels on which the words of Romans 8.31 may be found, two on houses and one on the gate leading to a house. One of these is also preceded by ΧΜΓ, and the other two are followed by the phrases, "Glory to him always" and "Glory to you now and always." All three contain crosses. Within two other villages – Id-Dabbāghîn and Martareh – part of Romans 8.31 may be found on the lintels of houses that sources note may have been churches although there is little supporting evidence to say why these lintels were identified as such and the field notes include a question mark next to these identities. The final example is from Tigzirt in today's Algerian territory and is the only of these lintels in Latin. This inscription was moved from its original place, which is unknown, to be used as part of a pillar in a Byzantine fort. It includes the words of Romans 8.31, a Christological monogram, and a phrase about envy. The association between what Felle identifies as a "pagan formula against envy" and Romans 8.31 is especially significant for drawing conclusions about the apotropaic use of this Pauline passage.[27]

In summary, we have two distinct ways that early Christians were using excerpts from Romans 8.31. On the one hand, this text is picked up minimally by early Christian writers and used to exegete texts about God's protection against darkness and evil. On the other hand, excerpts from this Roman text are used at least

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Published 1984-85 (Grand Rapids, MI. 1998) 156-168; M. Avi-Yonah, *Abbreviations in Greek Inscriptions (The Near East, 200 BC – AD 100),* Quarterly of the Department of Antiquities in Palestine Suppl. 9 (London. 1940).

[27] For Felle, as will be discussed in what follows in this article, the connection between the pagan statement about envy and this Pauline phrase from Romans proves "beyond doubt" the prophylactic or apotropaic function of the Roman words (Felle, *Biblia Epigraphia*, 347).

twice as many times as any other New Testament text on door lintels. This leads to a number of questions. If Romans 8.31 is so popular in the wider culture that it appears on thresholds of homes, why is this text not used more within the homilies and other writings of early Christians? Does the use of this text by early Christian writers shed light on why this text might have been worth inscribing on the threshold of a home in terms of the connections made with protection and evil powers? Or, conversely, could the popularity of this text on door lintels have influenced and even negatively affected early Christians' use of this text in their writings?

Door Lintels and their Significance

To clarify why these three questions are important, we turn briefly to the significance of the door lintel. Hundreds of inscriptions from the doorways of homes which appeal to God, Christ, or an excerpt from Scripture have been identified. The lintel of the house is especially important because, as Prentice is clear, it "is well known, evil spirits, however ethereal, do not penetrate solid walls, but, like the rest of us, enter by the door or perhaps through a window."[28] In other words, inscriptions and symbols within a house and on its thresholds were written especially to bring protection from evil. As one 6th century inscription from Sabbâ' reads, "Of this house (the) Lord shall guard the entrance and the exit for the cross being set before, no evil eye shall prevail."[29]

Even 4th century theologian John Chrysostom recommended marking the entrance to a home with a cross, writing that "we depict it with much zeal both on

[28] W.K. Prentice, "Magical Formulae on Lintels of the Christian Period in Syria," *American Journal of Archaeology,* 10.2 (1906) 137-50; 138. DOI: 10.2307/496990.

[29] Prentice, "Magical Formulae," 141.

houses and on walls and windows…for this is indeed the sign of our safety."[30] While Chrysostom does not necessarily attribute powers to the cross itself as it is only a "sign of our safety," many early Christians clearly did and they wrote it on their lintels in such a way that it served an apotropaic function on the threshold of a dwelling. Such symbols thus served as a sign with power to turn away and avert evil.

While we might assume that the use of Scripture or a Christian symbol on a door lintel to protect a home from evil would contradict Christian belief, such a distinction was not clearly made by early Christians. As Harry Gamble writes, "superstition is no respecter of ethnic, social, religious, or intellectual distinction, and it was inevitable that magical ideas and practices which were widespread in the ancient world, would find a place among Christians, too."[31] In fact, belief in supranatural forces of evil may be found throughout early Christian writings. For example, Origen writes that "the battle of Christians is twofold. Indeed, for those who are perfect such as Paul and the Ephesians, as Paul himself says, it was not a battle against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers, against the rulers of darkness here in this world, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places (Eph 6.12)."[32] Christians must, therefore, "defend themselves against the shrewdness of the devil and the attacks of the spiritual forces of evil."[33] Tertullian confirms this belief in evil forces writing that "ours are other strengths and other powers, just as our contests are other; we whose wrestling is not against flesh and

[30] John Chrysostom, *Hom.Matt.* 54.4 (*PG* 58).

[31] H.Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven. 1995) 237.

[32] Origen, *Hom.Jos*. 11.4 (adapted from *SC* 71; *FC* 105).

[33] Origen, *Comm.Cant*. 2.3 (*PG* 13).

blood, but against the powers of the world, against spiritual malice (Eph 6.12)."[34] For, as he concludes elsewhere, the Christian is engaged in a "spiritual war against spiritual enemies in a spiritual campaign and spiritual armour to be fought completely on a spiritual level."[35]

While early Christians advocated practices of prayer, piety, and the reading and teaching of Scripture in order to stand firm against the forces of evil, the very words of Scripture may have served a similar function. This gives context to the words of Evagrius with which we began that "carefully selected words from the holy scriptures" may equip the Christian and be used to "drive out the [enemies] forcefully."[36] That texts with certain words were believed to have an intrinsic power which could be used for the protection of an individual is evident from the large number of extant amulets from antiquity.[37] Chrysostom goes so far as to describe the words of Scripture as divine charms (*theiai epodai*) so that "the devil will not dare approach a house where a gospel book is lying."[38] Even Augustine believed in the protective and healing power of Scripture and advocated that a headache could be routed if one only slept with a copy of John's Gospel under his or her pillow.[39] In each of these instances it is clear that, however much early Christians sought to claim the words of the scriptural text as their own and to use them as they developed their

[34] Tertullian, *Jejun.* 17.7-8 (*CSEL* 20).

[35] Tertullian, *Marc.* 4.20 (*SC* 456).

[36] Evagrius, *Antirrhêtikos,* Pr.3 (Brakke).

[37] Gamble, *Books and Readers,* 238.

[38] John Chrysostom, *Hom.Jn.* 32.3 (*PG* 59).

[39] Augustine, *Trac.Ev.Jn.* 7 (*CCL* 36).

arguments, it is not only what is read and understood that can confer power but the texts themselves can also be effective objects.[40]

Furthermore, the use of scriptural texts as amulets was explicitly condemned, at least among the clergy, by the Council of Laodicea in 360 which states in that "they who are of the priesthood, or of the clergy, shall not be magicians, enchanters, mathematicians, or astrologers; nor shall they make what are called amulets, which are chains for their own souls. And those who wear such, we command to be cast out of the Church."[41] The fact that an ecumenical council had so clearly to condemn the use of texts for apotropaic or even magical purposes amongst the clergy suggests that Christian leaders were, in fact, using such objects and promoting their use amongst their flocks.[42]

By this logic and with this evidence, therefore, if words of Scripture could protect an individual who wore these texts on their bodies, then the conclusion that these words could also protect a house and its inhabitants by being carved into the threshold is not a stretch. Even though we might want to resolve that the use of Scripture on door lintels was simply an act of piety, the use of scriptural texts on amulets and a broader understanding of evil powers and the function of the threshold

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[40] Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 238.

[41] Synod of Laodicea, Canon 36 (*PL* 56; *NPNF* II.14)

[42] J.E. Sanzo, "Ancient Amulets with *Incipits*: The blurred line between magic and religion" at http://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-artifacts/artifacts-and-the-bible/ancient-amulets-with-incipits/, accessed 21 November 2015. Others who complain about the use of Scripture for protection or healing include John Chrysostom, *Hom.Statuis* 19.14; *Hom.1Cor.* 16.9.7; *Hom.Matt.* 72; and Augustine, *Trac.Ev.Jn*, 7.12.

suggests that the use of Romans 8.31 on a door lintel could, in fact, have served an apotropaic purpose. [43]

Further Questions

The question remains, what does this mean? What does it mean that early Christians used Romans 8.31 in a limited way within their writings to discuss evil forces and opponents? What does it mean that the same text, or very close variants of it, appears more than any other New Testament text on extant door lintels? And what might the use of this text epigraphically tell us about its reception and interpretation? Such questions are not easy to answer in any clear and definitive way. Nevertheless, I'd like to propose a number of possible options for why the use of use of the words of Romans 8.31 on door lintels is significant as well as a few further questions for consideration.

Firstly, the clearest conclusion of this study is one we've already stated: that the words of Romans 8.31 were being used on door lintels to protect homes from evil and harm.

But the next logical question is, whose homes? A frustrating aspect of this study in general is that the use of Romans 8.31, or any scriptural text, on a door lintel cannot tell us much about the faith of the people who lived within those dwellings. But it can possibly, especially alongside the way this text is used in early Christian writings, tell us something about early Christian practices and even demonology. As we have briefly touched on, the use of Scripture on a threshold can offer another

[43] This is further confirmed by one other use of Romans 8.31: sepulchral or funerary inscriptions where the intention of such an inscription was also to ward off evil and protect the site. See Felle, *Biblia Epigraphia*, 278, 328-329.

dimension to early Christian understandings of evil and how such evil may be countered and even routed on a daily basis.

Moreover, if excerpts from this text do serve an apotropaic function, we also have to ask whether such a reality impacts our understanding of this text within the Roman epistle? Was Romans 8.31 understood by Paul to be an apotropaic phrase or did it acquire this function and purpose after it was written by the Apostle? Could this phrase – if God is for us, who can be against us – be a more widely known apotropaic saying with which Paul is familiar and thus incorporates into his letter? No commentary appears to suggest that Romans 8.31 is not authentic to Paul, but does not the presence of this text on door lintels, serving a possible apotropaic function, at least raise this question? Nevertheless, even if this phrase is taken from the writings of Paul himself, the ban by the Council of Laodicea on the use of texts for protective purposes could account for the discrepancy between the seeming popularity of this phrase in the wider public sphere and its limited use within literary writings.[44]

Furthermore, what are we to make of the discrepancy between the number of times Romans 8.31 is used in early Christian writings – only 20 times – in comparison with the verses that follow, which are used more than 280 times? Could this discrepancy help us to understand the use of Romans 8.31 on door lintels and the way this part of the Roman text as a whole was understood? A number of scholars, most recently Joseph Sanzo, have studied the use of short citations of Scripture used for apotropaic purposes which are called incipits. An incipit is the beginning of a work or

[44] This phrase is also found on a possible funerary monument, 2 possible altar tables, 2 stele whose function is unknown, a silver buckle, a series of bricks and 2 stone blocks of unknown function, a marble disc, a mosaic panel, a cornice, and an unidentified object (see Felle, *Biblia Epigraphia,* 526).

a section of a work, and a number of amulets contain the first phrase from Psalm 91, the first lines of one or more gospels, and even the first words of Matthew 6.9, the Lord's Prayer. As Sanzo concludes, incipits needed to "provide just enough text so that the opening line could be recognized."[45] Although Sanzo is skeptical, a number of other scholars who study these texts conclude that by invoking the first words of a phrase or book, the whole was also invoked. Thus, one could cite the opening line of a gospel on an apotropaic object and through it claim the power associated with the whole. Could this, therefore, be the case with Romans 8.31? For if this text is an incipit, early Christians would see it as the introductory question which leads to the remainder of Romans 8 that features so prominently in early Christian literary writings. Thus, perhaps, the gap between the epigraphic and literary use of this portion of Romans 8 is not so wide.

And finally, conclusions can be drawn in terms of the reception history of Romans 8.31. Perhaps most obviously, these ten witnesses to the use of the words of Romans 8.31 on a door lintel – and the 13 other uses of this text epigraphically – place this Roman text not only in literary documents but within public life. These door lintels are examples of the reworking of a text of Scripture as it is applied in a new situation.[46] Moreover, the nature of these additional witnesses suggests that Romans 8.31 was meaningful for Christians in a variety of settings.[47] While this might not seem like much, as Peter Head concludes, it is "an impoverishment of the discipline if these additional witnesses are allowed to drop from our collective sight by virtue of neglect in comparison with the – admittedly fundamentally important –

[45] Sanzo, "Ancient Amulets with Incipits."

[46] Head, "Additional Greek Witnesses," 453.

[47] Head, "Additional Greek Witnesses," 432.

manuscript tradition."[48] For even if they don't serve a significant text critical purpose, these epigraphic examples do challenge an understanding of reception history that is linear and that suggests we can trace the development of a text through time.[49] When we begin to consider inscriptions, which could be from memory, liturgy, or adapted for a particular space, and which could serve an apotropaic and even magical function, we sidestep from a strictly linear view of reception history. Consequently, this enables us to consider a much wider swath of information to inform the use of a particular scriptural text, drawing on what some scholars call "popular Christian religiosity."[50]

Conclusions

Epigraphic inscriptions which use the words of Romans 8.31 are, in the words of Thomas Kraus, "fingerprints of a bygone time that had become fixed in individual material, a specific layout, and performance of the writing, and the orthography of a manuscript" and thus they may help to "reach new insights into the lives of early Christians" as well as serve as witnesses to the text and transmission of Scripture and

[48] Head, "Additional Greek Witnesses," 453.

[49] One text-critical nugget that can be gleaned from the information provided within these 23 inscriptions is a variant of Romans 8.31 found on three Latin inscriptions. These three inscriptions read "adversus nos" rather than "contra nos", a variation which, according to Felle, is not attested in biblical tradition or the manuscripts of early Christian writers (see Felle, *Biblia Epigraphia*, 340, 347, and 355).

[50] Head, "Additional Greek Witnesses," 442.

its use.[51] These inscriptions invite an encounter with Scripture, or at least with parts of it, in the ancient world not often considered by biblical scholars, an encounter outside the liturgy and the manuscript "with Scripture in its inscribed physicality."[52]

Such inscriptions offer a glimpse at one of the primary contexts in which a Christian in the ancient world may have engaged with the words of Scripture: on their door. It is important, therefore that these inscriptions are not lost sight of as a part of the reception of Romans 8.31, even if pencil sketches of them is all that remains. Even though the reception of Romans 8.31 in literary texts – traditionally privileged in reception historical studies – is limited, that this text appears in numerous inscriptions, serving a possible apotropaic function, suggests that it plays an important role in the daily lives of a number of Christians in antiquity and thus, even though many questions remain unanswered, it warrants our careful attention.[53]

[51] T.J. Kraus, "Manuscripts with the *Lord's Prayer*: They are More than Simply Witnesses to That Text Itself," in *New Testament Manuscripts: Their Texts and Their World*, T.J. Kraus and T. Niklas, eds. TENTS 2 (Leiden. 2006) 227-266; 231. See also Head, "Additional Greek Witnesses," 442, 453.

[52] Lincicum, "Epigraphic Habits," 91.

[53] G.H.R. Horsley, "The Inscriptions of Ephesos and the NT" *NovT* 34.2 (1992) 105-168; 167. DOI: 10.2307/1561039.