

**Gerrit C. Vreugdenhil, *Psalm 91 and Demonic Menace*, Oudtestamentische studiën/Old Testament Studies 77, Leiden: Brill, 2020. ISBN 9789004427884. Hardback, pp. xvi + 491. \$166/€138.**

- [1] As scholars have long noted, Ps 91 (LXX Ps 90) played a major role in rituals for combatting demons in the ancient and late antique world, traversing our inherited distinctions between magic and religion. Indeed, much scholarship has examined the anti-demonic use of this psalm in corpora ranging from the Dead Sea Scrolls to late antique amulets and apotropaic contexts.<sup>1</sup> This (anti-)demonic reception history of Ps 91—both from ancient and scholarly perspectives—sets the analytical stage for Gerrit C. Vreugdenhil’s *Psalm 91 and Demonic Menace*, which seeks to address the extent to which a demonically oriented reading of this psalm is justified for its Hebrew Bible context.
- [2] This lengthy book consists of nine chapters, which are complemented by numerous figures and tables; a relatively extensive bibliography; and various indices (authors; subjects; and biblical texts). In the book’s introduction (chapter 1), Vreugdenhil touches on matters that receive fuller treatment throughout the remainder of the book, including a cursory overview of some later amulets that make use of Ps 91; a broad taxonomic approach to the term *demon* (and the relevant ancient terms translated as “demon”); some basic concepts, such as the pluralistic religious context of the Near Eastern world and the distinction between primary and secondary religion; and a preliminary outline of the principle methods that will be deployed in the study, especially Delimitation Criticism and the exegetical and cognitive linguist methods developed by Eep Talstra and Ellen van Wolde respectively.
- [3] The remaining eight chapters are divided unevenly into three parts. The two chapters that make up the first section are oriented around the context of the psalm’s composition, focusing attention on conceptions of demons in the ancient Near East (chapter 2) and in ancient Israel (chapter 3). In chapter 2, Vreugdenhil makes the case that “Near Eastern man” was constantly plagued by demons in diverse spaces and areas of life (esp. home, the body, witchcraft, birth, the desert, and nocturnal activities) and deployed a host of rituals and objects to combat these threats that often used metaphors drawn from quotidian life (e.g., nets and snares). Despite the casual and synthetic references to diverse Near Eastern traditions (e.g., Ugaritic, Canaanite, Egyptian), Vreugdenhil focuses his attention on the Mesopotamian series *Utukkū Lemnūtu* on account of its full description of the demonic and because it brings “us closer to a general understanding of demons as the agents which most directly affected a patient’s psyche” (37). Vreugdenhil also highlights how these magical texts focus on immediate concerns and lack theological reflection that characterize official, elite religion.
- [4] Chapter 3 examines demons within the world of ancient Israel. Vreugdenhil begins this chapter with a short, but insightful history of scholarship on demons in the Hebrew Bible, underscoring the extent to which prior research has either downplayed the role of the demonic (e.g., Ridderbos, Frey-Anthes, and Blair) or emphasized the importance

<sup>1</sup> E.g., Émile Puech, “11QPsAp<sup>a</sup>: Un rituel d’exorcismes; Essai de reconstruction,” *RevQ* 14 (1990): 377–408; Puech, “Les deux derniers Psaumes Davidiques du rituel d’exorcisme, 11QPsAp<sup>a</sup> IV 4–V14,” in *The Dead Sea Scrolls: Forty Years of Research*, ed. Devorah Dimant and Uriel Rappaport (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 64–89; Thomas J. Kraus, “Septuaginta-Psalm 90 in apotropäischer Verwendung: Vorüberlegungen für eine kritische Edition und [bisheriges] Datenmaterial,” *BN* 125 (2005): 39–73; Joseph E. Sanzo, *Scriptural Incipits on Amulets from Late Antique Egypt: Text, Typology, and Theory* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 107–30.

of these otherworldly foes—and the world of magic that they ostensibly inhabited—as it relates to ancient Israel (e.g., Mowinckel). The chapter then examines some of the archaeological evidence for early Israelite demonology, underscoring the apotropaic role of material objects (e.g., jewelry, amulets, and later incantation bowls) as well as the heavy Egyptian influence on Israelite views of demons and how to combat them. For Vreugdenhil, this archaeological evidence and the demonic/magical perspective it reflects are situated firmly within the domain of family and household religion—as distinct from official religion; such a perspective in his view manifests itself principally in the individual psalms of lament. He then examines these psalms, highlighting four areas that overlap with demonic concerns in the Mesopotamian series *Utukkū Lemnūtu*: the house; inhospitable places; magic and sorcery; sickness and death. Comparison between these psalms and the texts of *Utukkū Lemnūtu* reveal similarities (e.g., the appearance of demons in powerless situations; overlap between presentations of enemies and demons) and differences (e.g., in contrast to the texts of *Utukkū Lemnūtu*, the Hebrew Bible does not identify demons by name and only the God of Israel is addressed to thwart their activities). This analysis sets the stage for Vreugdenhil’s examination of the relationship between text in context in part 3 (see below).

- [5] The second section focuses on the text of Ps 91, detailing the text and structure of the psalm (chapter 4) as well as its genre (chapter 5). In the fourth chapter, Vreugdenhil analyses the text and structure of Ps 91. After addressing some central textual questions in the study of this psalm (e.g., the relationship of verse 1 to verse 2; the proper reading of דָּבָר [as *deber* “plague” or as *dābar* “word”]), he applies the first part of Eep Talstra’s exegetical model, which progresses in seriatim from grammar and linguistic structure to rhetorical analysis, in conjunction with Delimitation Criticism, which attends to delimiting markers (e.g., textual divisions and paragraph signs) in the extant Hebrew, Greek, Syriac, and Latin manuscript traditions. With the help of this robust methodological framework, Vreugdenhil draws a series of conclusions about the structure of this psalm, including: the psalm can be properly divided into several units (verses 1–2; 3–4; 5–6; 7–8; 9–13; 14–6), which coalesce into two main divisions (verses 1–8 and verses 9–16); and 9a (“Yes, You, YHWH, are my refuge! [trans. Vreugdenhil]) occupies an especially important place in Ps 91. This final point proves to be central to Vreugdenhil’s reconstruction of the psalm’s overall function (cf. chapter 9).
- [6] Chapter 5 offers a preliminary analysis of the genre and context of Ps 91, which, Vreugdenhil rightly argues, is intrinsically linked to the question of demonic interpretation of this psalm. In this largely historiographical analysis, Vreugdenhil synthesizes the manifold ways scholars have understood the genre and context of this psalm (e.g., as a vestige of a healing ritual; as a psalm of sickness; as a cultic instruction; as a psalm of confidence; as a magic incantational psalm). Vreugdenhil provides a broad summary and evaluation of each of these scholarly approaches to the psalm’s genre/context and, not surprisingly, concludes that Ps 91 fails to conform perfectly to these clear-cut scholarly classifications.
- [7] The third and final part is the most extensive and grapples with methods and themes at the intersection of text and context, including an introduction to a cognitive-linguistic analysis of the text-context binary (chapter 6); investigations into words and expressions reflective of demonic threat (chapter 7) and divine protection (chapter 8) based on the aforementioned cognitive-linguistic model; and a synthetic conclusion that bridges the analyses between threat and protection and isolates the psalm’s primary function (chapter 9). In chapter 6, Vreugdenhil introduces the principal cognitive-linguistic model that he uses to flesh out the two-way relationship between the text of Ps 91 and its Near Eastern

- and Israelite contexts in chapters 9 and 10. These driving cognitive-linguistic concepts (esp. profile; base; cognitive domain; trajector; landscape) are ultimately tailored toward an investigation into the operative mental images in the psalm, which involve the interplay of four key processes: cultural categories and prototypes (categorization); cognitive domains (conceptualization); linguistic unit type (profile-base relations); and usage event (employment).
- [8] In chapter 7, Vreugdenhil applies this cognitive-linguistic model to the theme of threat in Ps 91. He precedes systematically through the principal terms and phrases that represent threat in the psalmic text (e.g., “fowler’s net,” “magic word,” “terror of the night,” “lion”), synthesizing information gleaned from ancient Near Eastern cultural contexts (including textual, visual, and material sources) and the text of Ps 91, which is seen through the prism of cognitive-linguistic categories (e.g., profile, base, cognitive domain, prototypical scenario). In keeping with his methodological framework, the goal of such analyses is to arrive at the mental image that each term/phrase evoked within the conceptual world of ancient Israel. His study of the phrase “fowler’s net” (פּוֹחַ יְקוֹשׁ) constitutes one of the more intriguing examples in this chapter. Vreugdenhil examines in this discussion a wide range of Near Eastern sources that attest to hunting, traps, and nets and assesses their manifold meanings—including their metaphorical extensions to the threats and menaces of enemies, demons, magical practices, and idolatry. He concludes that the trajector פּוֹחַ and its landmark יְקוֹשׁ in Ps 91 ought to be situated within the cognitive domains of hunting and enmity—and not, for instance, within other possible cognitive domains (e.g., judgment). These domains are said to envision scenarios in which one intentionally sets a trap for a bird/human with harmful consequences for the trapped. In Vreugdenhil opinion, the mental image evoked by “fowler’s net” would have extended across various kinds of threat and menace but would have included a particular emphasis on the “evil intent” of the trapper, whose snare suddenly catches a helpless and unsuspecting victim. Vreugdenhil concludes this chapter by emphasizing the associations of many of the analyzed terms and phrases with demons, whose menacing universe extends across a range of threats, including magic and sorcery (see discussion below).
- [9] Chapter 8 continues the contextually oriented cognitive-linguistic analysis of Ps 91 with an examination of terms for protection (e.g., hiding-place; shadow; fortress; wings). For instance, Vreugdenhil’s analysis of “shadow” (צֶל) highlights through diverse Near Eastern sources (including Hebrew Bible texts) the protective function of shade against the heat of the day and its metaphorical extension to the protection offered by gods and kings against enemies and even other (“false”) gods. He emphasizes that the term implies (physical) proximity to the entity/object providing protection and the recognition on the part of the seeker that the entity/object providing shade is “stronger or mightier” than him or her. For Vreugdenhil, therefore, the prototypical scenarios that צֶל envision are the protection from the sun’s heat, on the one hand, and the protection offered by a mighty person/god, on the other. Consequently, the needy person in Ps 91 is seeking protection “in YHWH’s physical proximity” (361). Vreugdenhil concludes by noting a progression in the presentation of protection in this psalm “from (1) a place beyond the reach of evil where one can take refuge, via (2) God’s protection in the form of wings enshielding the believer, to (3) the assurance of God’s intervention and action on behalf of the believer” (400). He concedes that the terms for protection in Ps 91 do not expressly deal with demons—though, he rightly notes, they do not necessarily exclude a demonic interpretation.
- [10] In the final chapter (chapter 9), Vreugdenhil synthesizes the insights from the preceding chapters (especially chapters 7 and 8) and sets forth his own theory about the primary

function of this psalm. After summarizing the main findings from chapters 7 and 8, Vreugdenhil turns his attention to the four principal actors in the psalm: (1) the anxious person seeking protection; (2) YHWH himself; (3) a representative of YHWH; and (4) bystanders. Attention to the dialogical interaction of the actors in Ps 91 (especially actors 1 and 3) and to the psalm's emphasis on demonic menace help Vreugdenhil establish the psalm's situational context. In his view, we should first examine family/household religion in ancient Israel, which, he argues was clearly distinct from official religion; was primarily oriented around quotidian needs (both mundane and preternatural); and, consequently, employed host of apotropaic rituals and objects (e.g., amulets; figurines). Yet, according to Vreugdenhil, despite the emphases on demons and apotropaic materials in such domestic spaces, the menacing circumstances behind Ps 91 (esp. various demonic and magical threats) proved to be too much for household religion and, therefore, drove the afflicted person to seek assistance from a specialist connected to the local/regional sanctuary (i.e., the representative of YHWH). The situational context was, therefore, two-fold: the family/household and the local/regional sanctuary.

- [11] The interface of these dialogical and social/situational dimensions works in conjunction with the structural centrality of Ps 91:9a (see above). For Vreugdenhil, this confession is not merely an “expression of confidence” in the presence of witnesses, whereby the original afflicted person places all of his/her trust in YHWH to thwart the operative demonic/magical threats. But these words also help orient the psalm's broader paradigmatic function: “he who makes this confession his own, such as by reciting the psalm, enters the world of the psalm: a world which, although menacing, is one within which YHWH is a guardian reality” (440). In Vreugdenhil's estimation, this confessional dimension alongside the psalm's instructional character also helps establish what Ps 91 is not: it was not designed to be an amulet or magic charm although demonic menace figures prominently in this psalm. For Vreugdenhil, a magical usage of this psalm “would be contrary” to its meaning since the psalm is designed to “deliver *out of* the consequences of magic and sorcery” (440–41 [emphasis in original]). To state the matter in a slightly different way, Vreugdenhil claims that the psalm “must be seen not as an *amulet* but as an *invitation* to entrust ourselves truly to YHWH” (440).
- [12] Vreugdenhil ought to be congratulated for providing a detailed textual and structural analysis of Ps 91 that likewise situates it in its ancient Near Eastern contexts (including diverse social, ritual, and domestic environs in Israel). This book usefully brings important theories and approaches to bear on this psalm, especially cognitive-linguistic analysis. Toward this end, readers will certainly find many of the analyses of the expressions (e.g., the “fowler's net”; “wings”) in chapters 7 and 8 illuminating for reconstructing the nature of threat and protection in Ps 91. Vreugdenhil not only incorporates his governing cognitive-linguistic method into his textual analysis in a clear and systematic way, but his discussions usefully engage with relevant textual, material, and visual sources from the ancient Near Eastern world. Most importantly, his conclusion that demons figured into the threat envisioned by Ps 91 in its Hebrew Bible context, which is based on a detailed exegetical investigation, will certainly have an impact on future scholarship.
- [13] But Vreugdenhil's otherwise adroit use of theory and method ironically underscores his lack of theoretical and methodological engagement with rubrics, such as magic and sorcery. His approach to these categories is drawn almost exclusively from Hebrew Bible and ancient Near Eastern scholarship, with little attention to larger discussions in religious studies. The absence of critical engagement with these categories, in fact, makes a significant impact on some of the individual conclusions he draws as well as on his approach

to the function of this psalm, more generally. For instance, his discussion in chapter 7 of the phrase *דבר הוֹוֹת*, which he translates as “magic word,” does not begin with the lexical meaning of these two words (in contrast to the other terms and expressions he discusses in chapters 7 and 8). Instead, Vreugdenhil follows other Hebrew Bible scholars (e.g., Guillaume) by beginning with the context of magic in the ancient Near Eastern world, whose ostensible emphasis on the spoken word—a point not uncontroversial in and of itself—is then used as the basis for his lexical investigation and contiguous translation. Beginning with a lexical analysis of this phrase, which he concedes is rather ambiguous (245–46), would no doubt have undermined his translation, the utility of focusing on ancient Near Eastern magical sources and, consequently, his claim that magical rituals comprised one of the principal threats behind Ps 91. Perhaps more importantly, his contention that magic and sorcery constituted the operative cognitive domain of this phrase in ancient Israel is unconvincing—at least to the present reviewer—and stands in contrast to a significant body of scholarship in religious studies, which has posed a considerable challenge to the idea that anything resembling a cognitive domain of magic—as a discrete unit of thought or social existence—would have been operative within the ancient (Near Eastern) world.

- [14] The magic/religion binary, in particular, manifests itself in several places in this book. This binary, for example, seems to stand behind the contrast he draws between the Maqlû series and Ps 91: “A possible difference between the two types of texts lies in the fact that in one context one seeks liberation by performing ritual actions and uttering a magical curse of incantation, while in the other context there is ‘mere’ prayer” (260). Such a clear distinction does not seem to be at work in the ancient Near Eastern world. In fact, in his survey of ancient Mesopotamian conceptions of illicit and ambiguous rituals, Daniel Schwemer challenges such an assumption in a rather blunt way: “Is prayer a potential means of witchcraft? Many texts imply that Babylonians and Assyrians indeed considered this to be the case” (Daniel Schwemer, “Mesopotamia,” in *Guide to the Study of Ancient Magic*, ed. D. Frankfurter [Leiden: Brill, 2019], 36–64, at 48). Many readers will also find that the magic/religion binary seems at times to lurk behind some of his governing theoretical concepts (e.g., the framing and clear distinctions between “primary” and “secondary” religion or “official” and “common/folk/household” religion).
- [15] Yet most importantly, the magic/religion binary plays an essential role in his overarching approach to the function of Ps 91 in the Hebrew Bible and in its subsequent reception. Vreugdenhil concludes that a magical use of the psalm (including an amuletic function) would run counter to the psalm’s emphasis on trust (cf. Ps 91:9a) and its anti-magical character. As he states, “Any magic use of the psalm will fail to oppose the consequences of magic; that would be taking more poison as an antidote.... It is not the use of the *text* as such but trust in YHWH that is the key to liberation and protection” (441 [emphasis in original]). But the notion that the use of the psalm’s text intrinsically stands in marked contrast with trust is more of a theological claim born out of a post-Protestant era (i.e., belief/trust vs. ritual/use) than a reflection of ancient taxonomies. Protective and curative uses of sacred texts did not necessarily connote magical or even amuletic practices in antiquity. In fact, late antique patristic writers, such as Augustine of Hippo, could extol the use of biblical objects as healing aids (e.g., *In Io. tra.* 7.12), expressly contrasting them with “amulets” (*ligaturae*) and associating these ritual artifacts with Christian virtues, such as “hope” (*spes*). In addition, even if one were to concede that the person seeking help in this psalm was threatened by magic (see comments above), it should be stressed that a considerable number of apotropaic formulas and objects from the ancient world—including many of the ancient Near Eastern materials Vreugdenhil references—were

specifically designed to combat harmful, magical rituals. In the end, if we disassociate Ps 91 from a religion/magic binary, we not only better understand its reception history, but we also open up interpretive horizons for the Hebrew Bible text within its ancient Near Eastern contexts. For instance, we cannot necessarily exclude the possibility that the recitation of the confession in Ps 91:9a would have been understood in its ancient Israelite context also as a performative, apotropaic speech act, analogous to many of the incantations we find in the ancient Near Eastern sources that Vreugdenhil mentions in his analysis.

- [16] In sum, Vreugdenhil's book embodies both the tremendous benefits of bridging biblical studies with other relevant disciplines and the analytical hazards of failing to do so. His exegetical work, which incorporates a philologically and contextually based cognitive-linguistic model, makes an important contribution to scholarship on Ps 91 and ought to serve as an exemplar for future study. Unfortunately, he did not extend this interdisciplinary posture toward the field of religious studies, which would have augmented some of his assumptions, analyses, and conclusions. Such criticisms notwithstanding, readers interested in Ps 91 and its reception history will certainly benefit from Vreugdenhil's detailed study.

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