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The Centuries-long Co-Production of the Sibylline Oracles

Filippino Lippi, "Sibyl of Delphi" (ceiling of the Carafa Chapel, Rome) - fresco painting, 1489-1491 (public domain)

This tradition of prophecies, written by Jewish and Christian authors in the voice of Greek Sibyls, shows the power of prophecy, even (or especially) prophecy from "outsiders," in the processes of religious co-production and competition.

An ancient collection of oracles supposedly uttered by Greek pagan prophetesses was largely penned by Jews and, later, Christians. They also read, copied, and circulated the collection, called the Sibylline Oracles, for centuries afterwards. Why would ancient Jews and Christians write prophecy in the voice of a figure from outside their own communities? More, why would such writings be considered useful and authoritative for these ancient groups? In searching for the answers to these questions, it is possible to see the dynamics of co-production at play in the history of this tradition.

The texts are called the "Sibylline Oracles" because they comprise a collection of prophetic utterances – oracles – attributed to the Sibyl, a type of Greek prophetess. In the ancient west Asian and Mediterranean world, a prophet was a human with a special relationship to a divinity who spoke on that deity's behalf. The prophet might do so by answering questions, interpreting dreams, or explaining contemporary political circumstances in theological terms (the latter a strategy favored by many prophets in the Hebrew Bible). The most famous Greek sibyl, discussed by both Herodotus and

Thucydides, was the one at Delphi, who answered questions about the future with ambiguous predictions. Readers may be familiar with the tale of Croesus described in book 1 of Herodotus' *Histories*: Croesus was king of Lydia, and was told by the sibyl at Delphi that if he went to war, he would destroy a great empire. Taking this as a signal of his imminent success, he went to war – and promptly destroyed his own empire. For a Greek Jew or a Roman Christian to write in the voice of the sibyl is to use one of the avatars of Greek and Roman culture against Greek and Roman opponents, utilizing the common language of prophecy in order to do so.

The material is presented as hexametric poetry, organized into 14 books in modern editions. There is not an obvious structure to the material, which contains a mixture of predictions of evil kings, the history and downfall of various nations, and retold biblical and folkloric material. The first three books describe the prehistory of the world, incorporating biblical narratives with Greek myth, e.g. by describing the biblical flood alongside the myth of the Titans. Scholars have long debated the precise origins of the collection, and have concluded that Book 3, in particular, appears to be the earliest part of the text, produced by a Jewish author living in Egypt in the 2nd century BCE under the culturally-Greek dynasty of the Ptolemies. The book opens with an invocation to God, "the high-thundering blessed heavenly One, who set the cherubim in their place … who formed four-lettered Adam" (3.1–2, 30), clearly naming a religious commitment to the God of the Jewish scriptures. One of the earliest parts of the book "predicts" and criticizes the epic poet Homer, the author of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. The text calls him "an aged mortal, a false writer of doubtful native land" (3.523–25) who writes of Troy "not truthfully, indeed but skillfully" (3.529–30). On the other hand, the text reflects a deep knowledge of both Jewish and Greek literature.

Later, in the Roman empire, early Christians copied, circulated, and expanded upon the original core of material. Book 2 includes a prediction that "Christ will judge that which is due… and give his martyrs an eternal prize" (2.50–53), and book 5 declares that Jesus was pre-existent and briefly describes the miracles he performed. Rome's downfall is predicted at length in book 5 and again in book 8. This tells us that at least one Christian wrote in the voice of the sibyl, and we have evidence that the Sibylline Oracles were extremely popular among early Christian groups. A 2nd century CE writer who produced anti-Christian polemic, named Celsus, called Christians "sibyl-mongers" as a part of his claim that Christians were superstitious fools. Legends about the sibyls continued to be popular throughout the Middle Ages.

Is there something in the form of a prophetic corpus, with its special relationship to the past, present, and future, that makes it particularly apt for creative processes and engagement? It might be the case that the stability and significance of biblical prophecy made the marginal and flexible sibylline prophecies particularly exciting to scripturally committed groups not only when the tradition was being formed but also in later centuries.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to understand the Sibylline Oracles without a decent understanding of ancient prophecy, Greco-Roman culture, ancient Jewish history and literature, and early Christian history. The author(s) and editors of the text certainly knew Greco-Roman myth and the Jewish prophetic tradition based in the Hebrew Bible; the later layers show an understanding of Christian theological positions, like the pre-existence of Jesus. We can easily describe this text as co-produced by the interaction of Greek, Jewish, Christian, and Roman cultures over the course of at least three centuries. The shared framework of prophecy enabled the authors to articulate their relationship with their predecessors – for example, Christians with their Jewish forebears, or Hellenistic Jews with ancient Greek authors – and also with their contemporaries, such

as early Christians and neighboring Jews, or Hellenistic Jews with their culturally-Greek rulers.

While it is certainly important to understand the origins of the Sibylline Oracles as best we can, this is not sufficient: the longer history of the (co)production of this corpus, with its messy entanglements between Jewish, Hellenistic, and Christian worldviews, offers a much better vantage point for understanding the text as we now have it. Thinking with co-production suggests that what is significant about these texts is not their fuzzy moments of origin or their emergence, but rather the long durée processes that led Hellenistic Jews to write a polemic against Hellenistic rule in Greek language, style, and form, and what further led to the successful circulation and expansion of that writing in a Roman contexts by Christians.

Further Reading

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