

**Pagan Divination in the Greek Patristic.
The Terms Used in Criticizing Oracles.**

di

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The theme of divination and prophecy is one of the topics that best allow analysis of the meeting and confrontation of the new Christian message and Greco-Roman civilization. In the earliest Apologetics there was already criticism of pagan prophesying, and this remained present with greater or lesser intensity throughout the life of the genre. The particular religious and spiritual context of the second century was favourable to the existence of oracles with a theological content, concerning the destiny of the soul, divine worship, the nature and characteristics of divinity and similar topics, a long way from the traditional consultations about material life¹. The shrines at Didyma and Claros provided an extensive collection of theological oracles at the period², to whose god was attributed a large part of the oracles contained in the collection gathered together under the title of *Tübingen Theosophy*. The field of theurgy also led to the proliferation of other examples of prophesies, such as the *Chaldean Oracles*, and some of the writings of Porphyry and Iamblichus. It was in this complex ideological context that there was a confrontation between, on behalf of pagan beliefs, Plotinus, Porphyry, Iamblichus or Proclus, and, on the Christian side, Origen, Eusebius of Caesarea, Synesius of Cyrene or Saint Augustine.

Christian authors are constant in their criticism of Apollonian divination, although some merely criticized it, while others took advantage of whatever in it appeared to them valid. From Saint Justin the Martyr down to the *Contra Julianum* of Cyril of Alexandria there is a steady strand in the writings of the Fathers of condemnation of the immorality of the traditions of the Greeks and their idolatrous religion, including their divinatory practices.

Co-existence between paganism and Christianity wavered between clear hostility and a more or less conscious assimilation. In Christian Apologetics there were two ways of making use of oracles and the pagan prophetic tradition. On the one hand, Christianity took advantage of the trend towards “theological oracles”, interpreting them to its own benefit, so that it was Apollo himself with his own words who announced and supported the characteristics of the true God, as can be seen in the *Tübingen Theosophy* or in the *Sibylline Oracles*. On the other, however, the harsher Apologetics that was more usual attacked the practice of prophesy using arguments taken from the Greeks themselves.

In the context of this confrontation between Classical culture and Christian culture, the object of this paper is to bring together and analyse the terms used by the Fathers in enunciating their criticisms and references to Apollo and pagan oracular responses, from the *Shepherd* of Hermas, one of the last examples of Apostolic literature, down to Theodoret of Cyrhus, with special attention

¹ Plu. *Mor.* 284 E-F. This step of a ‘citizen god’ to a ‘prophetic god’ has been studied by A. BUSINE, *Paroles d’Apollon. Pratiques et traditions dans l’Antiquité tardive (II-VI siècles)*, Leiden–Boston 2005.

² W. GÜNTER, *Das Orakel von Didyma in hellenistischer Zeit. Eine Interpretation von Stein-Urkunden*, Tübingen 1971; A.D. NOCK, *Oracles théologiques*, REA 30 (1928) 280-281; S. PRICOCO, *Un oracolo di Apollo su Dio*, RSLR 23 (1987) 4-36, *Per una storia dell’oracolo nella tarda antichità. Apollo Clario e Didimeo in Lattanzio*, Augustinianum 29 (1989) 351-374, and E. SUÁREZ DE LA TORRE, E., *Apollo, teologo cristiano*, Annali di Scienze Religiose 8 (2003) 129-152.

paid to Eusebius of Caesarea. Indeed, the *Praeparatio evangelica* by Eusebius of Caesarea, on the border between the third century and the Constantinian era, belongs to a point in time when there was considerable reflexion about the divinatory practices of the two great Neoplatonists, Porphyry and Iamblichus, who drew up a complete Plotinian system of oracular texts. An overview will be given of the principal authors in whose works this question is considered, so as to draw up a catalogue of the terms used in describing the phenomenon of divination. The idea is to define the critical arguments in Patristic authors, in an attempt to point to traditional lines of use of language, which for the greater part were already established in Eusebius of Caesarea, an heir of earlier practices and a source for posterity.

Pagan divination or fortune-telling and Christian prophecy

To get a better understanding of the method employed in Patristic texts containing Apologetics, it is necessary to keep in mind a few considerations about the terminology employed to denote Christian prophecy and distinguish it from Greek predictions. The terms used are very clear on this point, being *μαντική* and *προφητεία* respectively. In general, it can be stated that Greek Patristics used the word *προφητεία* in a narrower, more specialized, sense to refer to a power of knowing what will happen in the future, conceded by God to those whom he has chosen, while *μαντική* refers to the practice of foretelling the future thanks to the intervention of demons or false gods. John Chrysostom in his *In epistulam I ad Corinthios XXIX 1* includes interesting observations on the distinction between divination, *μαντεία*, and prophecy, *προφητεία*, with respect to the passage in Paul (I Corinthians 12, 2) on *εἶδωλα ἄφωνα*, “mute idols”. Overlying this basic distinction, however, there is a whole series of words used by the Fathers of the Church to refer to the pagan art of divination.

In Greek literature itself, nevertheless, the term *προφήτης*, which becomes the standard usage in Biblical and Christian literature, signifies simply ‘announcer’, ‘spokesperson’, ‘person who makes statements or speaks in the name of God’. That is to say, it indicates a function of spoken communication, without any necessary relationship to the activity of revelation. Even further, in Greek religion the term does not in principle indicate prediction of the future or inspired status, senses which it did acquire in Biblical Greek and in Jewish and Christian literature³. In Greek literature the word *μάντις* is the more general, not the marked, term. It indicates divinatory powers and their revelations, including not merely the transmission of a message, like *προφήτης*, but also the possibility of the revelation of a divine message, whether by means of technical procedures or by people inspired⁴. On the basis of the passage in Plato’s *Timaeus*⁵, the idea has become generalized that a ‘*mantis*’ is a person inspired, while a ‘prophet’ is a simple intermediary. In the New Testament the word *προφήτης* appears one hundred and forty-four times, eighty-six of them in respect of prophets of the Old Testament. In the works of the Apostolic Fathers there are fifty-eight

³ E. FASCHER, *PROPHETES. Eine sprach- und religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung*, Giessen, 1927, 51; M.C. VAN DER KOLF, *Prophetes und prophetis*, in *PW* 23.1 (1957), 798; P. AMANDRY, *La mantique apollinienne à Delphes*, Paris 1950, 175.

⁴ On this problem and the ambiguity of this terminology when used to refer to the staff of the sanctuaries see S. GEORGOUDI, *Le porte-parole des dieux: réflexions sur le personnel des oracles grecs*, in I. CHIRASSI and T. SEPPILLI (eds.), *Sibille e Linguaggi Oracolari. Mito, Storia, Tradizione*, Macerata 1998, 315-365.

⁵ 71 d-72 b.

occurrences, of which thirty-seven refer to prophets of the Old Testament⁶. In early Christianity this name was used to designate the ‘specialists’ in divine revelation and not simply those Christians who prophesied occasionally⁷. The same thing happened with the verb that describes the activity of a prophet: the normal word in Christian, Biblical and Patristic literature is προφητεύειν, translating in the Septuagint the corresponding Hebrew term, while in pagan Greek literature this is not the most usual verb, which here is μαντεύεσθαι⁸.

Nonetheless, the terminology used in Patristic sources to designate pejoratively the prophetic or divinatory activity of pagans is very extensive and varied. It is not limited to the word already mentioned, μαντεία. It is true that μαντεία, χρησπῆριον and their derivatives are the normal terms for referring to pagan oracles. The word λόγια, however, is kept to indicate the manifestation of the will of God⁹, τὰ λόγια τοῦ θεοῦ, which is how it is expressed, for example, in Romans 3, 2. In contrast, in Theophilus of Antioch there is a different usage. The second-century Apologists, as already indicated above, made no use of theological oracles, nor did they adapt the prophecies of Apollo to express their doctrinal content. They restricted themselves exclusively to attacking the immorality of pagan myths and rites, among which prophecy is included. Nonetheless, mention must be made of Theophilus, Bishop of Antioch, and his discourse *Ad Autolyicum*, which is an interesting piece of evidence of his way of describing pagan divinatory activity. The attack against paganism is carried out by quoting verses written by figures of prestige inside paganism itself, such as Aeschylus, Pindar, Euripides, Archilochus and Sophocles, which are presented as ‘oracular responses’, λόγια¹⁰. The doctrines arising from these verses proceed and are in agreement with the sayings of the prophets, whether they were pronounced before them or after them. Theophilus picks out only the Sibyl amidst those inspired by God among the Greeks¹¹. The positive meaning of λόγια is habitual in patristic writings¹², even if there are a few instances in which this term is used as synonymous with ‘pagan oracle’. This is the case of Eusebius of Caesarea, who quotes a passage by Porphyry in which he describes in this way an oracular hexameter¹³.

False Prophecy: Heresy and Paganism

The earliest Christian authors are conscious of the problem of the seers and wandering fortune-tellers who were prevalent towards the end of Classical Antiquity and the topic of the distinction between authentic and false prophecy is one to which they devote their reflexions on the subject. Nonetheless, it is difficult in early Christian texts to be sure whether the criticisms of false prophets are aimed at paganism or at heretical sectors of the Christian communities themselves.

⁶ On the people within Christianity, including some of the leading figures in heresies, who are designated by the term ‘prophet’, see D. AUNE, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World*, Grand Rapids 1991, 195-197.

⁷ AUNE, *Prophecy in Early*, 198.

⁸ FASCHER, *PROPHETES. Eine sprach-*, 53.

⁹ Naturally, in Biblical and Patristic texts there are a large number of other words used for concepts in this area, for example, the divine pronouncements, θεῖα κηρύγματα, of the prophets and apostles mentioned by Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *Affect.* X,76.

¹⁰ *Autol.* II,37-38.

¹¹ *Autol.* II,38.

¹² Eusebius, *HE* III,39,16; *PE* XII,16,9.

¹³ *Phil.* II, p. 169 Wolff, *ap.* *PE* VI,5,3.

The Apostolic Fathers directly refute pagan divinatory activities, without in any case taking advantage of them or attempting a symbiosis, as would become usual later as Christianity was gradually Hellenized in the third and fourth centuries. Their attitude explains why their terminology is totally negative.

One of the earliest Christian writings in which mention is clearly and unequivocally made of pagan divination in relation to Christian prophecy is the *Shepherd* by Hermas. Its nature as a work seen as inspired by the divinity, like the Old and New Testaments, makes it a crucial piece of evidence for Roman Christianity in the second century. The theme of the “false prophet” is fundamental in this literature, which attempts to mark itself off from paganism, but to continue using some of its literary formats. In the eleventh *Mandate* the topic is precisely this: the ψευδοπροφήτης, who destroys the minds of those servants of God who waver in their faith. Such people go to false prophets as if to a μάντις, or seer, and consult them about what will come to pass. The pagan term μάντις is still retained to refer to false prophets within Christianity, as opposed to the usual word in Christian literature, προφήτης. In XI 5-6 there is already a clear appearance of the idea, later repeated throughout patristic literature, that prophets speak because of inspiration from God, without anybody having to ask or tell them anything.

Judaeo-Christian prophets rarely gave prophetic answers to specific questions put to them by somebody who came to consult them¹⁴, while this was a standard practice in pagan divination. A further feature emphasized by Hermas is the fact that false prophets charge for their answers, something that would be at most sporadic in Christian communities, but habitual in the pagan world¹⁵, considered immoral by Christian critics. The *Shepherd* perfectly reflects the conflict within Christian communities between the practices of the Greco-Roman tradition of divination and Christian prophecy¹⁶.

Hermas gives a description of true and false prophets, the latter implying pagan seers, in XI,7-16. The description of Christian divination in Hermas, as also the terminology used to refer to it, is very unusual in early Christian literature. It apparently is based more on the Greco-Roman tradition of divination than the Jewish prophetic tradition, since it still reflects some of the practices and conventions common in pagan divination¹⁷, μαντεύονται ὡς καὶ τὰ ἔθνη¹⁸. The use of the word “*mantis*” doubtless refers more to pagan seers than to false prophets within Christianity itself, as is usual in New Testament writings¹⁹.

It is from the late first century that the *Didache*, or *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, dates. It already stresses the importance of prophecy as one of the forms of early Christian preaching, almost at the same level as the activity of the Apostles. Although prophets were highly revered in early Christian communities, this work nevertheless already alerts against charlatans and fakes. In XI 8 the author

¹⁴ See, for example, Mark 13,4; AUNE, *Prophecy in Early*, 226, n. 219.

¹⁵ *Didach.* II, 12; *Ascensum Isaiæ* 3, 28; Irenaeus, *Haer.* II,32,4, Aristides, *Apol.* II,1; J. REILING, *Hermas and Christian Prophecy. A Study of the Eleventh Mandate*, Leiden 1973, 52.

¹⁶ REILING, *Hermas*, p. 41-48, 73-96.

¹⁷ REILING, *Hermas*, p. 79-96.

¹⁸ *Mand.* XI,4.

¹⁹ The clearest case of this conflict among prophets in early Christianity is what is recounted in Revelation 2,20-24 against the false prophetess of Thyatira, the woman named Jezebel, who practised immorality and idolatry. There are numerous pieces of evidence dating from the late second through to the mid-third century concerning the problem of false prophecies, Matthew 7,15-23, 1Jo 4,1-3, *Did.* II-12, Hermas, *Mand.* XI, among others; AUNE, *Prophecy in Early*, 222-229.

gives several pointers for distinguishing a false prophet from a true. True prophets must act in accordance with their words, should not charge money for making predictions, and so forth. In XII 5 false prophets are said to be «people trafficking in Christ», χριστέμπορος. This expression appears in a number of Christian texts, normally referring to heretics or even to followers of Judaism, along with other terms, such as «empty boasters» and «swindlers»²⁰, ματαιολόγοι καὶ φρεναπάται, οὐ Χριστιανοί, ἀλλὰ χριστέμποροι. This is a word always used in a context of trickery, falsehood and blasphemy against the name of God²¹.

The term false prophet is also applied, as might be expected, to the seers of pagan religion, but with the expression ψευδόμαντις, not ψευδοπροφήτης. The first clear case is to be found in Athenagoras²², who takes an episode from Aeschylus²³. The latter, through words put in the mouth of Thetis, accused Apollo of being a false seer, a ψευδόμαντις, and of causing the death of Achilles. Athenagoras, however, here seems to be referring to the death of Hyacinth, as he quotes the fragment immediately after another on Apollo's beloved, which states that the speaker had believed the divine mouth of Phoebus to be infallible²⁴.

In this way it is evident what practice of Apologetics was adopted by Athenagoras, who used the words of Greek authors themselves to confirm the falseness of prophesies²⁵. The full text of Aeschylus is in Plato and a part of it in Plutarch, although in contexts differing from that of the Christian author. In contrast to it, Athenagoras²⁶ places authentic prophecy, coming directly from God, the sole source of knowledge²⁷.

This false nature of the prophecies of Apollo is reiterated in Patristic authors in a range of passages²⁸. Gregory of Nazianzus, for instance, calls Apollo a false prophet because of the oracle given to Croesus²⁹. This epithet is even given to other pagan figures, such as Balaam³⁰. In contrast with pagan prophecy, stress is laid upon the truth of Biblical oracles, χρησμών ἀλήθειαν, as noted by Theodoret when he recalls the foretelling performed by Isaiah a thousand years before the reign of Constantine. As had already been done by some second-century apologists, the *Stromata* of Clement of Alexandria also consider the topic of false prophets in relation to the origin of Greek philosophy. According to a Judaeo-Hellenistic idea, philosophy was stolen from God by an angel, who transmitted it to

²⁰ Ignatius of Antioch, spurious letter 3, 9, 5. In the letters of Saint Ignatius of Antioch the campaign to combat heresy has a prominent place, since heresy is the most dangerous stratagem in the Devil's arsenal. The Evil One makes use of heretics to corrupt faith in God with their false doctrines. The targets of Ignatius's attacks are Docetism and Judaism; C.K. BARRETT, *Jews and Cultures in the Epistles of Ignatius*, in *Jews, Greeks and Christians. Religious Cultures in Late Antiquity. Essays in Honour of W.D. Davies*, Leiden 1976, 220-244, and E. MOLLAND, *The Heretics Combated by Ignatius of Antioch*, JEH 5 (1954) 1-6.

²¹ See Chrysostom, *In Ep. I Thess.* 62,430, when commenting upon Rom 2,24.

²² *Leg.* 21, 5.

²³ Fr. 350 Nauck., vv. 5-9.

²⁴ Euripides at several points shows up the false nature of the oracles of Apollo, *Andr.* 1161-65 and *El.* 1246.

²⁵ Other references to the falseness of the Pythoness can be seen in Herodotus IV,69; Sophocles, *OC* 1097; Plutarch, *Mor.* 860 C.

²⁶ *Leg.* 7.

²⁷ L.W. BARNARD, *Justin Martyr. His Life and Thought*, Cambridge 1967, 135s.

²⁸ Theodoret, *Qu. in Oct.* 241,4; *HE* 188,6.

²⁹ *Jul.* II,35; see Pseudo-Lucian, *Philotr.* 8.

³⁰ John of Damascus, *Epistula ad Theophilum imperatorem de sanctis et venerandis imaginibus* 95, 373.

humans³¹. This theft of philosophy is compared to the stealing of fire by Prometheus. Greek philosophers in this way are thieves, because they seized part of the truth told by the Hebrew prophets and passed it off as their own doctrine³². In *Stromata* I,83,2 and 84,6 it is specified that this angel was actually Satan³³. He himself mixed false prophets with true. It is precisely the pseudo-prophets who have carried out this theft and are prophets not of the Lord, but of the Father of Lies, ψεύστος, that is, the Devil. Indeed, 'falseness' is one of the descriptions typifying pagan oracles

In general, in apostolic writings and those of the early apologists the expression «false prophet» has the sense of 'charlatan', γοητής³⁴, as will be seen below. Even later the pair of words 'divination' and 'charlatanry' were to be linked, as may be read in the *Contra Julianum* of Gregory of Nazianzus: πᾶσαν μαντείας καὶ γοητείας, ῥητῆς τε καὶ ἄρρήτου θυσίας τερατείαν³⁵.

The obscurity of pagan prophecies

The obscurity and ambiguity of Delphic prophecies, as contrasted with the clarity and certainty of those in the Bible, is one of the constant features in criticisms brought to bear against pagan oracles. For Clement of Alexandria the Greeks made use of concealment by means of enigmas and symbols in the sayings of their sages, in poetic and Pythagorean texts, and in the oracles, μαντεῖα, of Apollo, while Scripture is much clearer. In his *Stromata* V,21,4 he states this plainly and describes Apollo with the epithet Λοξίας, 'oblique'³⁶, which may be a reference to the obscurity and ambiguity of the Delphic responses³⁷. The same epithet is also to be seen in the *Contra Julianum* of Gregory of Nazianzus, in a passage in which the characteristics of the twelve Olympian gods are listed, in this case the deceitfulness of Apollo, ἀπάτην ὁ λοξίας αὐτῶν χρησμολόγος³⁸.

This ambiguity is described by Theodoret of Cyrhus as λώβη, that is, an 'insult' or 'mockery', when quoting some of the responses given by Apollo. One instance is his declaration to the Athenians, who were affected by famine, that they should sacrifice seven young couples to Minos³⁹

Clement equates the ἐπίκρυψις, 'the hidden meaning', of Holy Scripture with the hermetic, allegorical language used for theological topics among the Greeks and barbarians. He picks out the sayings of the Seven Sages, Pythagorean symbols and the oracles of Apollo with their αἰνύματα, which Clement also calls symbols⁴⁰. A mysterious and enigmatic vocabulary is present in pagan

³¹ J. PÉPIN, *Christianisme et mythologie. Jugements chrétiens sur les analogies du paganisme et du christianisme*, in Y. BONNEFOY (ed.), *Dictionnaire des mythologies et des religions des sociétés traditionnelles et du monde antique*, Paris, 1981, p. 161-171.

³² *Strom.* I 87, 2.

³³ F. BURI, *Clemens von Alexandrien und der paulinische Freiheitsbegriff*, Zürich-Leipzig, 1939, p. 34-36.

³⁴ J.-P. AUDET, *La Didaché, Instructions des Apôtres*, Paris, 1958, p. 205, n.2.

³⁵ *Jul.* II 35.

³⁶ See Plutarch, *De Pythiae oraculis* 409 C; Suda, s. v. Loci/aj.

³⁷ See Herodotus I,91. The etymology may also be related to the root *lyk-*, 'light', and a synonym of Phoebus, or to ἀλεητήριος, 'driver away of evil'.

³⁸ See also the similar expression, τὸν Λοξίαν τὰ ψευδῆ μαντευσάμενον, in Theodoret, *HE* 204, and the references by Synesius of Cyrene in *De somnis* 3 d.

³⁹ *Affect.* X,25.

⁴⁰ C. MONDÉSERT, *Le symbolisme chez Clément d'Alexandrie*, in *RSR* 26 (1936), p. 163.

oracles and in Christian prophesies, as God has veiled the truth to show up the ignorance of philosophers⁴¹.

Pagan prophecy, the work of demons

Demonology in early Christianity was conceived of as a reflexion on the origin of evil. The Early Fathers did no more than follow the *New Testament*, presenting demons as the adversaries of the kingdom of Christ⁴². They are said to be responsible for the deceiving of humankind, for heresies, for the persecutions against Christians. Pagan worship, its sacrifices, magic, and its oracles and astrology are the work of the Devil⁴³.

Pseudo-Clementine literature, for its part, puts in the mouth of Peter criticism of oracles as a deceitful means of dominating people used by demons, along with other tricks such as 'magic' cures. It recognizes that divination is not only one of God's works, but also a work of demons⁴⁴. In this author the first use is made of the term πύθων, serpent inspired by Apollo, commonly used in Patristic writings to designate Apollonian prophesies, but here employed in the plural⁴⁵. Theodoret⁴⁶ or Epiphanius of Salamis⁴⁷ recall the episode of the damsel possessed with a «spirit of divination», πνεῦμα Πύθωνος, who presented Paul and Silas as servants of the most high God. Paul himself finally expelled this «demon» from within the woman⁴⁸. It is clear that the term python is designating a pagan oracle.

In the *Dialogue with the Jew Trypho*, 105, of Justin the Martyr it is expressly stated that the demonic force of evil was present in the pythoness or woman with a familiar spirit 'ἐγγαστριμύθος' who conjured up the shade of Samuel⁴⁹ and who dominated the souls of just men and prophets. Bible history echoes the practice of summoning up the dead so as to learn about the future by recourse to women with familiar spirits who could act as mediums, which doubtless recalled to Christians the actions of the Pythoness of Delphi⁵⁰.

The fundamental point is precisely the fact that it is demons and not gods that preside over these oracles, as is stated with clarity in the *Praeparatio evangelica* by Eusebius, αὐτῶν Ἑλλήνων ὁμολογίαις ἥδη πρότερον δαίμονας αὐτοὺς εἶναι, καὶ οὐδ' ἀγαθοὺς πάσης δὲ βλάβης καὶ μοχθηρίας αἰτίους⁵¹. From this affirmation, Eusebius goes on to recount his principal arguments for rejecting oracles, since they are a demonic manifestation: their ambiguity, lack of any real knowledge of future events, their disappearance upon the arrival of Christ, and so forth. As Eusebius sees it, the Greek philosophers confirm this idea of the demonic origin of divination⁵². For this

⁴¹ *Strom.* V 15, 127.

⁴² Matthew 26,18; 2Corinthians 6,14-15; 12, 7-9; Ephesians 5,8; 6,11; Colossians 1,13, and elsewhere.

⁴³ ST. BENKO, *Pagan Rome and the Early Christians*, London, 1985, p. 119-122.

⁴⁴ In *Homiliae* IX,16.5-6 οὐ γὰρ εἶ τι μαντεύεται, θεός ἐστιν· ὅτι καὶ πύθωνες μαντεύονται, ἀλλ' ὑφ' ἡμῶν ὡς δαίμονες ὀρκιζόμενοι φυγαδεύονται.

⁴⁵ See, nonetheless, Plutarch, *Mor.* 414e.

⁴⁶ *Affect.* X,44 and 48.

⁴⁷ *Haer.* II,236.

⁴⁸ Acts 16,16.

⁴⁹ 1 Samuel 28,7.

⁵⁰ See Gregory of Nyssa, *De engastrimytho*.

⁵¹ Proem VI,11-14.

⁵² V,19-20 ταῦτα γὰρ ἦν, ὡς ἔφην, τὰ διὰ τῆς Προπαρασκευῆς ἐξ αὐτῶν τῶν Ἑλληνικῶν φιλοσόφων τε καὶ συγγραφέων μεμαρτυρημένα, ἐξ ὧν καὶ μάλιστα, δαίμονες ὄντες πονηροί, πολυπλόκοις μηχαναῖς, τοτὲ

Christian author, as was generally the tone adopted in all Patristic writings, the chief difference between Judaeo-Christian and pagan prophecy is that the former is inspired by the Holy Ghost, the latter by demons, τὸ διάφορον τῶν ὑπὸ τοῦ θείου πνεύματος κατόχων καὶ τῶν ὑπὸ δαιμονικῆς ἐνεργείας μαντεύεσθαι⁵³. The effects of such a demonic possession, which do not appear in the *Praeparatio*, are described as a befuddling of the mind, loss of reason, the uttering of meaningless words, dementia, and the like. It is even claimed that ‘manteia’ comes from the word ‘mania’, μαντεῖαν ὡσπερ τινα μανίαν⁵⁴. In contrast, prophecy from the Holy Spirit is authentic, since it illuminates the minds of humans to receive from God the truth about future events⁵⁵.

In the passage by John Chrysostom commented upon above, this is the difference between prophets and seers or fortune-tellers, τίς μὲν ὁ προφητεύων, τίς δὲ ὁ ψευδόμενος, where any μάντις is a liar. The guilty party is the fiendish Devil, μιᾶρός διάβολος, the δαίμων of pagans, who enters into prophets and turns them into false prophets, seers, of future events⁵⁶. The Holy Ghost produces sureness and certainty (πληροφορία) in prophets and in those listening to them, while the demon muddles humans’ wits (σκοτοῖ τὸν λογισμὸν)⁵⁷.

Divination, the work of charlatans or tricksters

In the first chapter of Book IV of his *Praeparatio evangelica*, Eusebius of Caesarea outlines the main thrust of his criticisms, insisting on the erroneous and fraudulent nature of oracles, which are a product of charlatans. They are nothing more than a swindle, ραιδιουργία being the term he applies to them most often: supposed fortune-tellers or seers rely on the aid of people who find out about the needs, wishes and interests of those coming to consult oracles, so as to be able to prepare responses in advance. Inside the sanctuaries they hide the items they use to produce surprising effects. Pagan seers utter their prophecies in an ambiguous and obscure form to prevent those people who consult oracles from understanding them or being able to check on them, as also happens with magic tricks.

Eusebius of Caesarea does not put the material of his argumentation in any rigorous order, so that there are repetitions and statements at cross purposes between Book IV and Book V. The ideas most often repeated are that pagan gods are evil demons and that their oracles disappeared when Christ came down to earth and his teachings were spread. Demons are guilty of the error of humans’ ways, πλάνη, and responsible for charlatantry, γοητεία, which is the root of evil. In IV,21, when speaking of demons, he brings in prophecies from the *Old Testament* relating to the setting free of

μὲν ταῖς διὰ μαντειῶν τοτὲ δὲ ταῖς δι’ οἰωνῶν ἢ συμβόλων ἢ θυμάτων ἢ τῶν παραπλησίων, τὸ ἀνθρώπειον διαστρέφοντες γένος δείκνυνται.

⁵³ V 26.7

⁵⁴ V,26. 8; see, nonetheless, Pl. *Phdr.* 244c.

⁵⁵ See also Gregory of Nyssa, *V. Mos.* I,74, where mention is made of the activity of Moses, when he became an interpreter of the will of God and abandoned the fortune-telling of demons.

⁵⁶ On this specific point another work must be taken into consideration, *Fragmenta in Jeremiam*, in which John Chrysostom distinguishes four sorts of prophesy (*PG* 56). One kind is natural or mechanical and another vulgar and popular, a third is spiritual and a fourth diabolical. He himself makes it plain that this last is the type of prophecy of the Pythoness of Dodona and the other manifestations in pagan antiquity; see *Frag. in Jerem.* 74I, 4-6, Καὶ καθόλου τῶν προφητειῶν, ἡ μὲν ἐστὶ πνευματικὴ, ἡ δὲ διαβολικὴ, ἡ δὲ μέση τούτων φυσικὴ τις ἢ τεχνικὴ, ἡ δὲ τετάρτη κοινὴ καὶ δημώδης; see also *In prodit. Jud.* 715, Πυθίῳ δαίμονι. □

⁵⁷ See also *Exegesis in Psalmis* 55,184,8. For this purpose John Chrysostom adduces the statement by Plato (*Apol.* 22c and *Men.* 99 c3) that seers do not know what they are saying.

souls from this devilish and polytheistic error. Neither Greeks nor barbarians have been able to bring mankind to the truth; only Christ has succeeded in banishing sin and error, παλαιᾶς πλάνης, πολυθέω πλάνη, etc...⁵⁸

For Eusebius of Caesarea the practices listed by Porphyry are not truly θεουργία⁵⁹, but rather γοητεία, κακοτέχνος γοητεία⁶⁰. Pagan gods are subject to the power of “charlatans”, they allow themselves to be manipulated by them and their oracles are nothing more than tricks played by such people. The word γοητεία means both magic or witchcraft and the activity of impostors or charlatans, having a sense very close to that of ἀπάτη or ψευδολογία⁶¹. In texts criticizing oracles, it is true, the word takes on the value of charlatany, certainly within the tradition of attacking them in which a prominent part is played, among other works, by the treatise *Γοήτων φώρα* (The Detection of Impostors) by Oenomaus. Nonetheless, in Christian texts the word also acquires the meaning of witchcraft, as a synonym of μαγεία, and also of work of evil spirits⁶². Likewise, in the discourse written by Gregory of Nazianzus, *Contra Julianum*, divination and witchcraft are linked, as an evident demonstration of the Emperor’s paganism⁶³. The same idea is reproduced in John Chrysostom, who in describing the circles of people around Julian adds to the list not merely seers and magi, but also charlatans (γόητες), augurs and priests of Cybele⁶⁴. Dydimus the Blind, in his commentary on Psalm 74⁶⁵, identifies the heads of the «sea dragons», specifically Leviathan, that are broken by God, with μαντεῖαι γοητεῖαι οἰωνισμοὶ καὶ... ψευδοδοξίαι καὶ πράξεις ἐναγείς. John Chrysostom in his treatise *De pseudoprophetis*⁶⁶ recalls the text of II Timothy 3,13 which states that «evil men and seducers (γόητες) shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived». This same author insists in another of his works that these sorts of people are all just as bad as one another, magi, charlatans, interpreters of oracles, magicians, demons, and so forth⁶⁷. Harsher still were the words uttered by Gregory of Nazianzus against the various Greek oracles: the stupidities (ληρήματα) of the oak of Dodona or the inventions (σοφίσματα) of the tripod of Delphi⁶⁸.

To sum up, the term γόητες had already been consolidated in these polemics against oracles⁶⁹ by one of the fundamental sources for an awareness of oracles in Eusebius of Caesarea, the second-

⁵⁸ Similar ideas and wordings are to be found in *PE* IV,5,1; IV,9,1; IV,21,2; IX,10,1; XIV,10,4; St Augustine, *Ciu.* XIX,23; see J.J. O’MEARA, *Porphyry’s Philosophy from Oracles in Eusebius’ Praeparatio Evangelica and Augustine’s Dialogues of Cassiciacum*, Paris, 1969, 14 ss., which actually identifies *De regressu animae*, or at least a part of it, with *De philosophia ex oraculis haurienda* on the basis of this idea of liberating the soul from error.

⁵⁹ C. VAN LIEFFERINGE, *La Théurgie. Des Oracles Chaldaïques à Proclus*, Liège, 1999, p. 183.

⁶⁰ V,2,5; V,10,12 and 15,3.

⁶¹ In *Contra Hieroclem* Eusebius attributed prophetic powers to Apollonius of Tyane and called him γόης καὶ ἀκριβής; see W. L. DULIÈRE, *Protection permanente contre des animaux nuisibles assurée par Apollonios de Tyane dans Byzance et Antioche. Évolution de son mythe*, in *Byzantion* 63 (1970), p. 253.

⁶² Origen, *CC* II,52; Gregory of Nyssa, *V. Mos.* I,24.

⁶³ V,9, μαντείας καὶ γοητείας.

⁶⁴ *Babylon* 77; see also II.

⁶⁵ *Frag. in Psal.* 774a.

⁶⁶ Chapter 59.

⁶⁷ *Babylon* 77,1; II,5

⁶⁸ *In san. lum.* XXXVI.

⁶⁹ The Hebrew prophets, in particular Moses and Joshua, are also accused of γοητεία, of being no more than vulgar magicians; *CC* VIII,41; also Justin, *Apol.* I,30.

century Cynical philosopher Oenomaus of Gadara⁷⁰ and his book *Γοήτων φώρα*, in which prophetic practices are harshly attacked⁷¹. Several Fathers also used this source to criticize pagan oracles, as J. Hammerstaedt has pointed out⁷². This is the case for Clement of Alexandria in his *Protreptic* and *Stromata*⁷³ and for Origen in his *Contra Celsum*⁷⁴. Irony and parody are the basic ingredients of the philosopher's criticism of divinatory practices.

Divination and magic

Divination, like magic, is the work of demons. This idea is very clear throughout Patristic writings. There are many examples that illustrate these two practice linked. For instance, John Chrysostom, following Eusebius of Caesarea, quotes the case of an initiate who through a series of magic rites introduced a demon into a man, who began to prophesy 'ἐμαντεύετο' and flung himself writhing to the ground, unable to free himself of the demon⁷⁵.

For his part, Hippolytus of Rome in his *Philosophumena* or *Refutatio Omnium Haeresium* dedicated a major section of Book IV, 27-42, to a description of magical practices⁷⁶. These apparently marvellous deeds are in reality mere trickery. The author pone reveals the methods employed by magicians to bring about the supposed miracles, procedures that are simple and sometimes even crude, but leave the gullible open-mouthed in awe. In IV, 28 he describes the ways of summoning up demons and acting by means of divine influence, θεοφορεῖσθαι. Despite these diabolical evocations, Hippolytus explains the greater part of the actions of the magi as by means of trickery of a purely natural, not supernatural, kind. The topic of divination, as such, is introduced in Chapter 34, in the shape of fortune-telling using a cauldron, λεκανομαντεία, one of the abominable actions of the magi, τῶν παρ' αὐτοῖς ἀπορρήτων μαθημάτων. In the middle of a closed room they set up a cauldron full of water, smearing the ceiling with blue dye, which was reflected by the water in the cauldron, giving it the appearance of the sky. In the floor there was an opening, a concealed compartment from which the accomplices of the magus emerged dressed as gods and demons, and started to produce images on the walls, moving the lamp as if they were filled with prophetic inspiration, ἀποφοιβάσθαι, and burning intoxicating drugs until they made Hecate⁷⁷ appear, although this was only an illusion, since all of this was a complete fraud⁷⁸.

Curiously Hippolytus at no time uses the word 'prophet' when referring to these practices, but rather always «magus», μάγος. Μάντις, μαντεύω, on the other hand, are used by him to make

⁷⁰ A. CARRIKER, *The Library of Eusebius of Caesarea*, Leiden-Boston 2003, 96-97.

⁷¹ Eusebius of Caesarea gives the title of the work in V 18, 6, 2 and its fragments take up Chapters 19 to 36 of Book V and Chapter 7 of Book VI. The Cynical philosopher is one of the main 'pagan' weapons used by the author from Caesarea to attack oracles.

⁷² J. HAMMERSTAEDT, *Die Orakelkritik des Kynikers Oenomaus*, Frankfurt 1988, 25-28.

⁷³ HAMMERSTAEDT, *Die Orakelkritik*, p. 19-24, and J. HAMMERSTAEDT, *Der Kyniker Oenomaus von Gadara*, in *ANRW* II 36.4 (1990) 2839-2841.

⁷⁴ HAMMERSTAEDT, *Die Orakelkritik*, 25-28.

⁷⁵ *In Ep. I Cor.* XXIX,1; *PE* V,9; see also Theodoret., *Affect.* III,69.

⁷⁶ R. GANSCHINIETZ, *Hippolytis Capitel gegen die Magier, Refut. Haer. IV,28-42*, Leipzig 1913.

⁷⁷ An invocation of Hecate is included (Hippolytus, *Haer.* IV,35-36), expressed in very similar terms to the oracles from Porphyry included in the works of the author from Caesarea (*PE* IV,23,7; V,7,1; V,8,4-7; V,12,1; V,13,3; V,14,2 and V,15,1).

⁷⁸ IV,35,3-4, οὗς καθορῶν ὁ πλανώμενος, τὸ πανούργημα καταπέπληγε τοῦ μάγου καὶ λοιπὸν πάντα πιστεύει τὰ ὑπ' αὐτοῦ ῥηθησόμενα. □

reference to astrology and the art of linking the sign of the Zodiac at the time of the birth of individuals with their physical features and character, *la μετωποσκοπική μαντεία*, of which more detail will be given in the appropriate section. Hippolytus likewise uses the expression «divination», with the standard pagan sense of the word, in the case of *λεκανομαντεία*, fortune-telling using cauldrons, which in reality is of more interest to magic than to prophecy. This divinatory activity is one more example of the trickery of magi. For Hippolytus these practices are all of a kind, bound up with demons and fraud, since even wise men are unable to gain full knowledge of God's truth⁷⁹.

In the preface to Book I the relationship of heretics to these 'demonic' practices is already made clear: heretics have taken the principles of their doctrines in part from Greek wisdom and philosophic systems, and in part, from the mysteries which were performed and the ramblings of astrologers⁸⁰. In the last book, Hippolytus describes these deeds as vain religious practices with a shallow veneer of apparent truth, creations of the indiscreet and inconsistent curiosity of the Chaldeans and the diabolical madness of the Babylonians⁸¹. Heretics interpret celestial signs in accordance with the Greeks' system, and transform the truths of Scripture into simple astronomical allegories. All this is a lie⁸².

The terms used by Hippolytus are the same as throughout Patristic writings: 'ravings of astrologers', 'magi', 'charlatans'. His aim is to take precautions against the dangers of such practices within the Roman Church of the first half of the third century⁸³. The basis of this astrology is the horoscope⁸⁴: this is an unstable art, *ἀσύστατος*,⁸⁵ and is shown to be such by the cases commented upon by Hippolytus⁸⁶. It is impossible to fix a horoscope properly, and even if this could be done, it would not be an augury of anything: there are people born under the same star sign who have nonetheless had very different destinies. After an exposition of these Chaldean and Greek ideas, the Christian bishop concludes that the theory of the influence of the stars has no consistency, and so no credence should be given to this form of divination⁸⁷. His criticisms do not forget they, which claim to

⁷⁹ IV,43.

⁸⁰ *Haer.* I, Proem. 1,8, ἔστιν αὐτοῖς τὰ δοξαζόμενα «τὴν» ἀρχὴν μὲν ἐκ τῆς Ἑλλήνων σοφίας λαβόντα, ἐκ δογμάτων φιλοσοφουμένων καὶ μυστηρίων ἐπιχειρημένων καὶ ἀστρολόγων ῥεμβομένων.

⁸¹ *Haer.* X,5. τὰ «τ» ἐν αὐτοῖς μετ' ἄξιοπιστίας θρησκευόμενα μάταια ὡς ἄρητα διδαχθεῖς, οὐδὲ Χαλδαίων ἀσυστάτῳ περιεργία σοφισθεῖς, οὐδὲ Βαβυλωνίων ἀλογίστῳ μανία δι' ἐνεργείας δαιμόνων καταπλαγείς. □

⁸² *Haer.* IV,46, μετὰ γινεῖν τὸν νοῦν τῶν προσεχόντων πειρώμενοι, πιθανοῖς λόγοις προσάγοντες αὐτοὺς πρὸς ἃ βούλονται, ξένον θαῦμα ἐνδεικνύμενοι, ὡς «ἀν» κατηστερισμένων τῶν ὑπ' αὐτῶν λεγομένων. □

⁸³ A. BRENT, *Hippolytus and the Roman Church in the Third Century: Communities in Tension before the Emergence of a Monarch-Bishop*, Leiden, 1995; J.A. CERRATO, *Hippolytus between East and West*, Oxford 2001.

⁸⁴ Closely connected with reflexions on divination is the considering of astrology as a means of knowing the future, a theme which cannot be touched on here because it goes beyond the bounds of this work; cf. A. BOUCHÉ-LECLERCQ, *Histoire de la divination dans l'Antiquité*, Paris 1879-1882, 543 (repr. Grenoble 2003).

⁸⁵ IV,5.

⁸⁶ *Didach.* III,4 criticized astrology as a manifestation of the divinatory and magic practices of idolatry. The term used for seer is very clear in this respect, *οἰωνοσκόπος*, that is, «one who observes auguries».

⁸⁷ *Haer.* IV,27, Ἐπεὶ καὶ τούτων τὴν θαυμαστὴν σοφίαν ἐξεθέμεθα τὴν τε πολυμέρινον αὐτῶν δι' ἐπινοίας μαντικὴν οὐκ ἀπεκρύψαμεν, οὐδ' ἐν οἷς σφαλόμενοι ματαιάζουσι σιωπήσομεν. □

prophecy the future by means of certain calculations, using the numerical values of the letters in the names of the people concerned⁸⁸.

One of the variations on astrology, divination by features of the face, μετωποσκοπικὴ μαντεία, is criticized with particular virulence by the Roman Bishop and described as madness⁸⁹. This supposed science postulated a close link between the signs under which people were born and their physical and moral features⁹⁰.

To end this brief overview it is necessary to point out that there are a few instances of ancient divination being described in positive terms, at least in so far as it had anything useful about it. Thus, in the *Stromata* of Clement a theological selection of the Delphic oracles is evident. In Book V,132, he makes use of an oracle of Apollo, whom he calls μαντικώτατος⁹¹, in which he bears witness to the glory of God when mentioning Athene. During the Persian expedition against Greece she begged Zeus to defend Attica⁹². Nevertheless, the commonest attitude adopted by Christian authors towards the Greek oracular tradition was to consider it a product of the deceitfulness of demons, in accordance with the terminology they normally used in referring to these practices, ῥαδιουργία, γοητεία, κακότεχνος γοητεία, παλαιά πλάνη, and so forth. Greek credulity never had limits, and this is what patristic criticisms stress most. Pagan oracles, as in general all Christian prophecy as well, were expressed as enigmas with no clarity, belonging to the context of secrecy⁹³. However, the Fathers presented the obscurity and contradictions of Apollonian oracular statements as charlatanry originating with demons, who are able to bring to life any sort of fantasy and to deceive with their wiliness.

The terminology used in this criticism of oracles lumps together divination, magic, astrology, and other practices, that is to say, every activity due to demons, there being practically nothing positive or salvageable seen in any of them. To sum up, authentic prophecy is contrasted with divination. This latter is equated to other demonic activities, as is well expressed by the exhortation of Gregory of Nazianzus to the Emperor Julian, Παῦσόν σου τὰς γοητικὰς καὶ μαντικὰς βίβλους· αἱ ἱεροφαιτικαὶ δὲ καὶ ἀποστολικάι μόναι ἀνελιπτέσθωσαν⁹⁴.

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⁸⁸ *Haer.* IV,14, Οἱ μὲν οὖν διὰ ψήφων τε καὶ ἀριθμῶν, στοιχείων τε καὶ ὀνομάτων μαντεύεσθαι νομίζοντες ταύτην ἀρχὴν ἐπιχειρήσεως τοῦ κατ' αὐτοὺς λόγου ποιοῦνται. □

⁸⁹ IV,15,4

⁹⁰ Hippolytus analyses the kinds of births for each of the signs of the Zodiac in IV,16-26.

⁹¹ However, such a statement is found, but with the opposite sense, in Gregory the Wonderworker's *In Origenem Oratio Panegyrica* 119, when he calls Apollo the most divinatory of demons.

⁹² This oracle renders homage to the glory of God, here symbolized by Olympic Zeus; H.W. PARKE and D.E.W. WORMELL, *The Delphic Oracle. II. The Oracular Responses*, Oxford, 1956, nos. 94 and 95.

⁹³ This idea is very old and was already present in Heraclitus, Fr. 93 Diels-Kranz; see Plutarch, *De Pythiae oraculis* 404 C.

⁹⁴ *Contra Julianum* II,35.

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