Interpreting the New Testament in the light of pagan criticisms of oracles and prophecies in Greco-Roman times

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ABSTRACT
This article investigates the different points on which pagans in Graeco-Roman times criticized oracular and prophetic utterances, also indicating their relevance for the interpretation of New Testament texts.

The study of New Testament prophecy is a major and often controversial theme of research,\(^1\) which provides an interesting contextual outline for the interpretation of texts like 1 Corinthians and Revelation. In a recent publication, Forbes investigates prophecy, using pagan sources from New Testament times as a foil for his discussion of early Christian inspired speech (glossolalia).\(^2\) His findings are that Christian glossolalia was unique\(^3\) and that social forms of prophecy in early Christianity differed from inspired manticism\(^4\) in the Hellenistic world, especially since Christian groups ‘had no priestly hierarchies, no consciously formalised prophetic ritual beyond a few simple rules of procedure... no oracular places, and no procedure for securing an oracle should one be required’ (Forbes 1995:318). In addition he finds that conceptually Christians and pagans had quite distinct views regarding messages from the gods and that the agent of inspiration was also understood very differently in pagan compared with canonical texts.

Pronouncements like these immediately raise many hermeneutical issues about comparing material from non-canonical contexts with the New Testament. It is, for example, increasingly clear that sources should not be taken

\(^1\) Early examples of an extensive investigation is to be found in Aune 1983 and Hill 1979.


\(^3\) He argues that Hellenistic glossolalia had nothing to do with speaking in other languages.

\(^4\) For a discussion of terminology cf De Villiers 1997:79–96. I use the terms here in a general sense for the utterings of inspired people regarding the future.
indiscriminately and too easily from different times to portray trends in the society of a particular period, although it is, at the same time, obvious that similar attitudes regarding issues may linger on for many decades and generations. There is in addition a growing feeling that localities of traditions should be taken more seriously when comparing material (e.g. in Frankfurter 1996:129ff). More questions are also asked about what is usually posited as 'unique.'

The issue is complex. New Testament prophecy has to be different from pagan prophecy because of the significant influence of Hebrew and Jewish traditions and the formative effect of the Christ event. Recent research reveals, for example, how extensively significant and foundational Hebrew prophecies are for an interpretation of the Book of Revelation. There is a vital link between the two that explains the repeated references of John to his work as prophecy. But then, even the most untrained reader of the text will recognize the differences of Revelation as prophecy from these earlier books, starting with its apocalyptic features, but moving on to many other differences in for example symbols, contents and function. There are therefore fundamental differences within Judeo-Christian prophecy, although they share major traditions.

It is to be expected that Christian prophecy will display more 'unique' features when compared with pagan prophecies and oracles. It will be a fallacy, though, to overlook the continuation between the two. Jews and Christians were exposed to pagan prophecies and oracles as a major social phenomenon (cf De Villiers 1997:79-96). They knew of them, experienced them closely on a daily basis, and had to respond to them in terms of their faith. Of course this led to the situation in which, in comparing their own prophecies to some pagan prophecies, they labelled those 'false' and rejected them. There is enough evidence, though, that pagan oracles and prophecies were not always brushed aside in such a way. Thus the well known Sibylline Oracles prove conclusively that some Jewish communities in the Graeco-Roman period had an 'open' and inclusive attitude to pagan prophecies and oracles. These texts are the clearest evidence of interpenetration between prophetic traditions and of the way in which Jews appropriated pagan prophetic forms and traditions. This is further underlined by the fact that later on Christians in turn had no qualms in taking

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5 Perhaps the best recent example of research on this is to be found in the excellent publication of Fekkes 1994. Cf also Mealy 1992; Moyise 1995. Earlier examples would include such seminal essays as VanHoye 1962:436-476.

6 On the reasons for presenting prophecies in the name of the Sibyl, cf Lanchester 1913:370.
over and extensively christianising this revelatory form.\textsuperscript{7} It had, for example, a formative influence on the Shepherd of Hermas. The situation can perhaps best be described by quoting Lanchester (1913:371), Lactantius' 'writings are a perfect mine of Sibylline verses. His view of the Sibyl was that, though in themselves they were prophetesses of false gods, yet from time to time filled with Divine inspiration they poured forth precious truths.'

Furthermore, inscriptions with oracles that were studied recently, clearly indicate how non-Christian oracular forms were assimilated into a Christian context (Horsley 1977:40–41 provides several examples). It is a further indication of the popularity of prophecies and oracles that the assimilation often happened unconsciously (Horsley 1977:44). The point is that there was a common understanding of 'prophecies' beyond social and ideological borders. These groups shared the basic approach of portraying their religious convictions in a revelatory mode. These commonalities need to be investigated as well.

Secondary literature also confirms that pagan prophecies and oracles should be taken seriously in the study of the New Testament. The usefulness of information about pagan prophecies for New Testament interpretation has been confirmed by articles in the well known collection of essays from the Uppsala Colloquium\textsuperscript{8} and the publication of Parke on the Sibyls and Sibylline Prophecy (Parke 1988).

Having said all this, a last proviso for the study of parallel material needs to be spelled out. The age of parallelomania has passed and hardly anyone indulges in listing the occasional similar phrases as indications of genetic links. Reading different texts together is much more complicated than that. It means respecting the integrity of an individual text and realising the way in which such a new text surpasses all the 'building blocks' (i.e., texts or textual traditions) from which it may have been constructed. The author of a text created something completely new out of his borrowed material.

In this article an overview of pagan attitudes to prophecies and oracles will be given. This essay is a further attempt to determine the value of pagan prophecies and oracles for an interpretation of Biblical texts (cf De Villiers 1997). It looks at pagan prophecies and oracles in Graeco-Roman society from the perspective of their reception and Wirkungsgeschichte. The focus is on the pagan critics of these prophecies and oracles. In doing so, one can determine how New Testament texts share the same features of or differ fundamentally from prophetic and oracular utterances in pagan societies and from prophetic....

\textsuperscript{7} For an overview on Christian perspectives on the Sibyllines, cf Lanchester 1913:370–371 ('Among the early Fathers allusions and quotations are very frequent').

\textsuperscript{8} Cf Hellholm 1983, especially the articles by Cancik, Betz, Griffiths and Burkert (cited in the bibliography below).
activities among themselves. I shall treat attitudes to pagan oracles and prophecies of Jewish and Christian authors elsewhere and concentrate on pagan criticism of pagan oracular utterances here.

1 REVERENCE OF ORACLES AND PROPHECIES

Prophecies and oracles were not only respected by citizens, but were also regarded as a seminal part of political life and society. This can be traced as far back as the Greek historian, Herodotus, who provides an example of this respect in his History 9.42-43 where Mardonius quotes an oracle that predicted the destruction of the Persians because they sacked the temple at Delphi. In his own response to the oracle, Mardonius states that his army will not attack the temple.

In later times, even to many philosophers, it was, in the context also of their respect for established oracular institutions, unthinkable that their role in society would come to an end. Cicero (De Divinatione 2.72) remarks in the context of his discussion and criticism of the long revered Sibylline Oracles, 'For I consider it the part of wisdom to preserve the institutions of our forefathers by retaining their sacred rites and ceremonies.' Plutarch, in his Greek context, echoes similar concerns when he rationalises about prophecies and oracles in De Pythiae Oraculis 402 E, where Sarapion argues that the prophetic gifts of the god should not be disregarded, but an explanation sought 'of such matters as seem to stand in the way, and not relinquish the faith of our fathers.' He himself was a priest and regular visitor to the oracle at Delphi (cf the extensive discussion of Barrow 1967:30-35), an attitude found in the writings of most of the authors from this period.

Pagan authors were quick to observe that divination had a transcultural and comprehensive character, found among many nations. Cicero noted in his De Divinatione (1.1; written as a sequel to his De natura deorum) in which two

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9 One should be aware, for example, of the different forms of pagan oracles and prophecies and how they vary from their Hebrew and Christian counterparts. It is, however, not without reason that Sibylline Oracles originated in a Jewish context and was taken over, adapted and read by Christian groups. The variety in the forms of oracles, despite certain basic characteristics, should keep one from too stringent an approach to the issue under discussion in this article.

10 For a discussion of a specific kind of oracles, cf Parke 1988:17, 143-144, with which one should compare Collins 1983. In this article translations from classical texts are quoted from the Loeb Classical Library Series, unless stated otherwise.

11 For an explanation of this, cf the interesting theses of Dodds 1951:74-75.

12 Herodotus himself, being part of an era of growing rationalism, did not accept oracles uncritically, as is proven by his remarks in 9.43. Note Smith 1978:71 on Herodotus' sarcastic criticism of the magi because of his rationalistic background.
characters respectively defend and criticize oracles, that he knows of no people, 'how refined and learned or however savage and ignorant, which does not think that signs are given of future events, and that certain persons can recognize those signs and foretell events before they occur.' He then lists examples from the Assyrians, Chaldeans, Egyptians and other nations before giving illustrations from Roman history.

Divination as such presented few problems to most authors. One of the reasons for this position may be found in the much earlier works of such an established thinker as Plato. He accepted certain forms of prophecy as quite legitimate, arguing that sometimes ecstasy or madness (furor or μαύτια) may be an indication of divine possession. Prophecy as 'good' madness represents divine possession. Plato strongly criticized certain types of prophecies and oracles, but respected others like the Delphic Oracle as the very mouthpiece of Apollo himself (cf Guthrie 1969:247).

Much later Cicero would argue along similar lines. The representative of Stoic thought in his De Divinatione (1.46.104), for example, remarks that to make light of the signs sent by the gods is nothing less than to disbelieve in the existence of the gods (Haec posse contemni vel etiam rideri praeclare intellego, sed id ipsum est deos non putare, quae ab eis significantur, contemnere.) For Cicero, divination is in line with the very nature of the gods. In his De Divinatione 1.58 Quintus sums up his own position with the words, 'But for my part, believing as I do that the gods do care for man, and that they advise and often forewarn him, I approve of divination which is not trivial and is free from falsehood and trickery.' The implication of this is clear. There was something accepted as authentic divination as long as it was not contaminated in certain ways.

This respect for prophecies and oracles is evident from a text produced by Plutarch (De Defectu Oraculorum) in which his critical remarks about them are expressed frankly, but do not lead him to abandon them. He argues, for example, that since gods cannot be responsible for prophecies and oracles seeing that the gods do not become part of human bodies, prophecies and oracles must come from demigods. This, however, does not necessarily make them

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13 Cf the remarks by Guthrie 1965:227 and also 1975:417 for a discussion of the same passage. Plato ranked rational behaviour of a higher value than ecstatic and prophetic acts.

14 The three words are 'levitate, vanitate, malitia exelusa.'

15 This is worked out in a story told by Cleombrotus about a man he met περί την Ἐρυθράν θάλατταν who prophesied for one day in a year 'when he went down to the sea and told of the future' (421). This person ascribed his power to the demigods. After many arguments, therefore, the work concludes that one should distinguish between prophets and their states of possession. The power of the spirit does not affect all per-
unacceptable. In 417 one of Plutarch's characters, Cleombrotus, remarks, 'Let us not listen to any who say that there are some oracles not divinely inspired, or religious ceremonies and mystic rites which are disregarded by the gods; and on the other hand let us not imagine the god goes in and out and is present at these ceremonies and helps in conducting them; but let us commit these matters to those ministers of the gods to whom it is right to commit them, as to servants and clerks, and let us believe that demigods are guardians of sacred rites of the gods and prompters in the Mysteries, while others go about as avengers of arrogant and grievous cases of injustice.'

2 CRITICISING ORACLES AND PROPHECIES

Some remarks need to be made concerning the nature of criticism of prophecies and oracles. Despite the esteem in which society held them, and the ensuing respect that philosophers showed towards traditional institutions like oracular shrines, criticism of them was not lacking, neither was this criticism necessarily gentle and indirect. In some instances they were subjected to open scorn and sarcasm, as is, for example, clear in the bitter attacks of the second century satyrist Lucian. In this, a long tradition starting in classical Greece, represented by such prominent literary figures as Aristophanes, was continued in later Graeco-Roman times.

The harsh criticism of Lucian was not the occasional brave remark of a daring individual. Other examples of the same explicit and negative form of criticism abound. An excellent illustration of the scorn and disdain with which diviners were treated, can be found in the Cynic epistle of Diogenes 38. The philosopher relates how he strolled back and forth in the market place, turning for a time 'toward those selling things, and then to those reciting, or philosophising, or prophesying' (μαντευομένοις). The main part of the letter is about someone seated in the middle of a crowd, 'with a wreath larger than Apollo's, who discovered the art of divination' and who is finally unmasked as inept (κακὸς μοντις). To name but one other example, in the otherwise
respectful text, the De Divinatione 1.19, Cicero (writing in 45-44 B.C.) makes Quintus say, ‘Let us laugh at the soothsayers, brand them as frauds and imposters and scorn their calling...’ (Irrideamus haruspices, vanos, futiles esse dicamus).

The criticism was not restricted to venomous verbal attacks. Activists in the cause against certain oracles and prophecies pursued their criticism with animation and embarked on prolonged programmes of action against undesirable examples of prophets and oracle-mongers. Not only philosophers and literary authors, but also former believers could take recourse in action against them. Lucian in his Alexander the Prophet 25 writes how certain ‘sensible men, recovering, as it were, from profound intoxication, combine against (Alexander), especially all the followers of Epicurus, and ... in the cities they began gradually to detect all the trickery and buncombe of the show...’

3 CRITICISM OF ORACLES AND PROPHECIES

Criticisms of oracles and prophecies varied from the obvious to the subtle and from person to group. The points of critique related to the attitude of those who uttered them and to those who sought them, but also to their consequences. Some of the more general comments against them can be summarized as follows.

3.1 False

The more pedestrian kind of criticism against oracles and prophecies expressed by the masses, but debated time and again also in philosophical literature, is evident from the text of the Greek historian Thucydides when he reveals how people criticized oracles and prophecies when they turned out to be false. In his history of the Peloponnesian War 8.1 Thucydides refers to the anger of the Athenians when they realized that the prophetic predictions of victory were wrong. More specifically Thucydides then describes how they ‘became angry with the prophets and soothsayers and all who at the time had, by various methods of divination, encouraged them to believe that they would conquer Sicily.’

What is almost a common sense response of the masses, is worked out in a more theoretical way by literary authors who argue that the failures of prophecies and oracles is an indication of their unacceptability. Perhaps the best and most extensive example of this argument is to be found in Cicero, in

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18 Cf also 44-45 for an exposure of Alexander by an Epicurean.
19 Cf the Penguin Classics translation by Warner.
his *De Divinatione*, where he initially presents the Stoic argument that oracles are acceptable because they have been accurate. This is afterwards disputed in the contra argument by other characters who argue that many oracles have been unfulfilled or turned out to be untrue. Similar arguments abound in other philosophical works.

Compare this with Hebrew Scriptures (and especially Deuteronomy) where, with their repeated distinction between true and false prophets, a false prophet is regarded as someone whose prophecy about the future remains unfulfilled. In the New Testament opponents of Christians are sometimes described as false prophets not only because of what they proclaim but also because of who they claim to be. In Mk.13:22 the faithful are warned against those who falsely claim that they are prophets. They are ψευδοπροφήται. Furthermore the prophets are to be opposed because their teaching is a lie (cf esp 2 Pt 2:1-2; 1 Jn 4:1-3).

3.2 Deceit

Closely connected to criticism that oracles and prophecies did not lead to the predicted results, is the concern that prophets and oracle-mongers were devious people who deliberately intended to mislead others. This criticism has come to the fore in several of the above quotations, for example in the above quoted remark of Cicero's *De Divinatione* 1.58 rejecting divination which is not free from falsehood and trickery. Lucian of Samosata in *Deorum Concilium*, noted that the many oracles were mostly the result of the activities of sanctuaries 'that can provide itself with a charlatan—of whom there are plenty' (12). Artemidorus, who wrote *On the Interpretation of Dreams* in the second century AD, remarks, in 1.69, that a whole list of people, i.e. Pythagoreans, physiognomonics, astragalomants, tyromants, gryromants, coscinomants, morphoscopes, chiroscopes, lecanomants, or necyomants should not be trusted because all they say is false and unreliable. 'They do not know even a little bit about prophecy, but fleece their patrons by charlatanism and fraud.' The accusation is against people who intentionally want to deceive others by their prophecies and oracles.

It is well known that the forms of deceit in religious and prophetic matters reached a high level of sophistication in Graeco-Roman times. Scherrer listed

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20 Cf the discussion in Kramer, TWB s v, 807-808, 813-814. This indicates how closely prophecy was associated in many different times with the prediction of future events and false prophecy then necessarily regarded as failure to predict accurately.

several examples of such treachery through machinery and technology, amongst others from Lucian's essay on Alexander the False Prophet in which he manipulated an image to create the impression that it was giving oracles (Scherrer 1984:599-610). The relationship of this motif to Revelation 13:13-15 where the false prophet prophecies through signs, is striking. In this passage attention is drawn to the deliberate attempt of agents of evil to get people to turn their backs on the One and True God. That is why the motif of deception is quite prominent in this passage. Rv 13:14, for example, clearly states that the second beast, through the signs, 'deceives the inhabitants of earth.'

3.3 Political misuse

There is no doubt that prophecies and oracles played a major political role in antiquity, and particularly in Graeco-Roman times. This can be best illustrated by the place of the famous Sibylline Oracles in the Roman empire. Exactly because of their political use, Jews and Christians were exposed to them in a very direct way.

There are two sides to this facet. In the first instance, pagans criticised oracles and prophecies that created political instability or incited people to irresponsible action. The legal document of the Roman jurist from the third century, Paulus, On Prophets and Astrologers, reveals what problems political leaders experienced with prophets and oracle-mongers. According to him, they deceive people with promises about the future, thereby disturbing their minds (a remark repeated twice in this text).

Why would prophecies and oracles lead to political unrest? The obvious answer is those instances where people are given certain promises that would make them rebel against existing rulers. The work of Paulus gives an interesting insight into the type of prophecies that is seen as potentially threatening to the state. They are prophecies that would respond to questions to diviners about the life expectancy of the emperor, or the stability of the government, or where slaves enquire about their masters' life expectancy (cf Smith 1978:76). An implication of such would be that where a prophet claims to have received a communication from the gods about the imminent doom of a ruler, it would not ask much for dissatisfied citizens to mobilise themselves against his rule.

As a result of the potential power of prophets who interpreted signs from the gods, rulers were wary of even existing, established oracles. After the destruction of the official collection of Sibylline oracles in 82 BC the Senate collected a considerable number of oracles, but kept them secret. Clearly the state needed them, but also had to control them! Similarly Augustus destroyed

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22 For other examples of how oracles could endanger the state, cf Hengel 1974:185-6.
many oracles, but kept a small number under the base of the Palatine Apollo to be consulted under strict rules (cf Lanchester 1913:370).

So great was this apprehension regarding prophecies and oracles, that extreme penalties were determined in the text of Paulus for those who were considered guilty of irregular behaviour. He prescribes lashes, expulsion and imprisonment for prophets that endanger public stability. If this did not help, they had to be deported or executed. According to Paulus the reasons for this harsh punishment are the divine, and, therefore, coercive claims of these prophets (they pretend they are filled with the god). This is one of those texts that explains Patmos as the setting of the Book of Revelation as well as references in the first chapter of Revelation to imprisonment.

The other side of this coin was the unacceptable co-option of oracles and prophecies to support an existing power. The reaction against the politicising of oracles is illustrated by an observation of Cicero, in his De Divinatione 2.57 where he recalls the remark of Demosthenes that the Pythian oracle was 'philippised' because she had been bribed by king Philip of Macedon. This indicates that leaders and authorities went out of their way and did not hesitate to bribe oracular shrines and officials for political gain. It was important to them to have oracles and prophecies that supported their activities. In this manner they would gain the support of the masses. This also was unacceptable to pagan observers.

Once again the situation in the Book of Revelation is quite close to this type of criticism against prophecies which legitimated the political status quo, especially in its depiction of the evil triad of Revelation 12–13. On the one hand there is the dragon (Rev 12) with the beast from the sea as his political representation, that are both worshipped by the peoples and kings of the earth (Rev 13:3–4). On the other hand there is their assistant, the second beast and false prophet (cf 16:13), that beguiles people to worship the first beast (13:12) by showing extraordinary signs and by making the image of the beast speak (13:15). All these activities and prophecies have clear political implications, legitimising the status quo and coercing people to accord divine honours to the existing powers.

3.4 Gullibility

Already at an early stage critics commented that oracles and prophecies exploited human gullibility. Cicero, in his De Divinatione 2.57 uses the observation that the Delphic Oracle was no longer functioning, as an argument

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against oracles. The claim of Delphic prophets that they had divine powers, was false. Such divine power cannot disappear. In fact, he argues, the time at which they disappeared was after people 'began to be less credulous' (minus creduli esse coeperunt), indicating their true nature. There are many similar references to gullibility in the sources of this time.

Cicero can be placed in an established tradition, reaching back to the Greek classical period. The Greek historian Thucydides, unlike his predecessor Herodotus was unimpressed by soothsayers’ claims that they were able to foretell events. In his history of the Peloponnesian War, he describes, though with clear reservations regarding their value (2.8), how numerous prophecies and oracles were given in many cities on both sides in the battle-ready mentality before the Peloponnesian War. They later turned out to be false. The implication of this remark is that the atmosphere and context of crisis and anxiety created the need for oracles and prophecies, and made people uncritical and more observant of them.

Some philosophers linked the gullibility of the masses to deeper factors and emotions. Lucian, in his *Alexander the False Prophet*, pointed out that fear and hope were the reasons why people wanted to know more about the future and why they were so easily exploited by manipulators (8). Fear is an emotion associated with superstition, as is so clear from the writings of Plutarch, especially his *De Superstitione* (Barrow 1967:93). Fear implies that the gods are harmful to people, which goes against the nature of gods. To a philosopher, fear is the worst possible reason to serve the gods. It takes not much to realise that the intellectual members of a society that valued courage as one of the four main virtues, would not take kindly to fear, and thus neither to superstition.

It is against this background that Lucian describes how Alexander and his coworker, Cocconas, establish their prophetic shrine and oracle in his own home country, carefully selected because of the ‘fat-heads’ and simpletons’ who lived there and who were ‘for the most part superstitious and rich. Whenever a man but turned up with someone at his heels to play the flute or the tambourine or the cymbals, telling fortunes with a sieve, as the phrase goes, they were all agog over him on the instant and stared at him as if he were a god from heaven’ (9).

Lucian describes in 14 how the whole population thought that a god had arrived in their city when Alexander produced a snake from an egg. Each one began ‘to sate himself greedily with prayers, craving treasures, riches, health, and every other blessing... And the whole population followed, all full of religious fervour and crazed with expectations (ἐλπίδων).’ Even more scathing

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24 In a similar passage in 17 the crowds are said to be thick-witted and uneducated (παχεσὶ καὶ ἀπαίδευτοις ἀνθρώποις).
is his description of the crowds in 15, where they are said to be bereft of brains and sense, and no different from animals in their pursuit of the sensational events.

Typical motifs come together in these passages to reinforce the impression of gullible masses who crave prophecies and oracles out of superstitious fear. It is, even when the satirical nature of the texts are taken into account, a picture that takes one closer to the Book of Revelation which speaks strongly about the masses that followed the two beasts and were impressed by the signs and wonders that accompanied their action. In Revelation 13:8 and 15 the worldwide effect of the deceit of these two evil characters is delineated, contrasted on the other hand by those who refuse to bow to them. The readers of the book are then called not to be as credulous as those who are being deceived. They need wisdom and understanding (13:18).

3.5 Numerous and trivial

Pagan authors often commented on how many prophecies and oracles were sought and given in their times. The second century satirist Lucian of Samosata wrote bitterly in his *Deorum Concilium* 12, 'at present oracles are delivered by every stone and every altar that is drenched with oil and has garlands.' He was quick to observe that his own generation did not differ from previous ones. He observed in his *Astrologia*, that 'the ancients had divination in very great use, and counted it no parergy, but would found no cities, invest themselves with no ramparts, slay no men, wed no women, until they had been advised in all particulars by diviners' (23).

There is a good explanation for the many prophecies and oracles. Life was dominated and regulated by oracular and prophetic utterances. Ancients sought the will of the gods on the most mundane of matters. Recently Horsley observed that the decline of classical oracle centres like those in Delphi in the early Roman Empire, as reflected in Plutarch's *De defectu oraculorum*, should

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25 Plutarch argues, amongst others through the character Ammonius, that the decline is a result of the decreasing population (414). His point is not that there is a general decline of oracular phenomena. Forbes 1995:2-3, refers to the reservation in literary works of philosophers about this matter and the increasing credulity in divine workings a few decades later on. 'Central to these changes was a widespread rise in the credibility of the miraculous, and an increasing fascination with the occult and ecstatic phenomena, especially as evidence of divine powers or divine activity.' Whether this was really such a dramatic change, needs to be proven. In the light of the lack of sources (pointed out by Forbes himself) one should not assume too much influence of some literary texts on the lives of the masses, or, for that matter, on other educated authors as if they were able to suppress oracular activities. Given the nature of human beings (acknowledged by some of the literary authors), it is not difficult to accept that prophecies and oracles remained popular among the masses right through antiquity and not only by times.
be related to the evidence reflected in inscriptions and papyri of oracular material.\textsuperscript{26} In Roman Egypt, for example, a wide range of deities were consulted on everyday matters. In fact, examples of questions put to oracles from the \textit{Sortes Astrampsychi} indicate how extensively people sought divine guidance (Horsley 1977:2.41-42). Originating in Egypt in the third century, but popular elsewhere, the questions would come from ‘an ordinary individual who made these enquiries in a private capacity. From the Sortes we can infer that males and females, free people and slaves, businessmen and soldiers, the well-to-do and those who could not pay their taxes were among the anticipated clients of the oracle-monger. Questions to the gods include: Shall I get allowance? Am I to remain where I am going? Am I to be sold? Am I to obtain profit from my friend? Is it permitted to me to make a contract with another?’\textsuperscript{27}

Pagan authors noted how extensively people consulted the gods about slight and commonplace matters (ἐπὶ πράγμασι μικροῖς καὶ δημοτικοῖς) as Plutarch, \textit{De Oraculis Pythiae} (408C) describes them. Plutarch was so aware of this that he reflected on its reasons, calling to mind that in times of crisis it was different when leaders asked for prophecies and oracles about much more important matters. He found an explanation for the trivial matters in the peaceful and tranquil nature of his time. In such peaceful times it should not be surprising that common people were concerned about ‘if one ought to marry, or to start on a voyage, or to make a loan’ while the most significant questions of political leaders concerned ‘the yield from the crops, the increase of herds, and public health...’

There is a philosophical concern behind their references to the triviality of prophecies and oracles. These remarks can be traced to another longstanding tradition in Greek philosophy in which anthropomorphic religious conceptions are strongly opposed (for a full and informative discussion, cf Guthrie 1969:226ff). The understanding of the gods as non-human and not subject to human desires and restrictions, is articulated in many literary and philosophical texts and represents an attempt to moralise religion (Guthrie 1969:228-229). Thus Plutarch shared with others a concern that the nature of the gods prohibited them from becoming too entangled in human affairs (ἐγκαταμείψως ἄνθρωπίναις χρείαις. Cf \textit{De defectu Oraculorum} 414E). The problem Plutarch deals with is that gods are drawn by certain activities in oracular shrines into issues that go against their nature. The majesty and

\textsuperscript{26} More evidence of these questions has been found than of answers. It was required practice that questions had to be submitted in written form, stating address, the question and a request for an answer. Cf Horsley 1977:2.38.

\textsuperscript{27} Horsley 1977:2.38. He notes that the triviality of these questions should not be confused with banality.
preeminence of the gods cannot be compromised by involving them in such matters. It is foolish and childish in the extreme, he argues, to imagine that the god himself after the manner of ventriloquists enters into the bodies of his prophets and prompts their utterances, employing their mouths and voices as instruments.\(^\text{28}\) The nature of the gods demands that they be seen differently than in human terms.\(^\text{29}\)

### 3.6 Superstition and irrationality

The previous remark paves the way for the next important criticism against prophecies and oracles. What the nature of the gods is, can be deduced by reason, according to philosophers like Plutarch. Reason therefore determines religion, because irrational beliefs are unworthy of the kind of god which reason demands.\(^\text{30}\)

With increasingly rational trends in society and amongst intellectuals, more and more criticism was levelled at what was considered the superstitious and irrational aspects of prophecies and oracles.\(^\text{31}\) This criticism should be seen as part of a wider movement that can be traced as far back as the Presocratic philosophers in Greece. It would, for example, reflect the attitude of Plato that not atheism, but superstition represents the first and greatest crime against religion. Superstition is precisely the reason why Plato rejected certain forms of oracles and prophecies.\(^\text{32}\) The most important yardstick for measuring oracles

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\(^{28}\) Cf also Ac 14:11; 15. Compare with this the pronouncement of the Stoic philosopher from the third century BC, Chrysippus, that to represent the gods in human shape was childish. Cf Dodds 1973:240.

\(^{29}\) This is the reasoning behind Acts 17:24, with its polemics against the understanding that the divine is to be found in temples. Compare with this how the philosopher Zeno declared that temples were superfluous. According to him God's true temple was the human intellect. Cf Dodds 1973:239-240, who describes the rationalist nature of the thought world of some philosophers. Orthodox Stoics, Epicureans and Sceptics opposed passions, arguing that philosophy alone leads to goodness. In an interesting discussion he points out how both Epicureans and Stoics found the essential aspect of religion not in acts of cult, but 'in a silent contemplation of the divine and in a realisation of man's kinship with it.'

\(^{30}\) Cf Barrow 1967:88-91 for a discussion about the failure of oracles and the reasonable nature of religion in Plutarch.

\(^{31}\) For an overview on the Presocratic philosophers, but helpful also to understand the age under discussion in this essay, cf Guthrie 1969:226ff.

\(^{32}\) Cf the discussion of Guthrie 1969:246ff. He remarks on 247 that Plato 'fully respected the Delphic oracle, the mouthpiece of Apollo himself, but the mantic art had its higher and lower forms, and there was a whole tribe of mercenary diviners, claiming to tell the will of the gods from the appearance of sacrifices, the flight of the birds, or written collections of forged oracles (such as ridiculed by Aristophanes in the Birds) who were bringing religion into contempt. Plato gives yet further evidence of the need to dis-
and prophecies was human reason. He argued that pseudo-priests and pseudo-prophets promoted superstition through sacrifices and prophecies. ‘Good sense and good counsel are the best prophets’ (Guthrie 1969:246).

Plutarch also wrote an extensive treatise on superstition in which he regarded it as one of two extremes to be avoided at all costs, the other being atheism. In this he is on the same side as Cicero who outspokenly disapproved of superstitious belief in oracles (De Divinazione 2.72). He argued that as long as one remained rational, oracles and prophecies might form part of one’s religion. ‘But I want it distinctly understood that the destruction of superstition does not mean the destruction of religion.’ That is why he proposed that the Sibylline Oracles be retained, because they were not the product of superstition and a result of an ecstatic non-rational state. He even motivated this position by a technical observation. Their acrostic technique proves that they were written by a meticulous author not in a state of frenzy.33

Thus rationality played a major role in the evaluation of prophecies and oracles. In Alexander the False Prophet 47, Lucian describes how the rational teaching of Epicurus would liberate people from their superstition, their ‘terrors, apparitions and portents, their vain hopes and extravagant cravings.’34 Rationality then would make people realise that prophecies and oracles are enslaving them in their fears and cravings.

The superstitious attitude to oracles was criticized by philosophers because it reflected an inherent misunderstanding of gods. Ignorance and folly were the roots of superstition. Understanding and reason provide the parameters for θυσεβεία, the desired form of religion. Once again the abiding influence of Aristotelian Greek philosophical thought can be pointed out. Dodds wrote in this regard, ‘Certainly it is in this age that the Greek pride in human reason attains its most confident expression. We should reject, says Aristotle, the old rule of life that counselled humility, bidding man think in mortal terms (θυντά φρονεῖν τῶν θυμάτων); for man has within him a divine thing, the intellect, and so far as he can live on that level of experience, he can live as though he were not mortal. The founder of Stoicism went further still: for Zeno, man’s intellect was not merely akin to God, it was God, a portion of the divine sub-

33 Even where superstition was avoided, though, he had reservations. The Sibylline Oracles were to be kept under proper supervision (cf 2.54.111-112), under lock and key, and be read only after permission had been granted by Senate (De Divinatione 54).

34 In his Zeus Catechized 12 he also criticized prophecies and oracles for their uselessness, stating that foreknowledge of the future helped nothing when people were completely unable to act against what was about to happen to them. On the concept of uselessness of certain forms of knowledge, cf Dodds 1973:249.
stance in its pure or active state. In the criticism of prophecies and oracles as irrational, one is reminded of Acts 25-26 where Paul appears before Agrippa with the report about his Damascus experience. In Acts 26:22-23 he proclaims the resurrection in accordance with the prophets. The response of Agrippa is the exclamation μαίνη, which Paul then denies, claiming that he speaks ἀληθείας καὶ σωφροσύνης ῥήματο (26:25). In the ensuing dialogue Paul asks Agrippa whether he believes the prophets, thereby reiterating his prophetic message. The implication is clear: to the enlightened Agrippa, the prophetic message of Paul is irrational and superstitious.

This passage obtains new meaning in the light of the debate in the Graeco-Roman world about the rational nature of prophecies and rationality. The same is true of Paul’s criticism of glossolalia in 1 Cor.12-14, which is in several ways a discussion about the need for a prophet to interpret with the mind a language spoken in glossolalia which is not understood by others. ‘For those who speak in a tongue do not speak to other people but to God; for nobody understands them, since they are speaking in the Spirit. On the other hand, those who prophesy speak to other people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation’ (1 Cor 14:2-3).

It is striking to note how in the Book of Revelation, the thinking, rational person is able to recognize the meaning of the symbolic figure of the second beast in Revelation 13:18. Wisdom is needed, the person with understanding will be able to recognize the number of the second beast (666). The same is true of the women and the beast with the seven heads and ten horns in Revelation 17:7ff. The enigmatic vision will be unravelled by wisdom and understanding (17:9). All this means that the prophecy contained in Revelation (cf Rv 1:3; 22:7,10,18) can be understood clearly and through careful consideration. It has a thoroughly rational character!

Often criticism of oracles and prophecies was linked to a phase of greater rationalism than before. As philosophers and people began regarding themselves as more enlightened than their ancestors, they displayed a more critical attitude to prophecies and oracles. The speaker in Lucian’s Astrologia, for example, linked the belief in oracles especially to the past when he noted that ‘the ancients had divination in very great use, and counted it no parergy’ (23). In the minds of many this past belief had been superceded. This critique was

35 Dodds 1951:238. In 1973:3ff he offers a further perspective on the growing rationalism in Greek and Roman society.
37 Prophets were interpreters of divine responses to questions put to them by visitors to the oracular shrines. Cf further de Villiers 1997:81–82.
found mostly in literary and philosophical settings, but also among educated and privileged groups. Even in a philosophical setting in which sympathy and acceptance of prophecies and oracles existed, there was a feeling that progression in insight and understanding brought about new forms for oracles and prophecies. In the essay of Plutarch, *De Pythiae Oraculis*, it is argued that an age of philosophy clearly changed the nature of prophecies and oracles. In 406E he writes that the simpler prophecies should be understood against the background that 'philosophy welcomed clearness and teachability in preference to creating amazement, and pursued its investigations through the medium of everyday language.' This intelligible and convincing language contrasts with epic versification, strange words, circumlocutions and vagueness that characterized earlier prophecies and oracles.38

Other philosophic considerations played a part in the negative evaluation of prophecies and oracles. Epicureans attacked oracles (cf Plutarch in his *De defectu oracularum* 434D) because they were considered to be part of a system of thought in which providence and fate were important, and that, to them, was unacceptable.39 Radical cynics also criticised oracles or mantic practices, being part of the status quo that they questioned so radically. The Cynic teacher Oenomaus of Gadara, in 120, composed an attack on the immorality, ambiguity,40 fraudulence, and potential fatalism of oracles, especially the one at Delphi.41 These points of critique are all linked with reflective thought in which an established institution is reevaluated in the light of intellectual theories and thought.

3.7 Ecstatic nature

Perhaps the single most controversial aspect of prophecy was the loss of rationality as a result of the state of ecstasy that the prophets and oracle-mongers claimed for themselves. They went out of their way to create the image of being possessed, clearly hoping to show the supernatural origins of their utterances. Of the many examples of criticism of frenzy, a colourful and scathing one is to be found in Lucian’s *Zeus Rants* 30, where Zeus remarks, 'What in the world are you going to say, my boy? These preliminaries to your

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38 For a modern discussion of the increasingly rational trend in Greek thought, with clear consequences for the topic under discussion in this essay cf Dodds 1973:179–206. Dodds points out the reactions against rationalistic movements, led in many cases by professional diviners who saw the criticism as a threat to their livelihood (190).
40 Ambiguity is a major point of criticism against prophecies and oracles, which, because of its importance deserves separate attention.
oracle are terrifying in themselves; your colour is changed, your eyes are rolling, your hair stands on end, your movements are frenzied, and in a word everything about you suggests demoniacal possession and gooseflesh and mysteries.'

Here the state of ectaticism is under criticism and scorned heavily. While the ecstatic state might impress the masses, to the philosophers it represented a loss of rationality. Even worse was when such a state was feigned by the false prophets. Plutarch praises the noble character of the prophetic priestess who gives simple answers to questions rather than the verbose ones given by others (*De Oraculis Pythiae* 408D). In his criticism it is also clear that the prophetess has the ability to avoid the extreme forms of ecstatic behaviour, especially when she 'cares more for fulfilling her function than for that kind of repute for men's praise or blame.'

The standard practice of having a prophet(ess) interpret ecstatic or oracular utterances was required as early as in the writings of Plato who accepted certain oracles and prophecies (with reservations), but required a rational person to interpret the ecstatic utterances of prophets who 'say many true things but don't know what they are saying' (cf Guthrie 1965:314). Since then the position of prophecy developed in order to interpret the signs or oracles. Already the way in which oracles were required to be interpreted indicates an uneasiness with them. Clearly this pattern of thought illuminates some of the dynamics at work in Paul's attitude to the enthusiasm in Corinth (1 Cor 12–14).

### 3.8 Moral critique of prophecies and oracles

Critics criticised the lifestyle of prophets and oracle-mongers in quite a few ways. A good example of what was censured, is to be found in a passage from Cicero's *De Divinatione* 1.58, where Quintus quoted Ennius' criticism of diviners who are 'superstitious bards, soothsaying quacks, averse to work, or mad, or ruled by want, directing others how to go, and yet what road to take they do not know themselves; from those to whom they promise wealth they beg a coin. From what they promised let them take their coin as toll and pass the balance on.'

Some aspects of this list represent traditional charges of philosophers against opponents. 'Soothsaying quacks' reminds one of the accusation of grandiloquence. The others in the above list are also traditional accusations, like

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42 Cf *De Oraculis Pythiae* 408D where Plutarch refers disapprovingly to people who embellish their oracles in order to enhance their repute.
teaching without practising the teaching themselves, aversion to work and being mad.

One of the most often mooted accusations was the one of greed. The accusation is found in an elaborate form in Lucian’s *Alexander the False Prophet*. Alexander and Cocconas set about establishing an oracular shrine because they knew if they exploited hope and fear, they would be able to enrich themselves. They succeeded, according to Lucian, far beyond their own expectations and became exceedingly rich. The narrative focuses on their greedy attempts to increase their income from their deceit. In his *Deorum Concilium* 12 Lucian writes graphically about ‘Trophonius, Zeus, and (what sticks in my gorge beyond everything) Amphilochos, who, though the son of an outcast and matricide, gives prophecies, the miscreant in Cilicia, telling lies most of the time and playing charlatan for the sake of his two obols.’ That this criticism was uttered over many centuries, becomes clear if one compares it with Plato’s criticism in his Republic (364) of itinerant evangelists and prophets who visit the rich and assure them that they can buy immunity from punishments for any wrongdoings they may have committed. Many other examples of the greed behind prophecies and oracles can be listed.

In this regard one is reminded almost immediately of the narrative in Acts 16:16ff where a slave girl with a spirit of divination ‘brought her owners a great deal of money by fortunetelling.’ Paul and Silas were thrown into prison as a result of the exorcising of the spirit and the loss of income for her owners. Even though the spirit prophesied the truth (16:17), the greed behind her prophecy made it unacceptable.

**4 CONCLUSION**

Although criticism of prophecies and oracles was systematised in the above essay, they were obviously not always presented in such manner and so neatly separated. Many different points of critique could be joined in one single pronouncement. Compare how, in a psychological interpretation of oracles and prophecies, *De Divinatione* 2.55.114, Cicero traces prophecies to a loss of courage, reason and self-control.

In general one can conclude that people who thought critically about prophecies and oracles, reflected on how gullible audiences were exploited and deceived by charlatans, if and what (pecuniary) demands were made, to whom

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43 Malherbe 1986:38ff lists examples of how philosophers wanted, through their garb, to demonstrate the principles they taught. He quotes from Pseudo-Diogenes Epistle 15 where it is required that ‘the spoken claims conform to the way of life.’ The necessity of a congruence between lifestyle and teaching is part of common wisdom.
and how oracles were given, what their effects were on society and individuals and other related questions.

The way in which criticism led to concrete measures to counter the problems, is a topic for another discussion. Some of these counter measures have been mentioned indirectly above, for example in the case of the control over the use of the Sibylline Oracles and in the attempts to unmask the exploiters. In some cases prophets and oracle-mongers were required to subject themselves to a code of conduct. Like astrologers, for example, prophets were by times even forbidden\(^4\) to prophesy to ‘any person alone’ or ‘regarding death even if others should be present.’ All these remarks serve to underline the importance of prophecies and oracles in the everyday life of the citizen in Graeco-Roman times.

**WORKS CONSULTED**


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\(^4\) Cf also Phillips 1997:264, who draws attention to the rather infrequent application of this prohibition, even though astrologers were expelled from Rome ten times from 33 BC to 93 AD.


Collins, JJ 1983. The Sibylline Oracles, in Charlesworth, OTP.


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