



eCOMMONS

Loyola University Chicago
Loyola eCommons

Theology: Faculty Publications and Other Works

Faculty Publications and Other Works by
Department

12-26-2019

Sibylline Oracles 4–5

Olivia Stewart Lester

Loyola University Chicago, ostewartlester@luc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.luc.edu/theology_facpubs



Part of the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Stewart Lester, Olivia. Sibylline Oracles 4–5. *T&T Clark Encyclopedia of Second Temple Judaism*, 2, 3: 496-499, 2019. Retrieved from Loyola eCommons, Theology: Faculty Publications and Other Works,

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Publications and Other Works by Department at Loyola eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theology: Faculty Publications and Other Works by an authorized administrator of Loyola eCommons. For more information, please contact ecommons@luc.edu.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License](#).
© Bloomsbury Academic, 2019.

Comparison with Other Second Temple Texts. The third Sibylline book is the oldest of the collection of twelve Sibylline books, most of which have a Christian origin. The book is composed in Greek Homeric hexameters, and borrows many words and phrases from Homer (Parke 1988; cf. Buitenwerf 2003: 332). The eschatological terminology and imagery bears a resemblance to that in, for example, the DEAD SEA SCROLLS, Trito-Isaiah, PSALMS OF SOLOMON, and Revelation. The book sheds light on Jewish identity in ASIA MINOR during the 1st century BCE, and therefore adds valuable information to that found in Josephus’ *Jewish Antiquities*.

Critical Issues. The provenance of the third Sibylline book is debated. From the 19th century onwards, literary critics tried to discern various layers in the text, in order to find the core part of the book. The most well-known representative of this method is Collins, who considers Sibylline Oracles 3.97–349 and 489–829 the oldest segments of the book. This original corpus can be dated by references to the Egyptian “seventh king” who, according to Collins, is to be identified with Ptolemy VI or VIII, who reigned in the 2nd century BCE. Therefore, the main body of the third book should be dated to 2nd-century Jewish EGYPT (contra Nikiprowetsky 1970: 195–225, who argues for the second half of the 1st cent. BCE). Collins considers 3.350–488 a secondary stratum, added to the corpus not earlier than the 1st century BCE (Collins 1974).

If one first tries to identify the provenance of the book *as a whole*, however, historical references (esp. in 3.350–488) strongly suggest that the work was written or compiled after 80 BCE. Since the existence of the Ptolemaic kingdom is presupposed (cf. e.g. Sib. Or. 3.193), the book must have been written before 31 BCE. The specific topographical references suggest that the author was living in Asia Minor. If the references to the seventh king are taken to refer to the author’s future, it is not necessary to presuppose an older, Egyptian layer. In this interpretation, seven is to be taken as a symbolic number: an exact moment is not given, but the victory of God’s people is predetermined and foreseen. This view is sustained by the popularity of the prophetess Sibyl in Roman Asia Minor in the 1st century BCE, whereas no reference to Sibylline prophecy has been attested in pre-Roman Egypt.

Bibliography

- R. Buitenwerf, *Book III of the Sibylline Oracles and Its Social Setting: With an Introduction, Translation and Commentary*, SVTP 17 (Leiden: Brill, 2003).
J. Geffcken, *Die Oracula Sibyllina. Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte*, GCS 8 (Leipzig, 1902).
V. Nikiprowetzky, *La troisième Sibylle*, Études juives 9 (Paris: Paris-La-Haye, 1970).

RIEUWERD BUITENWERF

RELATED ENTRIES: Isaiah, Book of; Jesus Movement; Jesus of Nazareth; Josephus, Writings of; Ptolemies; Revelation, Book of; Sibylline Oracles 1–2; Sibylline Oracles 4–5; Women.

Sibylline Oracles 4–5

Among the wide-ranging collection of Jewish and Christian oracles attributed to a pagan prophetess (a Sibyl), Sibylline Oracles 4 and 5 can be taken together with Sibylline Oracles 1–3 as likely having Jewish origins. The two books probably date from the first and second centuries

CE, but most likely from different locations. The two books share a central prophetic figure, a Sibyl, and both demonstrate interest in divine judgment against Rome. They differ, however, in their views on the temple and in their responses to Egypt.

Sibylline Oracles 4. Content. Sibylline Oracles 4 begins with a proud declaration from the Sibyl that she does not utter the oracles of “false Phoebus” (ψευδῆς Φοῖβος *pseudēs Phoibos*, i.e. Apollo [4.4]), but rather of the “great God” (θεὸς μέγας *theos megas* [4.6]). This God does not have a temple (4.8–11), and those who love God will reject temples and sacrifices (4.27–30). The Sibyl’s subsequent predictions of divine judgment in book 4 utilize a pre-Roman oracle, listing a succession of ten generations across four kingdoms: the Assyrians, the Medes, the Persians, and the Macedonians (4.49–101; Flusser 1972: 148–75; Collins 1974a: 365–80). The 1st-century CE Jewish author has added to this earlier oracle, so that the Romans succeed the Macedonians (4.102–51). The fourth Sibyl discusses Rome’s destruction of the JERUSALEM TEMPLE (4.115–29) and the eruption of Vesuvius (4.130–134). She describes the flight of Nero to the PARTHIANS (4.119–24) and predicts his return to ROME (4.137–39). Her prophecy culminates in the threat of a final conflagration (4.161, 171–178). The Sibyl, however, holds out some hope for her audience: she calls them to baptism, REPENTANCE, and praise, promising that if they do these things, God will not destroy them (4.162–70); she also predicts a RESURRECTION of the pious dead after the final JUDGMENT (4.179–92).

Date, Provenance, and Relation to Other Sibylline Oracles. The earliest layer of this book is a pre-Roman oracle, containing the succession of four kingdoms. The eruption of Vesuvius in 79 CE is the latest datable event in the book, and therefore scholars date the redaction of Sibylline Oracles 4 at approximately 80 CE (e.g. Collins 1974a: 367; Flusser, 148; Schürer 1986: 3.1.641). Sibylline Oracles 4 does not display a marked interest in Egyptian political affairs, and its anti-temple polemic stands in sharp contrast to the pro-temple material of books 3 and 5. It is most likely, therefore, that Sibylline Oracles 4 does not derive from the Egyptian Jewish context that produced Sibylline Oracles 3 and 5 (Collins 1974a).

Like the other books in the Jewish/Christian collection, Sibylline Oracles 4 mixes the traditional trope of sibylline prophecies as proclamations of doom with the Jewish innovation of sibylline ethical and theological instruction (Collins 1997: 189; Collins 2015b: 252–53; Parke 1988: 7, 10–11, 12–13; Lightfoot 2007: 8, 16–17, 136). In Sibylline Oracles 4, the ethics include resisting idolatry, adultery, murder, and dishonest gain (4.24–34; see Collins 1983: 383). Two of the more striking features of this book within the context of the larger collection are its anti-temple statements (Collins 1974a) and the hope that divine judgment can be avoided with repentance and baptism (Collins 2015a: 122).

Sibylline Oracles 5. Content. Sibylline Oracles 5 displays a concern for Egyptian affairs and a level of continuity with book 3 that suggests the two books emerge from related communities within Egyptian Judaism (Collins 1974b). Collins posits that the community behind book 3 may have been associated with the temple at Leontopolis, and the producers of book 5 may have been their descendants (Collins 1974b: 112). In contrast to book 3, however, its anti-Roman and anti-Egyptian sentiments are much more severe (Collins 1974b: 76–77).

Book 5 begins with a riddling account of Roman history, using gematria to describe major political figures, beginning with ALEXANDER THE GREAT and extending until Marcus Aurelius (5.1–51). The fifth Sibyl then proclaims judgment against various nations, including EGYPT (5.52–110;

179–199); nations of the east, such as the Persians, Iberians, Babylonians, and many others (5.111–136); Rome (5.162–178; 386–396); the Gauls (5.200–205); the Ethiopians (5.206–213); Asia (5.286–327); and Babylon (5.434–446). Nero receives particular attention from this Sibyl. Throughout the book, she describes his life and predicts his return with vitriol, blaming him for the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple and accusing him of murdering his mother (5.28–34; 93–110; 137–154; 214–227; 361–385). This Sibyl expresses love for the Jews, praising them in a lengthy speech (5.238–285) and praying to God on their behalf (5.328–332). She also promises that a heavenly savior will come and build a temple for God’s holy people (5.414–433). The Sibyl weaves these predictions of judgment and passages of praise and hope together throughout the book.

Sibylline Oracles 5 finishes with two accounts of destruction. In 5.484–511, the Sibyl predicts the conversion of the Egyptians to the true God, including their construction of a temple. This is immediately followed, however, by the destruction of their new temple and their land at the hand of the Ethiopians, and the Sibyl attributes this devastation to the wrath of God. The final section of the book describes a battle among the STARS (5.512–531). God commands them to fight, and, ultimately, HEAVEN casts the stars down, so that they ignite the whole earth.

Date and Provenance. Sibylline Oracles 5 speaks about Hadrian in positive terms (5.46–50), which suggests that it was composed before the Jewish revolt of 132 CE (Collins 1974b: 94–95; Momigliano 1988: 8). A later Christian interpolation occurs at 5.257, and Momigliano also argues for viewing 5.51 as an interpolation (Momigliano 1988: 8). Indications that the book was written by Jews in Egypt include the Sibyl’s self-description as the friend of Isis (5.53), multiple oracles directed at Egypt (5.52–110; 179–199), and placing a temple of the true God in Egypt (5.294–503; Collins 1974b: 75). The judgments against Egypt, however, indicate a deterioration of the relationships between Egyptian Jews and their Egyptian neighbors between the writing of Sibylline Oracles 3 and Sibylline Oracles 5 (Collins 1974b: 112).

Bibliography

- J. J. Collins, “The Place of the Fourth Sibyl in the Development of the Jewish Sibyllina,” *JJS* 25 (1974a): 365–80.
- J. J. Collins, *The Sibylline Oracles of Egyptian Judaism*. SBLDS 13. (Missoula: Society of Biblical Literature, 1974b).
- J. J. Collins, “The Jewish Transformation of Sibylline Oracles,” in *Seers, Sibyls, and Sages in Hellenistic Roman Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 181–97.
- J. J. Collins, “The Sibyl and the Apocalypses: Generic Relationships in Hellenistic Judaism and Early Christianity,” *Apocalypse, Prophecy, and Pseudepigraphy* (2015a), 108–26.
- J. J. Collins, “Sibylline Discourse,” *Apocalypse, Prophecy, and Pseudepigraphy* (2015b), 251–70.
- D. Flusser, “The Four Empires in the Fourth Sibyl and in the Book of Daniel,” *Israel Oriental Studies II* (1972): 148–75.
- O. Stewart Lester, *Prophetic Rivalry, Gender, and Economics: A Study in Revelation and Sibylline Oracles 4–5*, WUNT 2.466 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018).
- A. Momigliano, “From the Pagan to the Christian Sibyl: Prophecy as History of Religion,” in *The Uses of Greek and Latin: Historical Essays*, ed. A. C. Dionisotti, A. Grafton, and J. Kraye (London: Warburg Institute, University of London, 1988), 3–18.

OLIVIA STEWART LESTER

RELATED ENTRIES: Jewish Christianity; Roman Emperors; Sacrifices and Offerings; Sibylline Oracles 1–2; Sibylline Oracles 3; Temple, Leontopolis (Archaeology); Temple, Leontopolis (Literature).

Solomon, Odes of

The Odes of Solomon, a collection of poetic songs that draw heavily on Second Temple Jewish, early Christian, and gnostic traditions, are known principally from two Syriac manuscripts: MS H, discovered by James Rendell Harris in 1909, containing Odes 3 (the beginning missing) to 42 (dated 13th–15th cent. CE; see *Figure 3.34*); and MS N discovered in 1912, containing Odes 17:7b to 42 (dated 9th–10th cent. CE). Prior to these discoveries quotations from the Odes had been identified in the *Pistis Sophia* (among them the only extant source for Ode 1) and Lactantius' *Divine Institutes*. These two works, dated 4th–5th century CE and early 4th century CE, respectively, are the earliest sources for the Odes of Solomon and clearly identify them as a collection. A GREEK version of Ode 11 was found in Papyrus Bodmer XI (dated 3rd–4th cent. CE), discovered in 1952. In his most recent commentary, Lattke (2009) infers the existence of three further manuscripts based on clues such as the presence of marginalia in MS H.

The Odes of Solomon are grouped with the PSALMS OF SOLOMON in MSS H and N, and in the latter the numbering of the Psalms of Solomon continues from Ode 42 as if to form one continuous work. The two texts are also grouped together in early lists of apocryphal works, in Pseudo-Athanasius' *Synopsis Scripturae Sacrae* and Nicephorus' *Quae Scripturae Canonicae*.

The *Pistis Sophia* refers to each of its five quotations from the Odes as words that have been prophesied. If the characterization is taken in the first instance to mean speech that is inspired, it comports with the text's image of the Spirit of the Lord speaking through the odist (e.g. Ode 16:5) and frequent interweaving of the odist's speech with that of the messiah. This idea is

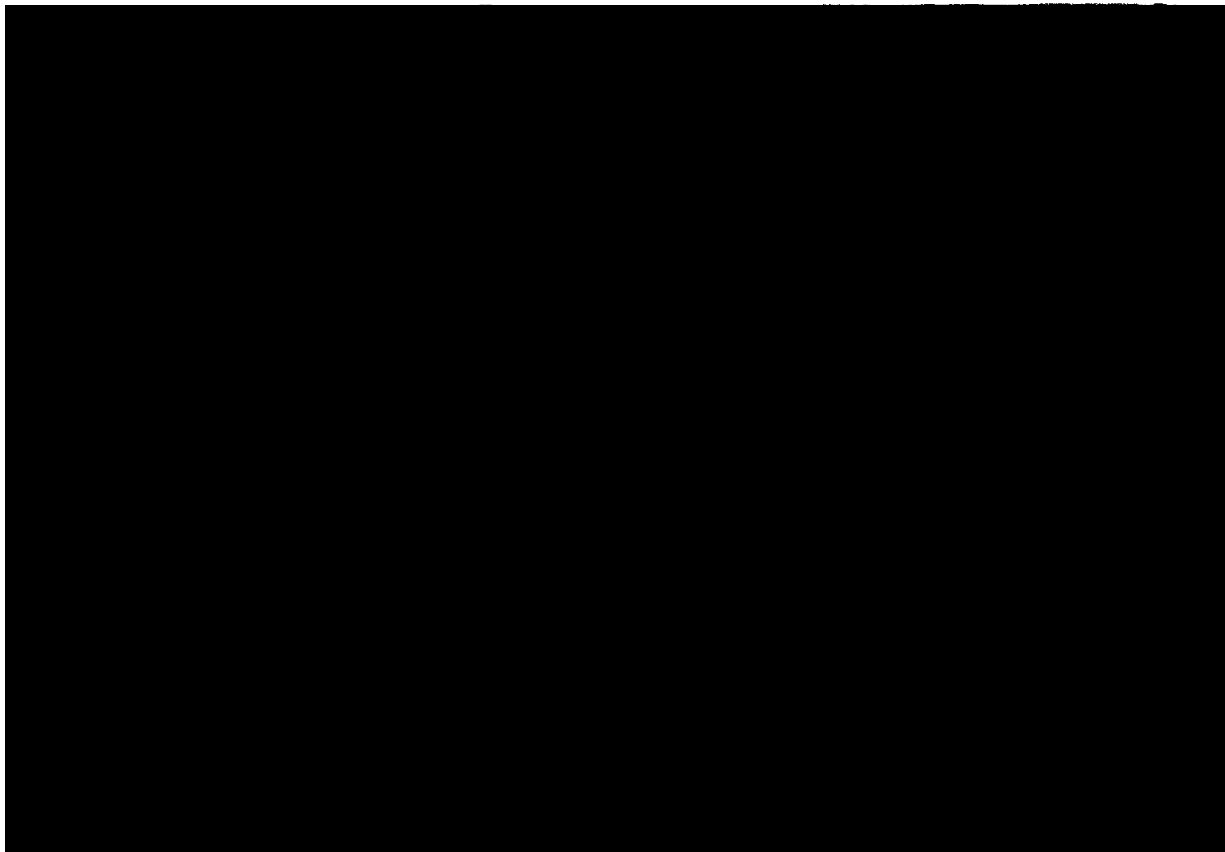


Figure 3.34 A page from MS H, now kept in the John Rylands Library, Special Collections.