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The Greek Patristic Reception of the Sibylline Oracles

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This paper examines the reception of the Sibyllines in the Greek Patristic literature up to the fourth century. Tracing references to and quotations of the Oracles in the works of Justin Martyr, Athenagoras of Athens, Theophilus of Antioch, Clement of Alexandria, and Pseudo-Justin, this study surveys the uses, functions, and authority of the Sibyl in Christian apologetic contexts.¹ As will be seen, the Oracles tend to have a protean character, as they were not only held to be authoritative “divine testimonies,” but they were also set in conversation with Scriptural materials and contemporary philosophical language.

Justin Martyr’s *Apologies*

Although Justin shows strong disagreements with the Gnostics, Simon Magus and especially Marcion (*Apol.* I 16; I 26, *Dialogue* 35.6), he is never overtly against the Sibyl, or the classical philosophers. His line of reasoning makes use of a rather ingenious tactic: since the Sibylline Oracles were an important part of the Greco-Roman religious life, they could be adopted and used as effective missionary tools. As will be shown below, displaying “common ground” examples between the Christian and the pagan views is actually a *topos* in Justin’s apologetic thought. The pagan ideas are not non-assenting, but they are altogether seen in complementarity with the Christian ones.

1 On the use of Sibylline Oracles in early Christian literature: G.J.M. Bartelink, “Die Oracula Sibyllina in den frühchristlichen griechischen Schriften von Justin bis Origenes (150–250 nach Chr.),” in *Early Christian Poetry*, eds. J. Den Boeft and A. Hilhorst, Supplements to VC 22 (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 23–33; R. Buitenwerf, *Book III of the Sibylline Oracles and Its Social Setting* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2003), 72–91; H.W. Parke, *Sibyls and Sibylline Prophecy in Classical Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 1988), 152–173; Bard Thompson, “Patristic Use of Sibylline Oracles,” *The Review of Religion* 16, 3–4 (1952): 115–136.

a *Apol. 1 20.1*

Mentioning the name of the Sibyl² two times in I 20.1 and I 44.12 of his *Apology*, Justin associates her with Hystaspes³ as well as the prophets (τάς Ὑστάσπου ἢ Σιβύλλης ἢ τῶν προφητῶν βίβλους). In *Apol. 1 20.1*, Justin credits the Sibyl and Hystaspes with foretelling a destruction of the corruptible beings by fire (Καὶ Σίβυλλα δὲ καὶ Ὑστάσπης γενήσεσθαι τῶν φθαρτῶν ἀνάλωσιν διὰ πυρὸς ἔφασαν).⁴ To strengthen his argument and demonstrate that the charges against the Christians were unfounded, Justin connects the Sibyl to a stoic illustration regarding the consumption through fire—“and those called Stoic philosophers are of the view that even God himself is resolved into fire (... καὶ αὐτὸν τὸν θεὸν εἰς πῦρ ἀναλύεσθαι ...).”⁵ Pairing the Sibyl and the Stoics was arguably a tactical move since, for instance, Marcus Aurelius—the Roman emperor and one of the addressees of Justin’s *Apol.* under the name of “Verissimus”—was a devotee of the latter.⁶ Similarly, a few paragraphs later, Justin establishes parallels between the biblical understanding of creation and that conveyed in Plato’s *Timaeus* (Πλάτωνος δόξομεν λέγειν δόγμα), portraying a series of philosophical analogies with “the poets and philosophers” (ποιηταῖς καὶ φιλοσόφοις τὰ αὐτὰ λέγειν δόξομεν—I 20.4). Since the Christians “seem to say the same things as the poets and philoso-

2 In the following, for the Greek text of the *Or. Sib.*, I will be using J. Geffcken, *Die Oracula Sibyllina*, GCS 8 (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1902); for the English translation, J.J. Collins, “Sibylline Oracles,” *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol. 1. Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments, ed. by J.H. Charlesworth (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1983), 317–472, with minor modifications.

3 Hystaspes is a legendary figure, a Persian satrap converted by Zoroaster, sometimes identified as the father of Darius I. The *Oracle of Hystaspes* pertains to the Persian apocalypses preserved only through the mentions of Latin and Greek authors (Lactantius, *Div. Inst.* 7.14.8, 7.15.19, *Epit.*, 68 (73); Ammianus Marcellinus 23.6.32; Justin’s *Apol.* I 20.1, I 44.12; Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 6.5.43.1, etc.). See J. Bidez, F. Cumont, *Les mages hellénisés. Zoroastre, Ostanès et Hystaspes d’après la tradition grecque* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1973): Vol. 1 (Introduction): 215–223; Vol. 2 (Texts): 359–377.

4 C. Munier proposes as a parallel *Or. Sib.* 2.196. Cf. C. Munier, *Apologie pour les chrétiens*, Sources Chrétiennes (hereafter SC) 507 (Paris: Cerf, 2006), 185, footnote 3. The passage from Justin, however, does not have any precise parallels with *Or. Sib.* 2 (it may equally echo *Or. Sib.* 4.173–178, or 7.119–122), or with any other verses on the final conflagration from the *Or. Sib.* See also J. Lightfoot, *The Sibylline Oracles* (Oxford: OUP, 2007), 105.

5 Translations from D. Minns and P. Parvis, eds., *Justin, Philosopher and Martyr. Apologies* (Oxford: OUP, 2009).

6 R.M. Grant, *Greek Apologists of the Second Century* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Westminster Press, 1988), 74 f., 52.

phers" (*Apol.* 1 20.1), Justin successfully sidesteps critiques that he is giving his faith too exclusive a role.

In the same vein, in *Apol.* 1 21 Justin again takes the opportunity to establish bonds with pagans: he affirms that the Christian theory of the Logos, the first-born of God (τὸν Λόγον, ὃ ἐστὶ πρῶτον γέννημα τοῦ θεοῦ—I 21.1), and Christ incarnated, crucified and then resurrected, is not unprecedented (οὐ ... καινόν τι φέρομεν—I 21.1) when compared to the Greco-Roman mythologies. Justin seems to proceed with a Christian expression of faith, which is then skilfully correlated with pagan examples in order to render it more appealing to them. In this particular fragment, the apologist explains that, by way of the Logos and the Spirit, it is God himself who speaks in these writings. The Sibyl thus serves as an Hellenistic element through which a Christian tenet is proposed to the pagan.

b *Apol.* 1 44.12

In *Apol.* 1 44, Justin Martyr addresses the theory of divine inspiration, and the possibilities of being granted the gift of the "true" prophecy. His main interest lies in defending Jesus who, as Logos and Son of God, implants the "seeds of truth" in all humans. Making use of allegories and typologies, Justin demonstrates that there are traces of Christology preserved in the Old Testament, and attributes the theophanies of the Old Testament⁷ to the pre-existent Christ. Thus, what Plato holds true is but an inspiration from Moses (παρὰ Μωσέως τοῦ προφήτου λαβὼν εἶπε—I 44.8), since Moses "is more ancient than even all the writers in Greek" (πρεσβύτερος γὰρ Μωσῆς καὶ πάντων τῶν ἐν Ἑλληνισι—I 44.8). Moreover, the philosophers and the poets know about the immortality of the soul and punishments after death through prophetic mediation. Hence, "there are seeds of truth"⁸ (σπέρματα ἀληθείας—I 44.10) amongst all [men],⁹ infused through the spirit of prophecy, but they are all dependent on the authority of the Scriptures.⁹

7 In his treatment of the Old Testament theophanies, Justin draws on Judaism and Philo. In the *Dialogue*, Justin engages even more in showing that the Old Testament prophecies had been already fulfilled in Christ. It is in this work, that Justin calls the Greeks "already Christians." R. Grant, *Augustus to Constantine. The Rise and Triumph of Christianity in the Roman World* (Louisville, London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 110 and 113.

8 Minns and Parvis distinguish between the "seeds of reason sown by the spermatik logos" which enable philosophers and poets "to see what was co-natural to that Logos," and the "seeds of truth" (as in this case), which "are in fact materials, or 'starting-points' taken from the prophets" (195).

9 C.H. Cosgrove, "Justin Martyr and the Emerging Christian Canon," *VC* 36 (1982), 209–232.

After drawing on these theories of “borrowings,” Justin turns to the Sibyl. He suggests that the prophetic spirit (cf. προφητικοῦ πνεύματος in *I 44.11*) inspires the Sibyl, Hystaspe and the prophets. In doing so, Justin disagrees (*Apol.* *I 44.12*) with those who condemn reading such works (θανάτος ὥρσιθη κατὰ τῶν τὰς Ὑστάσπου ἢ Σιβύλλης ἢ τῶν προφητῶν βιβλίου ἀναγινωσκόντων). It is not surprising that further on, in *Apol.* *I 44.13*, he sees the Sibyl’s prophecies as “pleasing to all” (πᾶσιν εὐάρεστα), including the Christians, who have nothing to be afraid of (ἀφόβως).

In sum, there are no direct quotations from the Sibyllines in Justin’s works, and the two references to Sibyl’s name function as points of contact between Hellenistic *topoi* and Christian tenets, apparently meant to make the latter more appealing to the pagan mind. However, only the teachings of the Logos alone (in the Old and the New Testament) have full authority, while the Sibylline Oracles might eventually possess some sort of “seeds of truth,” reliant on the prophets.

Athenagoras of Athens’s *Legatio sive supplicatio pro Christianis*

Like Justin’s *Apol.*, *Legatio pro Christianis* is also directed at emperors Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Aurelius Commodus, whom Athenagoras addresses as philosophers and wise men (*Leg.* 2.3). Athenagoras’ treatise addresses three main themes, as he fights against the charges of godlessness, cannibalism (“Thyestean banquets”) and incest (“Oedipodal unions”).¹⁰ First, he explains that Christian faith is not atheistic but monotheistic and ridicules the pagan gods. In order to substantiate his claims, Athenagoras appeals to a range of poets and philosophers (among whom is also the “Sibyl”),¹¹ all of which, to his mind, illustrate vain pagan deifications.

In *Leg.* 30.1, Athenagoras quotes *Or. Sib.* 3.108–113 in a polemic against the pagan gods and the imperial cult. There he rebukes the practice of euhemerism as the transformation of simple humans into gods, and takes one of the examples from the Sibyl. Informing the reader that Plato also mentions the Sibyl, Athenagoras goes on to quote six lines from the third book (*Or. Sib.* 3.108–113),¹² in which we are told that the kings Kronos, Iapetos and Titan were made gods

10 R. Grant, *Greek Apologists*, 102.

11 N. Zeegers-Vander Vorst, *Les citations des poètes grecs chez les apologistes chrétiens du IIe siècle* (Louvain: Publications Universitaires de Louvain, 1972), 25; for a comparative tableau on the citations used by the apologists, see 32–33.

12 This passage is also cited in Theophilus, *Ad Aut.* 11, 31 (*Or. Sib.* 3.97–105), Tertullian, *Ad Nat.*

by humans who proclaimed them as the sons of Gaia and Ouranos. This occurs in the conclusion of his demonstration that gods are the works of humans (who venerate them for various purposes and reasons), or even the works of demons.

Buitenwerf notes that, even if there is not much information that can be traced from this isolated reference, the “quotation is important since it is the earliest Christian testimony of Book 3 of the *Or. Sib.*”¹³ It is also important to note that here, the Sibyl is an exponent and illustration of a pagan custom that is to be rejected. As Athenagoras has it at the end of the chapter, the writings that tell such stories are ultimately not to be trusted (ἄπιστοι), and the reverence shown to them by people is far-fetched (περισσή).

Theophilus of Antioch's *Ad Autolycum*

Written at the end of the second century, *Ad Autol.* is usually regarded as an elaborate treatise in three parts that incorporates didactic instructions, elements of exegesis, polemics, apologetic passages and missionary efforts.¹⁴ Theophilus quoted the Sibyllines *in extenso*, at one point giving a 35-line testimony, and at another point bringing to the fore 49 more verses. In *Ad Autol.*, the *Or. Sib.* are referred to four times.¹⁵ From these, three occurrences have parallels in the so-called “fragments i, ii, and iii”¹⁶ of the *Or. Sib.* (*Ad Autol.* 2.3—*Or. Sib.* fr. ii, *Ad Autol.* 2.36—*Or. Sib.* fr. i, *Ad Autol.* 2.36—*Or. Sib.* fr. iii). The fourth passage, *Ad Autol.* 2.31, echoes *Or. Sib.* 3.97–103, 105 and 8.5. Apart from these quotations which have a parallel in the *Or. Sib.* as we know them today, there is another mention to the figure of the Sibyl herself (*Ad Autol.* 2.9), without a direct reference to some *Or. Sib.* verses.

11, 12 (*Or. Sib.* 3.108–113). Cf. B. Pouderon, *Athénagore. Supplique au sujet des chrétiens et Sur la résurrection des morts*, SC 379 (Paris: Cerf, 1992), 187, footnote 3.

13 R. Buitenwerf, *Book III of the Sibylline Oracles*, 87.

14 R. Rogers, *Theophilus of Antioch. The Life and Thought of a Second-Century Bishop* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2000), 15 ff.

15 R. Buitenwerf, *Book III of the Sibylline Oracles*, 72 ff.

16 For a discussion of the implication of these fragments for the textual reconstruction of the *Or. Sib.* collection, see Geffcken, *Komposition und Entstehungszeit der Oracula Sibyllina* (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1902), 69–75 and R. Buitenwerf, *Book III of the Sibylline Oracles*, esp. 124–134.

a Ad Autol. 2.3

The first reference of Theophilus (*Ad Autol.* 2.3) to the *Or. Sib.* (fr. ii) is used in a sarcastic polemic meant to ridicule the idolatrous practice of making “gods,” and to downplay “mythological absurdities.” The argument in *Ad Autol.* 2.3 follows three steps: a deconstruction of the opponent’s view on mainly logical grounds, an appeal to the authority of a prophet of their own (the Sibyl), and an affirmation of the superiority of his own faith. Thus, if the gods begot and were begotten, it is natural that there are gods coming into existence up to the present day; therefore, “there should be more gods than men, as the Sibyl says (δὲ καὶ πλείοντες θεοὶ ὠφείλον εἶναι τῶν ἀνθρώπων, ὥς φησιν Σίβυλλα)” (*Ad Autol.* 2.3).¹⁷ The fragment from the *Or. Sib.* (*Or. Sib.* fr. ii)¹⁸ inserted at this point, is meant to support Theophilus’ *reductio ad absurdum*. What follows is a pronouncement of the nature of God, yet in Judeo-Hellenistic terms (Most High, Almighty, self-contained, and ubiquitous), while in the next section Theophilus focuses on polemics against philosophers, poets and historians.

b Ad Autol. 2.9

Theophilus speaks in *Ad Autol.* 2.9 about the prophetic teaching on the creation of the world (as quoted below), followed by a long exegetical passage on the book of Genesis (*Ad Autol.* 2.10–32). While in a previous passage, Theophilus considers “all the historians, poets and philosophers” deceived by being unable to look for the truth in the right way, he also acknowledges that sometimes they can render ideas in agreement with those of the prophets.

The men of God (θεοῦ ἄνθρωποι), who were possessed by a holy spirit (πνεύματος ἁγίου) and became prophets (προφήται γενόμενοι) and were inspired (ἐμπνευσθέντες) and instructed (σοφισθέντες) by God himself, were taught by God and became holy and righteous (ὁσίοι καὶ δίκαιοι). For this reason they were judged worthy to receive the reward of becoming instruments of God (ὄργανα θεοῦ γενόμενοι) and containing wisdom (χωρήσαντες σοφίαν) from him. Through wisdom they spoke about the creation of the world (κτίσεως τοῦ κόσμου) and about everything else; for they also prophesied about pestilences and famines and wars. There were not just

17 Greek text and translations from R. Grant, *Theophilus of Antioch. Ad Autolycum* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970).

18 *Or. Sib.* fr. ii: “If gods beget and yet remain immortal/ there would have been more gods born than men,/ and mortals would never ever have a place to stand” (εἰ δὲ θεοὶ γεννώσι καὶ ἀθάνατοί γε μένουσιν,/ πλείονες ἀνθρώπων γεγεννημένοι ἂν θεοὶ ᾗσαν,/ οὐδὲ τόπος στήναι θνητοῖς οὐκ ἂν ποθ’ ὑπῆρξεν).

one or two of them but more at various times and seasons (ἀλλὰ πλείονες κατὰ χρόνους καὶ καιροὺς) among the Hebrews, as well as the Sibyl among the Greeks (παρὰ Ἑλλησιν Σίβυλλα). All of them were consistent with one another and with themselves (πάντες φίλα ἀλλήλοις καὶ σύμφωνα εἰρήκασιν, τὰ τε πρὸ αὐτῶν γεγενημένα καὶ τὰ κατ' αὐτοὺς γεγονότα), and they described events which had previously occurred, events in their own time, and events which are now being fulfilled in our times. For this reason we are persuaded that their predictions of coming events will prove correct, just as the former events took place exactly.

Ad Autol. 2.9

According to this passage, the prophets are possessed by the *pneuma* and are inspired by God himself, becoming instruments of the divine. Being granted the wisdom, they had access to foreknowing all sorts of concerns of human history. Among the inspired, Theophilus refers to the prophets of the Hebrews (προφήται), as expected, but also to the Sibyl who is technically a prophetess to the (pagan) Greeks. By linking the Sibyl to the Greeks, Theophilus presents her as an independent, non-Christian witness to the divine revelation, consistent with the Hebrew prophets.

It is not clear, however, whether Theophilus holds the message of the Sibylline Oracles on a par with the prophecies of the Hebrew Bible. On the whole, in *Ad Autol.* 2.10, Theophilus downplays the importance of the inspired and emphasizes the source of their inspiration: “It was [the logos], spirit of God (πνεῦμα θεοῦ) and beginning (ἀρχή) and sophia (σοφία) and power of the most high (δύναμις ὑψίστου), who came down into (κατήρχετο) the prophets and spoke through them about the creation of the world and all the rest.”¹⁹

c *Ad Autol.* 2.31

The next quotation from the *Or. Sib.* can be framed within his exegetical treatment of the book of Genesis, and more precisely, it gives an illustration of the Flood and of the Tower of Babel. In *Ad Autol.* 2.31, the disobedience of men brought about punishment—“from that time he diversified the tongues of men, giving each a different language” (Ἐνήλλαξεν τὰς γλώσσας τῶν ἀνθρώπων, δοὺς ἑκάστῳ διάφορον διάλεκτον)—but also the possibility of repentance as a new beginning after the Flood. Theophilus places in his account of Genesis a passage from the *Or. Sib.*:

19 For a more detailed discussion on Theophilus' theory of passing on inspiration to the prophets, and the role he ascribes to *Sophia*, see R. Rogers, *Theophilus of Antioch*, 82–84, and 136.

The Sibyl indicated these events when she proclaimed that wrath would come to the world. She spoke thus:
 But when the warnings of the great God are accomplished,
 Threats which he then made to mortals, when they built a tower
 In the Assyrian land. They all spoke the same language,
 And they wanted to ascend into the starry heaven.
 Straightway the Immortal laid strong necessity
 Upon the winds; straightway then the winds the great tower from above
 Cast down, and roused strife among mortals [= *Or. Sib.* 3.97–103]
 Straightway when the tower fell, the tongues of men [= *Or. Sib.* 3.105]
 Were divided into many languages of mortals [= *Or. Sib.* 8.5].²⁰

This is a complex manner of quoting the *Or. Sib.* in that Theophilus adds two further verses, one from the third and the other from the eighth book of *Or. Sib.* The Babel tower story appears in Genesis and in *Or. Sib.* 3.97–104, both seemingly known to Theophilus. In *Ad Autolycum* 2.31, the *Or. Sib.* narrative is brought in to illustrate and to confirm the Genesis account.

We read in these verses that after the Flood, people had started to build a tower in the Assyrian land. Moreover, there is another passage in *Or. Sib.* 3.809–810 where the Sibyl herself is said to “have left the long Babylonian walls of Assyria, frenzied, a fire sent to Greece, prophesizing the disclosures of God to all mortals.” Since there is no further reference in *Ad Autol.* 2.31, it is impossible to tell whether Theophilus knew *Or. Sib.* 3.809–810, or the tradition according to which God appointed the Sibyl to leave the Babylonian walls and to prophesize to the Greeks. If he did so, he might have indeed inferred the label of the Sibyl as “prophetess for the Greeks and for other nations,” after having read her linkage with Babylon.²¹

Up until now, the use of the *Or. Sib.* in *Ad Autolycum* might suggest that the Sibyl is considered prophetess to the Greeks in that she speaks to them of biblical issues. However, Theophilus does not clarify whether or not he holds as divinely inspired all of Sibyl’s prophecies. This possibility is kept open by the fact that in 2.9 he also holds that all the inspired are consistent in themselves

20 These parallels are discussed in Buitenwerf, *Book III of the Sibylline Oracles*, 73–75.

21 R. Buitenwerf demonstrates that “whenever the Sibyl mentions an episode which took place before she was sent to Greece, the past tense is used, whereas the future tense is used for later events.” See R. Buitenwerf, “The Identity of the Prophetess Sibyl in the Sibylline Oracles III,” in *Prophets and Prophecy in Jewish and Early Christian Literature*, eds J. Verheyden, K. Zamfir, and T. Nicklas, WUNT 11 286 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 41–55, esp. 45–46.

and with one another. One should add that the Sibyl does not enter the gallery of those pagan “authors” who have stolen knowledge from the Scriptures (cf. *Ad Autol.* 2.37), but she has direct access to the truth (cf. *Ad Autol.* 2.9), and becomes trustworthy and entitled to proclaim “that wrath would come to the world (ὁργήν τῷ κόσμῳ μέλλειν ἔρχεσθαι)” (*Ad. Autol.* 2.31).

d Ad Autol. 2.36

In *Ad Autol.* 2.36 Theophilus commends not only the study of historical texts, or of the Old Testament characters (Moses, David, Habakkuk), but also of the Sibyl. He quotes successively *Or. Sib.* fr. i and *Or. Sib.* fr. iii, after a sequence in which he has stressed how harmoniously and consistently all the Hebrew prophets spoke.²²

The Sibyl is then introduced as Greek prophetess as follows: “And the Sibyl, who was a prophetess for the Greeks and the other nations (ἐν Ἑλλήσιν καὶ ἐν τοῖς λοιποῖς), rebukes the human race at the beginning of her prophecy (ἐν ἀρχῇ τῆς προφητείας αὐτῆς), saying (...).” The fragment quoted in 2.36 exhibits (in 35 verses) roughly two important themes: an affirmation of monotheism, and a warning of the divine judgment and punishment. This too is paralleled in the previous chapter (2.35), with regard to Hebrew prophets. Theophilus gives full voice to the Sibyl and lets her affirm the statements of monotheism without adding Christian elements, or flavouring the Sibyl’s speech with any Christological concepts. The second fragment (49 verses) is introduced as follows: “And in regard to those [gods] who are called created, she said.” This quotation also deals with monotheism, and in particular, it denounces false deifications, gods made by man. The quotation is followed by a conclusion: “Now that these statements are true and useful and just and lovely is obvious to all men ...” (2.36).

In light of this, the function of the Sibyl is to establish common ground with the Greek pagan, in which the latter can see the will of God at work, stressing both its monotheistic character and the falsity of other gods made by man. It is in this context that his view of the Sibyl as the Greek prophetess—vessel of the spirit of God, in harmony and consistent with the Hebrew prophets—is best understood.

22 There is an emphasis not only on the continuity, but also on the universality of truth (cf. *Ad Autol.* 2.9). Preserving her as a prophetess “for the Greeks” (in line with the previous apologists) and “for other nations,” Theophilus gives her universality and it is only on account of this “given” that she pertains to the “people of God.” See Rogers, *Theophilus of Antioch*, 135.

Clement of Alexandria's *Paedagogus*, *Protrepticus* and *Stromata*

As Drobner shows, Clement devoted his works “to proclaiming to the rich and highly cultured upper strata of Alexandria a progressive and superior religion.”²³ Finding biblical support, Clement accommodates Hellenistic vocabulary and motifs, and portrays with the help of any sort of material he has at hand the core and the *telos* of the Christian life. In doing so, he has the deserved reputation of being the Church Father who most frequently refers to non-Christian sources.²⁴

Clement speaks of nine prophetesses, and he seems to have known both Varro's and Pausanias' accounts.²⁵ In a rather chaotic way, he offers his readers all sorts of examples of places and names of Sibyls: “the Hebrew prophetess” (*Protr.* 6.71.4), “the Phrygian ... called Artemis,” “the Egyptian Sibyl, and the Italian who inhabited the Carmentale in Rome” (*Strom.* 1.21.108). Interestingly, Clement also refers to Heraclides of Pontus, who is thought to have been the first author to distinguish between various Sibyls.²⁶ The passage from *Strom.* 1.21 reads: “There is another one [Sibyl], also from Erythrai, called Herophile. Heraclides of Pontus mentioned these in Περί χρηστηρίων” (1.21.108).²⁷ Clement also knows the Sibyl from Helicon and (or) from Milea (*Strom.* 1.15.70), and mentions in passing “the crowd of Sibyls: the Samian, the Colophonian, the Cumaean, the Erythraean, Phyto, Taraxandra, the Macedonian, the Thessalian, the Thesprotian (*Strom.* 1.21.132).”²⁸

He is also the first Christian author who seems to have known *Or. Sib.* 3, 4, 5, and fr. i. altogether, which helps us establish their *terminus ante quem* no later than the end of the second century or the beginning of the third.²⁹ Briefly, in *Paed.*,³⁰ addressed to novices in Christianity, the Sibyl is addressed twice (2.10.98.3 and 3.3.15.2), and depicted as a pagan prophetess; in *Protr.*, directed

23 H. Drobner, *The Fathers of the Church* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007), 132.

24 H. Fiskå Hägg, “Clement and Alexandrian Christianity,” in *The Routledge Companion to Early Christian Thought*, ed. by Jeffrey Bingham (New York: Routledge, 2010), 179.

25 H.W. Parke, *Sibylline Prophecy*, 46.

26 H.W. Parke, *Sibylline Prophecy*, 46.

27 R. Buitenwerf, *Book III of the Sibylline Oracles*, 95; Parke, *Sibylline Prophecy*, 26–27.

28 H.W. Parke, *Sibylline Prophecy*, 46.

29 R. Buitenwerf, *Book III of the Sibylline Oracles*, 77.

30 For the Greek text I will be using the SC editions: C. Mondésert and André Plassart, eds., *Clément d'Alexandrie. Le protreptique*, SC 2 (Paris: Cerf, 1976); C. Mondésert and H.-I. Marrou, eds., *Clément d'Alexandrie. Le Pédagogue*, SC 108, SC 158 (Paris: Cerf, 1965, 1970); C. Mondésert, A. Le Boulluec, and P. Descourtieux, eds., *Clément d'Alexandrie. Les Stromates*, SC 30, SC 278–279, SC 446 (Paris: Cerf, 1951, 2006, 1999). For the English trans-

mainly to the non-Christians as an exhortation to adhere to the Christian faith, the Sibyl is brought to the fore more extensively and envisaged as a prophetess of God; in *Strom.* the picture of the Sibyl is more ambiguous, since she is neighboured twice with the pagan philosophers, and once with Deuteronomy.³¹ In what follows we will mainly distinguish between two thematic sets: on the one hand, (a) the passages in which the Sibyl appears well at home in her Greek dress, and on the other hand (b) the passages in which Clement frames the prophetess in a Jewish-Christian perspective.

a *Prophetess of Greek Descent*

First, it is not uncommon for Clement to associate the Sibyl with distinguished Greek characters. In *Strom.* 1.15.70.3, after walking in the footsteps of Plato and the Pythagoreans, the Sibyl is said (via Heraclides) to have been granted divine rather than human inspiration (οὐκ ἀνθρωπίνως, ἀλλὰ σὺν θεῷ (τὸ) μέλλον Σιβύλλῃ πεφάνθαι). She is also considered to have come from the Helicon where she was brought up by the Muses (ἐκ τοῦ Ἑλικῶνος παραγενομένην ὑπὸ τῶν Μουσῶν τραφεῖσαν), with no end to her prophesizing—ἀέρα χωρήσαν αὐτῆς μετὰ τελευτῆν (*Strom.* 1.15.70.4).

Elsewhere, in defence of the universality of the truth, Sibyl and Plato bear truths in harmony with the Christian testimonies, but apart from them: “even Plato spoke about the One and Sole Principle, and the Law” (5.15.115.2), which, according to Clement, was interpreted as “obeying to the will of the One”—νόμος καὶ βουλῇ πειθεσθαι ἐνός (5.15.115.2). The source of their notion of truth (δόξα ἢ ἀληθής) comes ultimately from the Scriptures, to whom the Sibyl is said to subscribe as well: “Behold, he [the One] is clear and unwavering for all” (*Or. Sib.* fr. i. 28) as the Sibyl says” (*Strom.* 5.15.115.6).

In *Paed.* 2.10.98.3, Clement mentions the Sibyllines as part of the Greek world (“one from your poets”), and in *Strom.* 1.21.132 he shows no confidence in her prophecies, taking the liberty to neglect them: “I will keep the silence on the foolishness of the Sibyls.” Elsewhere, Clement places the Sibyl in the row of authors who tend to depreciate humans as mortals (*Strom.* 3.3.14.3), as exemplified in a single line from the *Or. Sib.* frag i. 1 (“You are human, mortal and fleshy, and are nothing”—Ἀνθρωποι θνητοὶ καὶ σάρκινοι, οὐδὲν ἔόντες), and

lation: A. Roberts, J. Donaldson, A.C. Coxe, “Exhortation to the Heathen,” “The Instructor,” and “The Stromata, or Miscellanies,” in *ANF* vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1956—reprinted after the 1985 ed.), 165–568; G.W. Butterworth, *Clement of Alexandria. The Exhortation to the Greeks, The Rich Man’s Salvation, To the Newly Baptized*, LCL (London: Heinemann, 1960).

31 J. Lightfoot, *The Sibylline Oracles*, 82–83.

the parallel in Homer's *Odyssey* 18.130: "Earth nurtures nothing feebler than a human being" (*Strom.* 3.3.14.3).

Clement also (approvingly) cites Paul, recommending the reading of Greek books with the Sibyl among them as they may be of help in acquainting pagans with the One God (*Strom.* 6.5.40.1).

For that, as God wished to save the Jews by giving to them prophets, so also by raising up prophets of their own in their own tongue, as they were able to receive God's beneficence, He distinguished the most excellent of the Greeks from the common herd, in addition to "Peter's Preaching," the Apostle Paul will show, saying: "Take also the Hellenic books, read the Sibyl, how it is shown that God is one, and how the future is indicated. And taking Hystaspes, read, and you will find much more luminously and distinctly the Son of God described, and how many kings shall draw up their forces against Christ, hating Him and those that bear His name, and His faithful ones, and His patience, and His coming".

Strom. 6.5.40.1, ANF 2: 490

It seems plain that, since Paul conveys the message about the Sibyl, whom God has chosen as a Hellenic prophetess to teach monotheism, he offers Clement a scriptural basis for his view that God raised prophets to the Greeks from among themselves.³²

b *Prophetess of God*

The second category of passages mirror Clement's treatment of the Sibyl in closer connection to the people of God. Clement's central concern when dealing with the Sibylline oracles lies in emphasizing the authority of the Scriptures, to which, eventually, the Sibyls subscribed. If we have seen the Sibyl aligned with pagan culture in *Paed.* and in some passages from *Strom.*, in *Protr.* she is depicted mainly as a prophetess of the Hebrews, and instructor in matters of ethics and cult practices. In *Protr.* 4.50.1–3, Clement brings in his service oracles of Jewish Egyptian provenance, and wraps up in successive Sibyllinic quotations a diatribe against idolatry.

32 Parke suggests that this attitude of resorting to a scriptural text, which supposedly conveys a positive valuation of these oracles, pertains to "a preliminary stage in the complex process of establishing a selective relationship between Christian revelation and pagan literature," of which Clement would be indicative; H.W. Parke, *Sibylline Prophecy*, 157.

As your instructor I will quote the prophetic Sibyl, “whose words divine come not from Phoebus’ lips,/ that prophet false, by foolish men called god,/ but from great God, whom no man’s hands have made,/ like speechless idols framed from polished stone” [= *Or. Sib.* 4.4–7].

She, however, calls the temples ruins. That of Ephesian Artemis she predicts will be swallowed up by “yawning gulfs and earthquakes” [= *Or. Sib.* 5.294], thus: “Prostrate shall Ephesus groan, when, deep in tears,/ she seeks along her banks a vanished shrine” [= *Or. Sib.* 5.295–296].

That of Isis and Sarapis in Egypt she says will be overthrown and burnt up: “Thrice-wretched Isis, by Nile’s streams thou stayst/ lone, dumb with frenzy on dark Acheron’s sands” [= *Or. Sib.* 5.483–484].

Then lower down: “And thou, Sarapis, piled with useless stones,/ In wretched Egypt liest, a ruin great” [= *Or. Sib.* 5.486–487].³³

Or. Sib. 4 and 5 lash out against the Egyptians for destroying the Jewish temples, and against Rome for destroying the temple of Jerusalem.³⁴ In particular, the Sibyl whom Clement voices here stands over against the pagan shrines in Asia (of Ephesian Artemis) and Egypt (of Isis and Sarapis). Thus, just as the Jewish ‘sibyllist’ employed the ‘prophetess’ to display antipathy towards the pagans and gentile converts to Judaism, Clement seems to lead a similar fight in his time, and the Sibylline quotations serve his condemnation of the evils of idolatry.

In a similar vein with Justin, the Sibyl (named the first among the prophets) does not have the power to speak on her own: when she “sings the song of salvation”—ἁσάτω πρώτη Σίβυλλα τὸ ἄσμα τὸ σωτήριον (*Protr.* 8.77.2)—she does it on the ground of her master’s voice.³⁵ Somewhat peculiar, Clement assigns her the role of ‘instructor’ for a Christian way of life, probably an idea connected with the issue of the transmission of wisdom.³⁶ However, we should not exaggerate the importance Clement ascribes to the Sibyl. For him, she is a valid teacher, instructing that “error is darkness, and that the knowledge of God is light,”³⁷ but not on her own. Similar to what we have previously seen in Theophilus, *Ad Autol.* 2.10, Clement then turns to quotations from the Old

33 Translation from G.W. Butterworth, *Clement of Alexandria. The Exhortation to the Greeks*, 113.

34 J.J. Collins, “Sibylline Oracles,” 391.

35 E. Osborn, *Clement of Alexandria* (Cambridge: CUP, 2005), 70; Lightfoot, *The Sibylline Oracles*, 84.

36 J. Lightfoot, *The Sibylline Oracles*, 63.

37 E. Osborn, *Clement of Alexandria*, 70.

and the New Testament, although, quite characteristically, he still puts together quotations from Homer, Plato, Isaiah, Jeremiah, or the Psalms.

A number of further passages (*Strom.* 1.21.108, *Protr.* 6.70.1–2, *Protr.* 6.71.4, etc.) indicate that Clement sees the Sibyl in a Jewish lineage as well.³⁸ In *Strom.* 1.21.108.1, Clement (re)adduces the issue of primacy closer to a Jewish-Christian framework and indicates that Moses precedes the Greek sages and philosophers and also their gods. Yet, “Moses is not alone, because the Sibyl herself is older than Orpheus” (Καὶ οὐτι γὰρ μόνος οὗτος, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἡ Σίβυλλα Ὀρφέως παλαιότερα). It is not clear in the paragraph whether the Sibyl is taken to be following the line of Moses, or being on a par with him. Given the context, it is reasonable to see the Sibyl among “the people of God,” in order to preserve the anteriority to the Greeks.

In *Protr.* 6.70.1, Plato and the Sibyl are thought to derive their knowledge of truth and of divine laws from the Jews. However, as Buitenwerf stresses, the passage opens up to a larger portrayal of how Greek philosophers derived their knowledge and wisdom from the Hebrews, i.e. from “the people of God.”³⁹ The most contentious passage in this sense is *Protr.* 6.71.4 (Πόθεν ἄρα ὁ τοῦ Γρύλλου σοφίζεται ἢ δηλαδὴ παρὰ τῆς προφήτιδος τῆς Ἑβραίων θεσπιζούσης ὧδέ πως), which, according to R. Buitenwerf may be read as:

either

- (1) “But it is not clear that it is only thanks to the prophetess of the Hebrews that the son of Gryllos could speak so clearly? She prophesied as follows;”

or

- (2) “But it is not clear that the son of Gryllos could speak so clearly only thanks to the prophetess (speaking) about the Hebrews, who prophesied the following.”⁴⁰

38 Lightfoot explains that the difficulty stems from the fact that the passages quoted are from a Jewish oracle, and thus, through association, Clement might have thought of the Sibyl as Jewish, instead of Greek. In Lightfoot’s eyes, Clement “has maintained the Jewish view of her, as against other Christian writers;” indeed, the same passages were also referred by Theophilus and Ps.-Justin, who do not take her as Hebrew for that. See J. Lightfoot, *The Sibylline Oracles*, 84; see also Buitenwerf, *Book III of the Sibylline Oracles*, 76 ff.

39 R. Buitenwerf, *Book III of the Sibylline Oracles*, 77.

40 R. Buitenwerf, *Book III of the Sibylline Oracles*, 77.

However, from this latter variant, it is unclear whether he leans τῆς Ἑβραίων on the previous genitival form τῆς προφήτιδος, with the function of an explicative Genitive (thus, excluding a Genitive of possession/relationship), or considers it dependent on a verb (and if so, on which verb?); there are no clues that he might favour dependence on the participial form θεσπιζούσης, but he seems indeed to plead for the function of a complement. Buitenwerf's argument is thus only partially laid out, and one could disagree with the translation "about the Hebrews," but there is altogether not sufficient ground to assume that Clement thought Sibyl a Hebrew in the strictest sense. Rather he seems to have used the ambiguity—to which the very nature of the Sibyllines calls for—intentionally,⁴¹ given that at the other end a possible dependence of Plato and the Sibyl on Moses was a way for Clement to save some of the Greek *paideia*, as already rooted in God's revelation.⁴²

To sum up, Clement turns to the Sibyl to gain access to the Greeks due to the common ground it provides (much like the authors above). However, he also seems to take the Sibyl as Hebrew to set her closer to the "people of God." In doing so, he ultimately accommodates his views on the non-Christian prophethood as a way of facilitating his apologetic aims.

Pseudo-Justin Martyr's *Cohortatio Ad Graecos*

One last example is drawn from *Cohortatio ad Graecos*, about which the general consensus seems to be that Justin Martyr is not its author.⁴³ One can infer that

41 Cf. Zeegers-Vander Vorst, *Les citations des poètes grecs*, 205: "En fait, les Oracles eux-même prêtaient à confusion. Ils sont juifs parce qu'ils sont composés par un faussaire juif, mais ils sont grecs parce que le faussaire les a rédigés dans une langue qui doit beaucoup à Homère, à Hésiode et aux authentiques oracles grecs."

42 Daniel Ridings, *The Attic Moses. The Dependency Theme in Some Early Christian Writers* (Göteborg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 1995), 52 ff., 63 ff.

43 C. Riedweg, *Ps.-Justin (Markell von Ankyra?), Ad Graecos de vera religione* (bisher "*Cohortatio ad Graecos*"). *Einleitung und Kommentar* (Schweizerische Beiträge zur Altertumswissenschaft, 25/1–2), 2 Vols (Basel, Fr. Reinhardt: 1994). See also M. Marcovich, ed., *Pseudo-Justinus. Cohortatio ad Graecos; De Monarchia; Oratio ad Graecos*, *Patristische Texte und Studien* 32 (Berlin, New York: de Gruyter, 1990), 3. Since its author seems to have used the *Or. Sib.* and the Hermetic writings in the style of Lactantius, rather than that of Clement of Alexandria, *Cohortatio* might have been written before 302 (approximately the year when Lactantius started his *Div. Inst.*). Moreover, it has been also pointed out that Eusebius (*Hist. Eccl.* 4.18.4—καὶ αὐτοὶ ἕτερον πρὸς Ἑλλήνας εἰς ἡμᾶς ἐλήλυθεν αὐτοῦ σύγγραμμα, ὃ καὶ ἐπέγραψεν Ἑλεγχον) mentions the *Cohortatio* among the works

the author was trained in rhetoric. He quotes extensively from Homer, from Orphic verses and four times from the *Or. Sib.* He further refers to the Sibyllines, yet without explicitly introducing them, on three other occasions.⁴⁴

Ps.-Justin introduces these passages as if they were prophesized by an individual, namely, the Sibyl of Cumae. In 16.1,⁴⁵ Ps.-Justin quotes them three times. The first quotation reads as follows:

It is the ancient Sibyl who lived very long ago, whom Plato, Aristotle, and many other writers refer to as a prophetess that teaches you in her oracles about the one and only God. It is necessary to remember. This is what she says: 'There is one God, who rules alone, exceedingly great, unbegotten,/ universal ruler, invisible, who himself sees all things/ He is not seen by any mortal flesh' [= *Or. Sib.* fr. i. 7–9].⁴⁶

After these three lines from *Or. Sib.* fr. i. 7–9, the author of the *Cohortatio* continues: "Then, elsewhere [she says] as follows: 'But we had wondered from the path of the Immortal./ With mindless spirit we revered things made by hand,/ idols and statues of dead men' [= *Or. Sib.* 3.721–723]."

The passage from *Or. Sib.* 3.721–723 is immediately followed by the third quotation, introduced by the words: "And again, this is what she says somewhere else: 'Happy will be those of mankind on earth/ who will love the great God, blessing him/ before drinking and eating, putting their trust in piety./ They will reject all temples when they see them;/ altars too, useless foundations of dumb stones/ defiled with blood of animate creatures, and sacrifices/ of four-footed animals. They will look to the great glory of the one God' [= *Or. Sib.* 4.24–30]."

In an effort to convince his audience about the authenticity of the Sibylline verses, the author reports in some detail that he had visited the sanctuary of Sibyl at the cave in Cumae (*Cohort.* 37.1), where he enjoyed the guidance of the locals throughout the way (οἱ ὡς <τὰ> πάτρια παρειληφότες παρὰ τῶν ἑαυτῶν

attributed to Justin Martyr. It follows that the *Cohortatio* must predate 311/312 CE. See. M. Marcovich, *Cohortatio*, 4.

44 *Cohort.* 16.1—*Or. Sib.* 3.721–723; *Cohort.* 16.1—*Or. Sib.* 4.24–30; *Cohort.* 16.5–7—*Or. Sib.* fr. i. 7–9; *Cohort.* 38.1—*Or. Sib.* 3.24–25; cf. R. Buitenwerf, *Book III of the Sibylline Oracles*, 78. The other passages envisaged stem from chapters 11, 24, 37.

45 For the Greek text, I will be using B. Pouderon, *Pseudo-Justin. Ouvrages apologétiques. Exhortations aux Grecs, Discours aux Grecs, Sur la Monarchie*, SC 528 (Paris: Cerf, 2009), and M. Marcovich, *Cohortatio*.

46 *Or. Sib.* fr. i. 7–9 is also quoted more extensively by Theophilus (*Ad Autol.* 2.36.1–6), and by Clement and Lactantius, cf. Pouderon, *Ps.-Justin*, 185.

προγόνων ἔφασκον—*Cohort.* 37.1). He further claims that he was even shown the place where the urn with Sibyl's ashes was kept (καὶ φακὸν τινα ἐκ χαλκοῦ κατεσκευασμένον, ἐν ᾧ τὰ λείψανα αὐτῆς σῶζεσθαι—*Cohort.* 37.3).⁴⁷ Moreover, the author of the *Cohortatio* seems to defend the oracles against the accusations of falsity, caused by metric irregularities. In 37.3, he explains that on the one hand, the prophetess does not remember anything of what she has uttered, when the moment of being possessed by divine inspiration has passed, and on the other hand, the scribe himself (ὑπογραφεύς) might have missed the metric accuracy. Ps.-Justin then encourages the Greeks to have confidence in their own oracles (which announced the coming of the Word of God—38.1), and, in particular, in the primeval and the most ancient Sibyl (38.2—πείσθητε ... τῇ ἀρχαιστάτῃ καὶ σφόδρα παλαιᾷ Σιβύλλῃ) for the sake of their own salvation.

At any rate, in Ps.-Justin's words, the oracles are an exercise in restraint and preparation for understanding the prophecy of saintly men (38.2—Ἔσται γὰρ ὑμῖν ἀναγκαῖον προγύμνασμα ἢ τούτων γνώσις τῆς τῶν ἱερῶν ἀνδρῶν προφητείας). On this note, the author of the *Cohortatio* delivers once again the key-point of the treatise: in his view, it is only possible to learn about God through the prophets who deliver their knowledge under the effect of divine inspiration. To the extent that the text discloses this, Ps.-Justin situates the Sibyl among the Greeks, next to the poets and philosophers ("your oracles," "the ancient Sibyl," etc.).

In sum, the author of the *Cohortatio*, who seems to have known passages from *Or. Sib. fr.* i, *Or. Sib.* 3 and *Or. Sib.* 4, plainly brings the Sibyl into discussion because she is part of the Greek pagan tradition. As a prophetess of old, she is made to corroborate Christian monotheistic claims and to refute idolatry. Her function is therefore to speak of 'Christian' values to the Greeks, from a Greek point of view, and to function as an introduction to the message of the 'holy men.'

Conclusion

Apart from the obvious awareness of the Sibyllinic traditions, the references to the Sibyl in early Christian Greek authors display (in their new contexts) several strategies of approaching the Greeks for apologetic purposes. There is, perhaps unsurprisingly, some oscillation between approving and disproving

47 These sort of details are also found in Pausanias, 10.12.8 (λίθου ὑδρίαν) and Petronius, *Satyr.* 48.8 (*in ampulla*). Cf. B. Pouderon, *Ps.-Justin*, 267; M. Marcovich, *Cohortatio*, 11.

these mythological accounts. Yet for the most part, there is among the Greek apologists a tendency to emphasize and use the link between the Sibyl and the mainstream Hellenistic mythology in an attempt to draw her (and their intended audience) closer to the world to which they pertain. In addition, Clement also places her in the vicinity of the Jewish prophets for the same purposes. Clearly, the apologists counted on the social and cultural context of the Sibylline oracles, as they perceived them. It is worth stressing in conclusion that this ultimately implied an intentional elevation of the authority of the Sibyl on the part of the Greek apologists (the clearest example is perhaps Ps.-Justin) in a mixture of Scriptural, pseudepigraphical, oracular and philosophical arguments.