

Introduction

The Third Sibylline Oracle is, confusingly, the earliest of the Sibylline Oracles, by which we mean not the oracles supposedly acquired by Tarquinius and then preserved for Roman state consultation in the Temple of Jupiter Capitolinus, but rather the extended poetic production of a Greek-writing Jew, likely living in Egypt in the mid-2nd century BCE.ⁱ There are some difficult textual questions regarding the poem's beginning, questions whose answer may impact how we view the Sibyl's self-presentation. This paper makes a case for the inclusion of lines 93-96 in the poem as a multiple-entendre, simultaneously pointing to the poem's three major time-scales: a) the Noahide flood that comes to an end with the return of the sun, b) the movement of the Noahide Sibyl, like the sun, from East to West, and her superiority to the "lightless" Homer, and c) the future coming of the "king from the sun" who will fix the future metaphoric cataclysm of human affairs and bring peace to the world and Ptolemaic prosperity to the Jews. Through this issue we will come round-about to questions of the Sibyl's self-presentation as a Jewish prophetess combining the traditions of Greek poetry (Homer, Hesiod, and others) with Jewish prophetic traditions.

The Cumaean Sibyl famous for her close connection to the Roman state was not, of course, the only Sibyl. Varro, for example, makes a list of ten Sibyls.ⁱ Only the Cumaean Sibyl constitutes the Official Sibyl of the Roman world, but we are aware, through the works of Pausanias and others, that the vague pronouncements of these other Sibyls made the rounds of the Mediterranean world. Starting in the 1st century CE, the Sibylline genre would become increasingly popular among Christian audiences, indebted in large part to the pioneering work of the author of our Third Sibylline Oracle, which, as many of you may know, has been credited with a role of influence in Virgil's Fourth Eclogue, though this is a strife into which I dare not now enter.ⁱⁱ Suffice it to say that our poems end up going somewhere, but where do they come from?

It has been noted by John Collins (*Seers*, 190) and Momigliano ("From the Pagan to the Christian Sibyl," 735) that our poem's concern for universal history and for sweeping moral exhortation differentiates it from what we can gather from historical sources and the fragments preserved by Phlegon of Tralles to have been the content of pagan Sibylline poems.ⁱⁱⁱ What we have here is not a simple case of translation or assimilation, but rather of creative adaptation, akin, perhaps, to the Yiddish "Queen Lear," which was, in the words of its creator, the late 19th century Ukrainian Jacob Gordin, "translated and improved."^{iv}

Summary

A brief summary of the 900 or so line poem is in order: the poem evidently began with a now-fragmentary account of Noah and the flood, followed by a brief but interesting Tower of Babel narrative, and then by an extended Euhemeristic account of the Titans and Olympian gods, situating them in a Biblical-historical time-scheme. The Sibyl then turns to prophecies about Macedonia's rise and fall, some discussion of the Greeks and their immoral and impious behavior (most especially homosexuality)^v, then a eulogy of the Jews and a quick review of their history. Then follows a new prophecy (295) that moves quickly between a variety of different nations (Babylonia, Gog, Magog, Libya, Rome, the Greek islands, Asia, the rise and fall of Alexander the Great), then a new prophecy (489) against the Greeks, and

ⁱ Persian, Libyan, Delphian, Cimmerian, Erythraean, Samian, Cumaean, Hellespontian/Marseppian, Phrygian, and Tiburtinian.