

THE SIBYLLINE ORACLES

August 8, 2014

Shabbat shalom!

I'd like to open with a quiz: Who is the oldest prophet in our tradition?

It's a trick question, for two reasons: First, because when we think of our oldest sources we think of our Bible, especially the Torah – the oldest part of the Bible. But our *tradition* includes a vast body of literature, some of it quite ancient, that never made it in to the Bible. And second, because our oldest prophet wasn't a prophet at all, but a *prophetess* – an old woman named Sibyl.

Sibyl was so ancient that our earliest references pre-date Abraham by over a thousand years. She is first mentioned in texts excavated in Mari, one of the greatest sites yet unearthed from the Ancient Near East, not far from where Abraham would have lived. And these texts, from about 2900 BCE, in the same dialect of Northwest Semitic from which Hebrew later emerged, described Sibyl as a shriveled old woman who was already a thousand years old.

Her influence was so vast that she became known throughout the ancient world. Though known by many names, this thousand-year old woman – somehow she was always a thousand years old! – became a source of prophecy – an oracle – in ancient Persia, in Arabia, Anatolia, Greece and Rome – and in Judaism as well. Her Hebrew name, it seems, was Sabbe or Sambethe, derivation unknown, though some say the name derived from Sibtu, who was one of the queens of ancient Mari.

Sibyl was an oracle, but not the kind you could consult – not like the Witch of Endor, who King Saul consulted to call up the ghost of the dead prophet Samuel. Sibyl's style was to go into a spontaneous, ecstatic trance, and.... prophesy. And people would collect her prophecies and write them down and study them to see what they could learn about the future. Almost every ancient people, it seems, had their own collection of Sibylline Oracles, because while Sibyl might have originally been a particular woman, the term is almost generic – for a long succession of weird prophetesses, whose prophecies are called by the same name.

The most famous collections of Sibylline Oracles, and the ones that come up if you do a Google™ search, were the ones used by the Senate during the Roman Empire,

based on the earlier Greek and Near Eastern models. For hundreds and hundreds of years the Romans would consult their Sibylline Oracles, and the literature is vast.

But there is also a Jewish version, though it's not in our Bible – the Jewish Sibylline Oracles is, instead, found in what we call the Pseudepigrapha – literally “false writings” – Jewish texts from the Second Temple period that were deemed heretical (that's another term for “politically incorrect”), and unworthy for inclusion in our canon. It's too bad, because the result has been an almost complete ignorance of some of our most beautiful, thoughtful Jewish literary tradition, aside from being a gold mine for students of early mythology and belief just before the onset of Christianity.

So what does our Sibyl – Sabbe or Sambethe – teach us?

The Jewish Sibylline Oracles were originally written in Greek, for the Jewish community of Alexandria, in Egypt – the largest, most prestigious community outside of Israel. We learn about the great rival temple the Jews built in Egypt – almost as large as the one in Jerusalem – and how sacrifices and worship and a rival priesthood undermined the centrality of Israel – maybe a good reason why we can't find the book in our Bible. The Jews of Egypt were highly acculturated – the Reform Jews of those days – with a strong emphasis on social justice, but not caring much about the halacha – rabbinic expansions of Jewish law – that were already in development back in Israel. They went to great lengths to harmonize Greek philosophy with Judaism. Apparently trying to curry favor with the Egyptian authorities, the Egyptian king is even called Savior and Messiah, which must have made the rabbinic authorities in Jerusalem even more upset.

Sibyl's oracles sided with the poor and oppressed. She predicted doom to wicked rulers. Whereas the Greek Sibyllines predicted natural or political catastrophes, the Jewish Sibyl is motivated by moral or religious considerations, just as our other Hebrew prophets are. But then we read about a “Mighty King” from the East who will liberate the conquered, punish all oppressors and inaugurate a period of welfare and peace.

This was radical thinking in those days; it was revolutionary, and functioned not just as a religious teaching, but as political propaganda. The expectation that the earth would one day be transformed with the advent of a glorious kingdom anticipates both Jewish messianism and, tellingly, Christian teachings as well.

The early Christian community, of course, ate this stuff up.

The New Testament Book of Revelations, written 200 years after the Jewish Sibylline Oracles, tells of apocalypse, cataclysm and turmoil preceding the coming of the Messiah – Jesus – and the advent of a kingdom of peace. What is almost completely unknown is that some of the language and imagery in Revelations is almost identical to the Sibylline Oracles! It's almost like the Jewish Sibylline is a first draft for the Christian Book of Revelation. At the very least, the early Christian community knew about the Oracles, and co-opted them, probably another reason why we don't find this text in our Bible.

What I find is particularly remarkable about these writings is this: In our Bible, the grand theme is our covenant with God: If we obey God's laws, we will thrive; if we stray from the laws, we will perish. This week's Torah portion is a great example; it begins a long section of blessings and curses that will befall us if we obey or disobey the laws of God.

But in the Sibylline Oracles, disaster will come not just from offenses of law or ritual, but from ethical offenses. Showing the influence of Greek philosophy, the emphasis on ethics – showing another similarity to today's Reform Judaism – is striking.

I love how the Oracle describes the ethical laws of Torah – not as things we *must* do, but as things we *will* do; as predictions. Thus Torah, in Leviticus 19, instructs us to have equal weights and measures, to welcome the stranger, and take care of the orphan and the widow. The Oracle predicts that we will have equal weights and measures, welcome the stranger and take care of the orphan and widow.

One long-standing Jewish tradition is that the Messiah will come if all Jews observe all of Jewish law for one day. In the Oracles, the Messiah will come when everyone treats everyone else ethically, and as prediction, this will happen.

What will the messianic kingdom look like? Here's a quote:

“When indeed this fated day also reaches its consummation and the judgment of immortal God comes upon mortals, a great judgment and dominion will come upon all. For the all-bearing earth will give the most excellent unlimited fruit to mortals, of grain, wine, and oil, and a delightful drink of sweet honey from heaven; trees, fruit of the top branches, and rich flocks and herds and lambs of sheep and kids of goats.

“And it will break forth sweet fountains of white milk. The cities will be full of good things and the fields will be rich. There will be no sword on earth or din of battle, and the earth will no longer be shaken, groaning deeply. There will no longer be war or drought on earth, no famine or hail, damaging to fruits.

“But there will be great peace throughout the whole earth. King will be friend to king to the end of the age. The Immortal in the starry heaven will put in effect a common law for all throughout the whole earth for all that is done among wretched mortals.

“For He himself alone is God and there is no other.”

I read this passage in the context of the unholy evil which has been unleashed in so many parts of our broken world – from the “caliphate” [in quotes] of ISIS to the rockets and tunnels of Gaza to the kidnapping of Nigerian girls by the Boko Haram to the drug kingdoms in Central America and the Soviet theft of Eastern Ukraine, and I can only marvel that Judaism, in all its variety and diversity, remains such an optimistic faith and people, longing for universal peace and righteousness, as expressed so beautifully in this ancient unknown work, the Sibylline Oracles.