

## ANCIENT JEWISH BIBLIOMANCY

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The Jewish people did not have sacred books until long into their national history. It was only in the sixth century BCE, during and after the Babylonian exile, that the Torah was given its present shape and began gradually to gain canonical status. This bestowing of canonical status went hand in hand with the attribution of holiness. The increasing centrality of the Torah in Judaism in the post-exilic period (after 538 BCE), certainly after and due to the reforms by Ezra (5th–4th cent.), led to a heightened sense of holiness of the Torah. In the Hebrew Bible, the Torah itself is not yet adorned with the epithet ‘holy’. One sees this starting to happen only in the Hellenistic period. In the second half of the second century BCE Pseudo-Aristeas, the author of the pseudonymous work on the origin of the Septuagint, is the first to call the Torah ‘holy’ and ‘divine’ (ἅγνος, θεῖος).<sup>1</sup> Thus, he reports that the Ptolemaic king of Egypt prostrates himself in adoration seven times in front of the first Torah scroll in Greek and speaks of the oracles of God, for which he thanks him (§177).<sup>2</sup> Also, such widely different writings as *Jubilees*, 4

1. See *Letter of Aristeas* 3, 5, 31, 45.

2. For this and the following, see O. Wischmeyer, ‘Das Heilige Buch im Judentum des Zweiten Tempels’, *ZNW* 86 (1995), pp. 218-42. For the typology of the holy book in antiquity in general, see e.g. J. Leipoldt and S. Morenz, *Heilige Schriften* (Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1953) and W. Speyer, ‘Das Buch als magisch-religiöser Kraftträger im griechischen und römischen Altertum’, in his *Religionsgeschichtliche Studien* (Hildesheim: Olms, 1995), pp. 28-55.

*Ezra*, various documents from Qumran,<sup>3</sup> and authors like Philo and Josephus emphasize the holiness of the Torah on account of its divine origin. Not surprisingly, inspiration theories on the genesis of this Holy Scripture soon begin to make their appearance.<sup>4</sup> Whatever the merits of the term ‘religion of the book’, if it indicates that a holy book has become the central locus of divine revelation in a religion, it certainly seems applicable to Second Temple Judaism.<sup>5</sup> It is probably no coincidence that the first attestations of the existence of synagogues date precisely from the period in which, for the first time, the Torah is called a holy and divine book.<sup>6</sup> And it is in exactly the same period that we also see the beginnings of the use of the Torah for bibliomantic purposes. Bibliomancy is the practice of using the Bible in order to get to know what God has in store for individuals or groups, not by reading the biblical text but by using it as a lot oracle.

Let me begin with the two earliest examples: 1 Macc. 3.48 and 2 Macc. 8.23.<sup>7</sup> In the first passage, we read: καὶ ἐξέπετασαν τὸ βιβλίον τοῦ νόμου περὶ ὧν ἐξηρεῦντων τὰ ἔθνη τὰ ὁμοιώματα τῶν εἰδώλων αὐτῶν ‘And they opened [unrolled] the book of the Law to inquire into those matters about which the gentiles consulted the likenesses of their idols’.<sup>8</sup> The context is as follows: in the middle of the

3. See Wischmeyer, ‘Das Heilige Buch’, pp. 229-33. Cf. also Paul in Rom. 7.12: the Law is holy.

4. See e.g. H. Burkhardt, *Die Inspiration Heiliger Schriften bei Philo* (Giessen-Basel: Brunnen, 1988); further the references s.v. ‘inspiration’ in the Index (p. 791) of M. Sæbø (ed.), *Hebrew Bible Old Testament: The History of its Interpretation*, I.1 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996).

5. See the important article by B. Lang, ‘Buchreligion’, in H. Cancik *et al.* (eds.), *Handbuch religionswissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe*, II (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1990), pp. 143-65.

6. P.W. van der Horst, ‘Was the Synagogue a Place of Sabbath Worship before 70?’, in S. Fine (ed.), *Jews, Christians and Polytheists in the Ancient Synagogue: Cultural Interaction during the Greco-Roman Period* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 18-43.

7. I follow here Wischmeyer’s convincing interpretation of both passages in Maccabees (‘Das Heilige Buch’, pp. 226-27). For other views, see the commentaries of J.A. Goldstein, *I Maccabees* (AB, 41; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), pp. 261-63, and *II Maccabees* (AB, 41a; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983), pp. 334-35.

8. Cf. K.-D. Schunck, *I. Makkabäerbuch* (JSRZ, 1.4; Gütersloh: Gütersloher, 1980), p. 312: ‘Dann rollten sie das Buch des Gesetzes auf—in der gleichen Absicht, in der die Heiden die Bilder ihrer Götzen befragen’ (note *ad locum*:

sixties of the second century BCE, the Seleucid king Antiochus IV tried to enforce a Hellenization of the Jewish cult in the Jerusalem Temple. The Jewish opposition was organized by the priest Mattathias and his five sons, later known as the Maccabees. They were confronted by a huge military power and faced fearful and overwhelming odds. The Jewish army fasted and prayed. Just before the beginning of the decisive battle, they consulted the book of the Law. In the same way in which the gentiles by various means of divination tried to receive a verdict from their gods about the outcome of their enterprises, the Jews opened the Torah scroll at random in the hope that the first line their eyes hit upon would instruct them about what God had in store for them or expected them to do. What in former times had been the role of a prophet was now taken over by the Law scroll.<sup>9</sup> Whatever the historicity of the story, at any rate it is clear that, in the final quarter of the second century BCE, a Jewish author presented the Torah scroll as a book that could be consulted as an oracle by opening it at random. Of course, the Jews won the battle.

In 2 Macc. 8.23 (written somewhat later than 1 Maccabees, but using the second century BCE author Jason of Cyrene as his main source),<sup>10</sup>

‘Gemeint ist ein Öffnen des Buches des Gesetzes aufs Geratewohl, um aus der dabei aufgeschlagenen Textstelle ein Gottesantwort über den Ausgang des geplanten Kampfes zu erhalten. Analog befragten die anderen Völker ihre Götter bzw. deren Abbilder’). For the translation problems here, see the extensive discussion by F.-M. Abel, *Les Livres des Maccabées* (Paris: Gabalda, 1949), pp. 69-70, who concludes: ‘περὶ ᾧν se rapporte non à βιβλίον mais au but de l’action du verbe susdit, étant une construction elliptique fondée sur l’omission de la préposition répétée et de l’antécédent du relatif (KG II §451,4; §555,2) équivalente de περὶ [τούτων περὶ] ᾧν, et en vertu de la relation la formule sert à marquer également l’objet *circa quod* du verbe suivant... Le livre est ouvert pour être lu (v. II Macc. 8,23) devant les assistants. Dans l’incertitude présente on a besoin d’un conseil d’en haut. Le rôle de médiateur est tenu non plus par un prophète mais par le livre de la Loi.’ The interpretation by Goldstein, *I Maccabees*, p. 256, who translates: ‘They spread open the scroll of the Torah at the passages where the gentiles sought to find analogies to their idols’, and who defends this translation by stating that ‘Antiochus IV attempted to use the Torah to prove that illicit “pagan” rites and deities belonged in the religion of Israel’ (pp. 261-62), does not make sense in this context. See also his *II Maccabees*, pp. 334-35.

9. See J.T. Nelis, *I Makkabeën* (Roermond: Romen & Zonen, 1972), p. 106.

10. For discussion and extensive bibliography of this author, see M. Goodman in E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, III.1 (rev. edn by G. Vermes, F. Millar, and M. Goodman; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986), pp. 531-37.

we read why they won, in a different version of the same story: παραναγνοὺς τὴν ἱερὰν βίβλον καὶ δοὺς σύνθημα θεοῦ βοηθείας τῆς πρώτης σπείρης αὐτὸς προηγεούμενος συνέβαλε τῷ Νικάνορι, ‘He [i.e. Judas the Maccabee] cast a glance into the Holy Book and gave as watchword, “The help of God”. Then, leading the first division himself, he joined battle with Nicanor [= the Seleucid general]’.<sup>11</sup> Now we do not find the expression ‘help of God’ anywhere in the Torah, but the motif of God’s help is common enough in the Hebrew Bible and, moreover, unlike 1 Macc. 3.48, the text does not state that they read from the book of the Law (Torah) but from the Holy Book, which may also imply the Prophets or the Psalms.<sup>12</sup> Here again a random opening of canonical books provides the leader of the resistance army with the clue to what is going to happen: God will help them in the battle.

This behaviour is new in the history of the Jewish religion. Whereas in previous centuries, especially in the pre-exilic period, it was the prophets or some form of oracular device called the Urim and the Tummim (probably sacred dice with ‘yes’ and ‘no’ answers) which the Israelites turned in order to consult God,<sup>13</sup> in the Hellenistic period it was the divinely inspired sacred book(s), which were coming more and more to be regarded as the repository of all wisdom, to which they made recourse. It was this period in which Judaism developed slowly but definitely into a ‘religion of the book’.<sup>14</sup> And it is this circumstance that made possible the development of the Torah into an oracle-book.

11. C. Habicht, *2. Makkabäerbuch* (JSHRZ, 1.3; Gütersloh: Gütersloher, 1976), p. 241: ‘Nachdem er in die Heilige Schrift Einblick genommen hatte, gab er die Parole “Gottes Hilfe” aus und stieß, selbst an der Spitze der ersten Abteilung, mit Nikanor zusammen’.

12. Habicht, *2. Makkabäerbuch*, p. 241 n. a *ad locum*, suggests: ‘Die Stelle ist Ps 3,9: τοῦ κυρίου ἡ σωτηρία. Vgl. in der “Kriegsrolle” von Qumran 4,14 “Gottes Hilfe” als eine der Standartenaufschriften der aus der Schlacht heimkehrenden Söhne des Lichts.’ In the *War Scroll* we find a whole series of short biblical expressions written on the banners of the eschatological army, among which is ‘help of God’.

13. C.T. Begg, ‘Inquire of God’, *ABD* 3 (1992), pp. 417-18.

14. B. Lang, ‘Buchreligion’, p. 145: ‘Haben sich die heiligen Schriften einmal durchgesetzt und in einem Prozess der Kanonbildung allgemeine Anerkennung gefunden und damit zur Konsolidierung einer Religionsgemeinschaft entscheidend beigetragen, dann wirken sie als erstrangige Kulturmacht in alle Lebensbereiche hinein’.

‘Überall, wo im Altertum von Heiligen Schriften... die Rede ist, galt das Buch als magisch-religiöser Kraftträger’.<sup>15</sup>

We see the same phenomenon also in the rabbinic literature of the Roman and early Byzantine period, albeit there most often in the kledonomantic<sup>16</sup> form of stories about biblical verses rehearsed by schoolchildren and inquired after or overheard by rabbis. It has to be borne in mind here that in antiquity there was a widespread assumption that children possessed the gift of prophecy.<sup>17</sup> Let me quote a few examples. In the Babylonian Talmud we read in tractate *Hul.* 95b that Rav Samuel wrote letters from Babylon to Rabbi Johanan in Palestine which so impressed the latter that he decided to visit this great master there. In order to make sure that this was the right decision, he asked a child, ‘What is the last biblical verse you have learned?’. The answer was from 1 Sam. 28.3: ‘Now Samuel was dead’. Even though this was said about the biblical prophet Samuel, it was clear to Rabbi Johanan that God wanted to inform him that it no longer made sense to go to Babylon. The Talmud adds that later Rav Samuel turned out to be alive after all, but that God wanted to save him the hardships of the long and arduous trip! Another example is about the famous scholar Elisha ben Avuya, who became a notorious heretic and thus earned the nickname Aher (‘the other one’).<sup>18</sup> It is again a passage in the Babylonian Talmud, tractate *Hag.* 15a-b (in a baraita):

Once Aher was riding on a horse on the Sabbath, and R. Meir was walking behind him to learn Torah from his mouth. He [Aher] said to him: ‘Meir, turn back, for I have already measured by the paces of my horse that thus far extends the Sabbath limit’. He replied: ‘You, too, go back!’. He [Aher] answered: ‘Have I not told you that I have already heard from behind the Veil, “Return, ye backsliding children” [Jer. 3.22]—except Aher?’. He [R. Meir] prevailed upon him and took him to a schoolhouse. He [Aher] said to a child: ‘Recite for me your verse!’. He

15. Speyer, ‘Das Buch als magisch-religiöser Kraftträger’, p. 39.

16. Kledonomancy is prognostication on the basis of the interpretation of auditive omens, e.g. sneezing and casual remarks or overheard utterances.

17. See, e.g., Plutarch, *De Iside et Osiride* 14 (356E). Many more instances in P. Courcelle, *Les Confessions de Saint Augustin dans la tradition littéraire* (Paris: Études augustiniennes, 1963), pp. 137-54.

18. On Aher, see E.E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs* (trans. I. Abrahams; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1975), pp. 465-66, and the (uncritical) collection of material in G. Bader, *The Encyclopedia of Talmudic Sages* (Northvale-London: Aronson, 1988), pp. 303-10.

[the child] answered: ‘There is no peace, says the Lord, unto the wicked’ [Isa. 48.22]. He then took him to another schoolhouse. He [Aher] said to a child: ‘Recite for me your verse!’ . He answered: ‘For though thou wash thee with nitre, and take thee much soap, yet thine iniquity is marked before me, says the Lord God’ [Jer. 2.22]. He [R. Meir] took him to yet another schoolhouse, and he [Aher] said to a child: ‘Recite for me your verse!’ . He answered: ‘And thou, that are spoiled, what doest thou, that thou clothest thyself with scarlet, that thou deckest thee with ornaments of gold, that thou enlargest thine eyes with paint? In vain doest thou make thyself fair’ [Jer. 4.30]. He took him to yet another schoolhouse until he took him to thirteen schools, and all of them quoted in similar vein.<sup>19</sup>

Here it is not a matter of opening the Holy Book at random, but of a random questioning of children in the expectation that the first biblical verse they will quote contains God’s message for that particular situation, in this case God’s condemnation and rejection of Aher as an apostate.<sup>20</sup> But the principle is the same: since all that God had, has, and will have to say to mankind is contained in the Torah, and since he can be trusted to guide and control this process of consultation, the answer is incontrovertible, in fact, a prophecy (*nevu’ah*).<sup>21</sup> As one of the early rabbis (Ben Bag-Bag) is reported to have said about the Torah: ‘Turn it, and turn it again [i.e. study it from every angle] for *everything is in it*’

19. Cf. *Hul.* 95b: ‘Rav used to regard [the arrival of] a ferry-boat as an omen, Samuel [a passage in] a book, and R. Johanan [a verse quoted] by a child’. *Git.* 58a (a baraita): ‘R. Joshua ben Hananiah once happened to go to the great city of Rome, and he was told there that there was in prison a child with beautiful eyes and face and curly locks. He went and stood at the doorway of the prison and said: “Who gave Jacob for a spoil and Israel to the robbers?” [Isa. 42.24]. The child answered: “Is it not the Lord, He against whom we have sinned and in whose ways they would not walk, neither were they obedient unto his law?” [Isa. 42.24].’

20. See also *Midr. Mishle* 6.20, where Elisha (Aher) tells: ‘Once I entered a synagogue and saw a student sitting in front of his teacher who was making him recite Scripture. The teacher recited first, “And to the wicked (*we-la-rasha*) God said, ‘Who are you to recite My laws?’” (Ps. 50:16). Then the student repeated it, “And to Elisha (*u-le-Elisha*) God said, ‘Who are you to recite My laws, and mouth the terms of My covenant?’” When I heard that, I said, “The decree against me has already been sealed from above”.’ Translation (slightly modified) by B.L. Visotzky, *The Midrash on Proverbs* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 41. Here the slip of the tongue by the student is taken by Elisha as an omen.

21. See S. Krauss, *Talmudische Archäologie*, III (Leipzig: Fock, 1912), pp. 228-29 and esp. the notes at pp. 352-53.

(*m. Ab.* 5.22), not only everything of the past, but also of the present and of the future.

In another passage in the Talmud, *Ta'an.* 9a, we even see that, in a discussion of the meaning of a difficult biblical verse, the rabbis ask a young boy to quote the passage in the Bible he had learnt that day in order to elucidate their verse in the light of the one quoted by the boy. And, finally, in a rabbinic commentary on the book of Esther, we read that when Mordechai heard about Haman's plan to destroy the Jews in the Persian Empire, he saw three children coming from school and asked them to repeat the biblical verses they had just learnt. The first one recites Prov. 3.25, 'Be not afraid of sudden terror, neither of the destruction of the wicked, when it comes', and also the other two quote verses which convince him that God will see to it that Mordechai's countermeasures will be successful (*Est. R.* 7.13, *ad* 3.9).<sup>22</sup>

Now we have to face the problem of the large chronological gap between the earliest evidence (in 1 and 2 Maccabees) on the one hand, and the rabbinic material on the other. How can we account for this? If we leave the early evidence aside for the moment, we see that almost all of the remaining material is from a much later period, the third through the sixth centuries CE, and this applies not only to the Jewish evidence but also to the pagan and Christian evidence of *sortilegium*.<sup>23</sup> There is

22. See also *b. Git.* 56a and 68a; *Gen. R.* 52.4; *Midr. Tehillim* 93.8. Comparable in a sense is Rabbi Johanan's dictum: 'If one rises early and a Scriptural verse comes to his mouth, this is a kind of minor prophecy' (*b. Ber.* 55b; I owe this reference to Philip Alexander). Further instances and discussion in S. Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (repr. New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1962 [1950]), pp. 194-99. L. Jacobs, *The Jewish Religion: A Companion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 132, says that in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, 'Lithuanian Rabbis were in the habit of using a type of bibliomancy known as "the Lot of Elijah, Gaon of Wilna", although there is no evidence whatsoever that the attribution is correct. So far as one can tell, the usual method was to flip through the pages of the Hebrew Bible at random and then count seven pages from the place where a particular page opened. Seven lines from the top of this page provided the verse for the divination.' M. Gaster, 'Divination (Jewish)', *ERE* 4 (1911), p. 812, is informative about Jewish bibliomancy in the early Medieval post-Talmudic period: e.g., the Bible oracle leads to that of the *Shimmusha Rabba* (or that of selected portions of the Bible) known in the eighth or ninth century. In the *Shimmush Tehillim* (magical use of psalms), the Book of Psalms is used as a means of divination.

23. This material is discussed at length by me in 'Sortes: Sacred Books as Instant Oracles in Late Antiquity', in L.V. Rutgers, P.W. van der Horst, H.W.

such a concentration of this material in these centuries that one feels strongly inclined to assume that the whole practice originated only in that period and that the isolated passages from the books of the Maccabees have to be explained differently. As a matter of fact, we have seen that our earliest testimonies to this practice are somewhat problematic. The two passages in the books of the Maccabees we discussed at the beginning are interpreted in a different way from me by some scholars (see the notes above, esp. note 8), and on their interpretation we have to conclude that the earliest evidence for *sortes biblicae* among Jews is to be found not in the books of the Maccabees but only in the much later rabbinic literature. Moreover, as we have seen, all instances found there are different from the Maccabean material in that the method used is not opening books at random but the kledonomatic approach in the form of hearing children reciting the last biblical verse they have learned at school. So there would seem to be little continuity.

Should we drop therefore the two instances from 1 and 2 Maccabees and state that the practice of Jewish bibliomancy is a rabbinic invention? That would be too easy an escape. In view of the high status of the Bible among the Jews in the Hellenistic period, as we have sketched it above, it was only to be expected that this kind of practice would develop in a world in which other forms of cleromancy were already current, especially in the Greek world.<sup>24</sup> Viewed in the context of their time, the

Havelaar and L. Teugels (eds.), *The Use of Sacred Books in the Ancient World* (Leuven: Peeters, 1999), pp. 143-73. It deals, *inter alia*, with papyri with *Homeromanteia*, the papyri of the *Sortes Astrampsychi*, passages in Dio Cassius and Pseudo-Plutarch, the material about the *Sortes Vergiliana*e in the *Historia Augusta*, passages from Athanasius and Augustine and other Church Fathers, the *Sortes Sangallenses*, the papyri of the Gospel of John with *hermêneiai*, and the warnings against *sortilegium* by the Councils of the Church. Most of this material dates from the period between 250 and 600 CE.

24. See J. Bolte, 'Zur Geschichte der Losbücher', in *idem* (ed.), *Georg Wickrams Werke*, IV (Tübingen: Laupp, 1903), pp. 276-348, esp. pp. 278-308; P. Amandry, *La mantique apollinienne à Delphes* (BEFAR, 170; Paris: Éditions E. de Boccard, 1950), pp. 25-36 and 183-87. See further the valuable bibliographical survey in the Appendix to T.C. Skeat, 'An Early Mediaeval "Book of Fate": The *Sortes XII Patriarcharum*', *Mediaeval and Renaissance Studies* 3 (1954), pp. 41-54 (51-54). The most recent discussion of lot oracles is D. Potter, *Prophets and Emperors: Human and Divine Authority from Augustus to Theodosius* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), pp. 23-29.



passages from the books of the Maccabees are no *corpora aliena*—on the contrary. One could rather say that it is strange that we do not have more evidence for this practice from the pre-rabbinic centuries. It is hard to find a satisfactory explanation for that, but it may just be a matter of mere chance and of the vicissitudes of the history of textual transmission that we do not have more instances from an earlier period.<sup>25</sup>

25. I owe thanks to Dr J.N. Pankhurst for the correction of my English.

Ancient Jewish society in the land of Israel was chiefly agrarian. Men worked in various aspects of farming, artisanry and trade, while women organized and maintained the home. Formal education was available for boys beginning in the first century CE. Join Our Newsletter. Empower your Jewish discovery, daily. Email. Sign Up. Comments. Discover More. Jewish Texts. Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha. External texts from the Second Temple period. Ancient/Medieval Jewish History.