

Oracles in Ancient Paganism

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There are several different religious practice in ancient paganism, different prayers, sacrifices, as well as the use of oracles. Though oracles of all different kinds were being used in several different regions in the ancient and classical world, this research mainly focuses on the Mediterranean area, especially Greece. The use of oracles was so much more than trying to receive advice and direction from the pagan gods, but used as a way to control the gods mainly, the three Fates by knowing the future. A great example of this is Sophocles' Oedipus. Attempting to control the gods in this way resulted in the pagan gods speaking through the oracles in a misleading fashion, in attempts to confuse the inquirer, leaving the inquirer having nobody to blame but themselves for misunderstanding. This is seen in Herodotus's account of Croesus. And finally drawing a contrast between the Abrahamic faiths tradition of prophets and dream interpretation and pagan oracles, looking at just how they are very different.

To understand the use of oracles, a very brief overview of paganism needs to be explained to understand why there was a desire to gain a control over the gods. First of all, the gods are rooted in nature¹. The weather is constantly changing and there is so much uncertainty, that pagans needed a way to try and control this uncertainty. For example, Mesopotamians saw earthquakes as a message from the gods². This is where religious practices come along to keep the gods in good favor as well as control them. We look at the cult of the Nile in Egypt³, the flooding of the Nile was predictable almost always, because Egyptians gave sacrifices to it and worshiped

1 Carl McColman, "Pagan Origins," *Patheos Library*, accessed April 3, 2016.
<http://www.patheos.com/Library/Pagan/Origins/Influences>

2 Cynthia Jean, "Divination and Oracles at the Neo-Assyrian Palace: The Importance of Signs in Royal Ideology", in *Divination and Interpretation of Signs in the Ancient World*, ed. Amar Annus, (University of Chicago, 2010), 270.

3 "Hymn to the Nile", in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, ed. James E. Pitchard (Princeton, 1955), 372-373.

it constantly. In the Mesopotamian story, “The Epic of Gilgamesh”, Gilgamesh is spared over Enkidu because of the sacrifices he had been making⁴. We look at Homer's Iliad and we see the gods taking sides between the Greeks and the Trojans because of who worships them⁵. Though one day someone else could give a better sacrifice and the gods would no longer be in your favor.

From this it becomes pretty clear why exactly pagans would find the concept of oracles appealing. There is no one strict definition of what an oracle is. At Delphi, which was Apollo's sanctuary and also one of the most popular in Greece during these periods, the oracles were mediums who were separated from the inquirer and told their prophecies to the priest or priestess who then relayed the message to the original person who asked the question⁶. Though trouble can arise when the priest or priestess has their own agenda depending on the question asked⁷. In another part of Greece, there was Zeus' sanctuary in Dodona. Their practice there was writing a yes or no question onto a slip of paper and placing it into a jar. The priestess would then draw a slip of paper out of the jar while simultaneously taking a white or black bean out of a separate jar. A white bean meaning yes, and a black bean meaning no⁸.

In Egypt, the use of oracles and the practice of divination was a bit different than that of the ancient Greeks. Around 3,800 BCE in the Middle Kingdom, not only did people try to consult the gods, but also dead relatives. One way this was done was by writing letters on papyrus, though also very commonly pottery and placing it next to or in the person's grave. Then would hope for a sign from their ancestor for their answer⁹. Not only did they try to contract the dead, but they would track the movement of stars for predictions, which helped predict the

4 *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, trans. N.K. Sandars (England: Penguin Books, 1972), 72- 89.

5 Homer, *The Iliad*, trans, Stanley Lombardo (Indianapolis: Hackett Publish Co., 1997), 65.

6 Richard Cavendish, C. A. Burland, and Brian Innes. *Man, Myth & Magic: The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Mythology, Religion, and the Unknown*, no. 14, (New York: Marshall Cavendish, 1995), 1927.

7 Ibid, 1930.

8 Ibid, 1931.

9 Kasia Szpakowska, “Religion in Society: Pharaonic,” in *A Companion to Ancient Egypt*, ed. A. B. Lloyd, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2010), 508.

flooding of the Nile and even the succession of kingship¹⁰. Another common practice, seeking the god directly for communication, which was very similar to the Greek's at Delphi¹¹. Though it was done a bit differently and in several different ways.

Trying to communicate with the gods in ancient Egypt was not accomplished just by seeking out an oracle, though that was a possibility. Depending on the god that one wanted to speak to, there was a script to get the attention of the god¹², which means there were dozens of, if not more, scripts to choose from. From the script there was a lot of repeating and chanting done, which was done, as stated earlier, as an attempt to get the attention of the god¹³. For example, there are remaining documents that still have some of the different scripts, this particular one is to try and bring in a criminal. "Write the following names of the gods, whom you invoke to bring in a criminal or enemy: "Maskelli, Maskello, Phnoukentabao, Hreksyktho, Perykthon, Perypeganex, Areobasagra, otherwise Obasagra...Recite the above names over the bowl seven times"¹⁴.

This chanting is only one way to try and contact the gods. Like other pagans, who used idols, Egyptians believed that their gods not only resided in nature, but in the idols or talisman that they had created¹⁵. So those who possessed these idols would have a direct link to their god, and would be able to invoke them when they needed guidance. Dream interpretation was also something that was used in ancient Egypt to prophesize the future. One way this was done was sleeping at the temple of a certain god, that god would then speak to the inquirer through their dreams, giving them an answer to their questions, or giving them an insight to their future¹⁶.

10 David Frankfurter, "Voices, Books, and Dreams: The Diversification of Divination Media in Late Antique Egypt" in *Mantikê: Studies in Ancient Divination*, ed. by Sarah Iles Johnston and Peter T. Struck, (Boston: Brill, 2005), 236.

11 Eleanor L. Harris, *Ancient Egyptian Divination and Magic*. (York Beach: Weiser Publishing, 1998), 122.

12 Ibid

13 Ibid 126.

14 Ibid 153.

15 Ibid 122.

16 David Frankfurter, "Voices, Books, and Dreams: The Diversification of Divination Media in Late Antique Egypt" in *Mantikê: Studies in Ancient Divination*, ed. Sarah Iles Johnston and Peter T. Struck (Boston: Brill, 2005), 239.

In Mesopotamia, there is much of the same when it comes to oracles, as well as other types of divination that are used to try and contact the gods, as well as get a glimpse at the future. It is believed that the Mesopotamian oracles mirrored many Western oracle traditions that they could have adopted the practice around 2000 BCE with Semitic populations moving through this region¹⁷. The difference that was found was that in Mesopotamia, the oracles were more likely to give answers that the inquirer wished to receive¹⁸. Just like the scripts that were recovered from Egypt, letters detailing accounts with oracles were found. These letters would identify the person whom the divine message was verbalized by, the mode in which it was received, where it was received, as well as the deity who sent it¹⁹.

The use of oracles was so much more than trying to receive advice from the gods, but used as a way to control the gods. But no matter what the Fates always intercedes. Though there was a lot everyday questions asked of oracles, such as good investments to make, the weather, illness, as well as many others²⁰. For the ancient Egyptians, they would try and plead with their gods to change a current situation at hand, to make for a better future²¹. There were also very big questions asked of the oracles like we see in the story of Croesus, which is whether or not Croesus should go to war and what the outcome will be²², but there will be more on Croesus further on. In Sophocles' tragedy Oedipus, there is definitely the element of humans using oracles to bypass the Fates. In this case the oracle was not at all misleading with the King and Queen of Thebes. Which prophesied that their son would kill his father and marry his mother²³. So by using this knowledge that the oracle gave them, they leave their son, Oedipus on a hilltop

17 Maria deJong Ellis, "Observations on Mesopotamian Oracles and Prophetic Texts: Literary and Historiographic Considerations," *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 41, no. 2 (1989): 130.

18 Ibid 143.

19 Ibid 134.

20 Richard Cavendish, C. A. Burland, and Brian Innes. *Man, Myth & Magic: The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Mythology, Religion, and the Unknown*, no. 14, (New York: Marshall Cavendish, 1995), 1927.

21 Eleanor L. Harris, *Ancient Egyptian Divination and Magic*. (York Beach: Weiser Publishing, 1998), 125.

22 Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. Aubrey De Selincourt (England: Penguin Books, 2003), 23.

23 Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, trans. David Mulroy, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), 74.

to die. But he is found and taken into another family²⁴. It could be assumed that all would have been fine, if Oedipus did not go to an oracle years later and got the same exact prophecy, though he believed it to be about the family who took him in, so he fled²⁵. By knowing their future they tried to manipulate and control their Fates, which in the end did nothing but lead them to ruin²⁶.

We see a contrast of not wanting to know one's fate in Thucydides' account of the plague that infected Athens during the Peloponnesian war during the classical period of Greece²⁷. Thucydides writes that along with other religious practices at the time, consulting oracles was completely abandoned²⁸. With the Athenians dying so rapidly and in such large numbers, it can be argued that to most of them their fate was sealed, and there was no need to contact the oracles. Showing that if one believes they know what is coming, because the gods' favor shifting, they have no use of the oracles.

Almost all sources do agree on the fact that the gods did intentionally make the oracles difficult to understand, but the reasons behind it are skewed. In the book, *Ancient Oracles: Making the Gods Speak*, it is believed that they were misleading in order to test human ingenuity whilst trying to interpret what the gods meant²⁹. Or according to *Man, Myth, and Magic*, the indirect prophecies were used to trick someone who was being foolhardy in their inquiry³⁰. As mentioned earlier the story of Croesus, who was a Lydian king who sought out the oracle at Delphi³¹. The first thing he does before speaking to the oracle, is he attempts to win the favor of the god Apollo through magnificent sacrifices. He gave thousands of animals, pottery, clothing, jewelry, gold and silver. This was all as Herodotus puts it “in the hope of binding the god more

24 Ibid, 62-64.

25 Ibid, 50.

26 Ibid, 76-78.

27 Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, ed. Rex Warner (England: Penguin Books, 1974) 151-156.

28 Ibid, 152.

29 Richard Stoneman, *The Ancient Oracles: Making the Gods Speak*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 2.

30 Richard Cavendish, C. A. Burland, and Brian Innes. *Man, Myth & Magic: The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Mythology, Religion, and the Unknown*, no. 14, (New York: Marshall Cavendish, 1995), 1927.

31 Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. Aubrey De Selincourt (England: Penguin Books, 2003), 5.

closely to his interest”³². The prophecy is given about the outcomes of war if Croesus goes into battle. But it is misinterpreted, which leads Croesus into a war that he loses³³. After all the sacrifices made, Croesus is still misled. Which begs the question why?

There was no favor given to Croesus, even after all the magnificent sacrifices he gave. In the first book of the Iliad though, we see a priest of Apollo pray to the god asking him to attack the Greeks for not letting his daughter go, Apollo immediately obliges³⁴. Which makes it likely that there is more at play than the gods not liking being controlled though that still has a part in the deceit of the gods, but more importantly, the Fates having a larger role in the actions of all the gods. For Croesus there was a curse on his family for the actions of his ancestor, which foretold the falling of Croesus, and it came to fruition³⁵. We saw the role Fate played with Oedipus and how it is inevitable. We also see Achilles in the Iliad have to make a choice about his own fate³⁶, which is brought on by a disagreement with a fellow army commander, Agamemnon after the priest of Apollo had asked the god to place his wrath onto the Greeks³⁷.

So it is because of the lack of trust in their gods who are unpredictable and the Fates that causes them to try and control the gods in their favor. But because of the power that the fates hold, as well as the desire not to be controlled, they give misleading prophecies, which almost always puts the wheels of fate in motion.

Now taking this information of how the oracles were used and also the role that the Fates play, we can take a closer look at how pagan oracles are different than the Abrahamic God, besides just what they believe. We will do this by looking at the Old Testament story of Joseph from the book of Genesis. Joseph was given the gift of dream interpretation from the Abrahamic

32 Ibid, 21-23.

33 Ibid, 32.

34 Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Stanley Lombardo (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1997), 2

35 Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. Aubrey De Selincourt (England: Penguin Books, 2003), 8.

36 Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Stanley Lombardo (Indianapolis: Hackett Publish Co., 1997), 358.

37 Ibid, 3.

God. After having dreams of his brothers bowing down to him³⁸, Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers³⁹, and then was accused of attempted rape by his master's wife⁴⁰, which lands Joseph in an Egyptian prison where he encounters two of the Pharaoh's servants. Both of the servants say they had dreams from the night before but had no one to interpret what these dreams meant⁴¹. To which Joseph asks in reply "Do not interpretations belong to God?"⁴² Once he had been told the dreams he was able to say exactly what was going to happen to each of the men⁴³.

After two years had passed the Pharaoh himself was having trouble with dreams that none of his oracles could interpret⁴⁴. Which is when one of the servants who was in jail with Joseph told the Pharaoh about his gift. Joseph is then sent to the Pharaoh to give an interpretation⁴⁵. Joseph again gives his God the credit for his gift of dream interpretation rather than boasting about himself⁴⁶. Eventually Joseph become second in command of all of Egypt and his original dream is fulfilled as his brothers bow down to him⁴⁷. The difference that comes across from the other stories mentioned earlier is that Joseph was shown by his God a piece of his future. But instead of trying to bypass fate and destiny, even when he was in very low spots in his life. He gave his God all his faith and trust that he would eventually come out of these terrible ordeals.

Trusting and having faith is a huge difference between Paganism and the monotheism like we see in the Abrahamic religions. So although the Abrahamic God gives people the gifts of prophecy and dream interpretation, followers aren't seeking is these prophets out because they do not trust their God, but to actually to listen to what to come and put their faith in it and know that their God will deliver on what is said. There is no need to trick or confuse through the use of the

38 Genesis 37:7.

39 Genesis 37:27.

40 Genesis 39:14-15.

41 Genesis 40:8.

42 Ibid.

43 Genesis 40:21-22.

44 Genesis 41:8.

45 Genesis 41:14.

46 Genesis 41:16.

47 Genesis 41: 39-41.

prophets, because the Abrahamic God is not of nature, there is no unpredictability because of the omnipresent nature that their God has.

Oracles had a large part in ancient and early classical period pagan religious practice and the records of them are a great way to see the insecurities of the people who lived in the ancient world. While also reflecting on the type of relationships there were with the different gods. There was several different uses of each oracle, but above all else were used to attempt to skirt around the three Fates, though these attempts have been seen as completely folly. Though it seems that pagan practitioners believed through the use of the oracles, they can use their knowledge of their future to change the outcome, but the Fates always have a way of catching up to one. The lack of trust in the gods, however was not a part of the Old Testament story of Joseph, showing a clear difference between oracles and Abrahamic prophets.

The pagan practice of seeking out oracles went on for thousands of years, not only in the Mediterranean region, but in China, other areas of the near east, and in early Germanic tribes from further west in Europe. This seeking out to know the future is a reflection of the fears and the anxiety that these ancient people had, many of which mirror the fears and anxieties of today. There was an unstable quality that their gods possessed, which lead to trying to control some aspects of their lives. In the 4th century under the Roman Emperor Theodosius I pagan rites and practices, including the use of oracles, were completely abolished with the move towards Christianity that was happening at that time⁴⁸.

48 Richard Stoneman, *The Ancient Oracles: Making the Gods Speak*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 199.

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