

# The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the  
Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

Founded by EDWARD C. HEGELER



AN OPEN JADE RING; CHINESE SYMBOL OF SEPARATION.  
(See pages 673-675.)

## The Open Court Publishing Company

CHICAGO

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THE FOUR SIBYLS.

Raphael's Fresco in the Church of Santa Maria della Pace at Rome.  
*Frontispiece to The Open Court.*

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## PAGAN PROPHECY.

SOME CURIOUS FACTS IN THE HISTORY OF RELIGIOUS  
DEVELOPMENT.

BY F. CRIDLAND EVANS.

Emerson assures us that

“One accent of the Holy Ghost,  
The heedless world hath never lost.”

But this optimistic saying may be looked upon with some dubiety when we take into consideration the various views that have prevailed as to the vessels wherein the outpourings of the divine spirit have been stored. The iconoclastic hand of modern criticism has sought to eject from their tabernacles the variously shapen urns and reduce them to shreds and fragments, until the sacred storehouse were well-nigh depleted. Conservative Protestantism with the exception of the bodies that hold to the doctrine of a personal dispensation from the Inner Light, are united in believing that the Old and New Testaments are unique in their inspiration, and rigidly exclude all other writings with pretensions to divine origin. When we turn to the church of Rome, however, we find Holy Writ enlarged by the fourteen books elsewhere known as the Apocrypha. Moreover we find a different point of view regarding the works of the Fathers, and a much augmented reverence for the vast body of lore known as the traditions of the church. If not put in the same class as scripture, these writings are at least set apart from profane literature in a way that would indicate that they are supposed to speak in some measure with the “accent of the Holy Ghost.”

Parallel to this indication of a broadening of the Holy Spirit's field of operations, we come to a belief in another and stranger

source of inspiration, viz., in the literature of heathendom. To the modern church there is something repugnant about this notion, and



PYTHIA, THE DELPHIC ORACLE.\*

in truth, as Symonds has shown, it does contain an insidious solvent of many Christian principles. But the early and medieval church

\* The illustrations in this article are all from Michelangelo's famous frescoes.



ignored such disturbing inferences, in order to lay stress on those portions of the theory which appeared to corroborate her teachings. As precedent for the doctrine of pagan inspiration they could cite Balaam the Midianite. If he could prophesy, what would prevent any other Gentile from receiving the same inspiration? Thus reasoned the medieval mind. So the heathen texts were overhauled and the heathen prophecies examined, and verses from Virgil and the Sibyls were placed alongside those of Isaiah and Malachi.

The Christian respect for pagan founts of inspiration may have been due to the newly-converted bringing with them into the church many of their old habits of thought, prominent among which was a profound reverence for the sibyls. These personages were reputed to have been wise virgins who had dwelt in certain temples, usually of Apollo, and were especially *en rapport* with the deity. Their number is uncertain, but various writers have mentioned those of Erythrae, Persia, Libya, Cumae, Tibur and Delphi.

The Delphic Sibyl, or Pythia, was unique in the fact that instead of being a single individual she was an institution. When a Delphic priestess died, her successor was appointed, so that we have a dynasty of seeresses, enduring for centuries. The Delphic utterances were delivered among so many curious circumstances that the reverence with which they were regarded is not at all surprising. The Greek and Latin worlds received them with awe, and Christian writers were unable to come to an agreement on the subject. This reverence lingered on as late as Jeremy Taylor, who in his life of Jesus Christ (sec. 4) mentions the sibylline prophecies with belief. Even Milton, if the expressions in his "Ode to the Nativity" be any thing more than poetic fancy, had a notion that there was something in the pretensions of Delphi and "the oracles were not dumb" until the birth of Christ.

Plutarch, who resided near Delphi, has given us an account of the proceedings. It seems the priestess became intoxicated by inhaling some sweet-smelling vapor that issued from an orifice in a cave beneath the Temple of Apollo. The gas known as "laughing gas" has an odor of almonds, and the source of the oracles may have been an allied composition of natural origin.<sup>1</sup> Plutarch gives an instance of one poor priestess who took too great a dose of the divine vapor and died of *delirium tremens*. But most of her sisters attained great age. Under the influence of the gas, the Pythia would rush into the courtyard, and her ravings would be forced into sense and

<sup>1</sup>For an interesting account of how it feels to be under the influence of "laughing gas," see *The Will to Believe* by William James.

sometimes into verse by the *prophetes* or official interpreter. Plutarch, in his essay on the "Pythian Responses," records a few. A



THE LIBYAN SIBYL.

metrical one reads, "God pardons everything that can't be helped," which answered the anxious inquiry of a youth who had unwittingly responded to the advances of a young woman while he was in a

state of intoxication. Collections of these oracles were made by Herodotus, Philochorus, Theopompus and other ancient dilettanti,



THE ERYTHRAEAN SIBYL.

but their labors have perished. The Delphic oracles were generally characterized by ambiguity.

The other sibyls differed from the Pythia. Their power was

personal. When they died, the inspiration of their shrine came to an end. Few facts of their history can be gathered, and these few are ascribed by different authors to different sibyls. In all probability none of them are derived from any historic personage. Some natural phenomena, like the gas of Delphi, may have originated the legends. Northwestern Asia Minor seems to have been the original seat of the belief, and the fact that the Trojan princess Cassandra was inspired by Apollo to prophesy, may have some bearing on the subject.

According to Pausanias, the Libyan sibyl was the daughter of Zeus and Lamia, and the original of the mystic sisterhood. Another author, however, gives the same parentage to the first Pythia. In fact it is impossible to disentangle the legends, excepting those that apply to the several of the more important sibyls. But collections of mysterious writings existed, which purported to have been their utterances, and almost every Greek city had a collection in the *sanctum sanctorum* of a chief temple. The books which Pisistratus consulted in the Erechtheum furnish a case in point.

The oldest, or at least the most famous, of these sibylline books was made in northwestern Asia Minor. Its inspired authoress is said to have been Herophile, who dwelt either at Marpessus on the Hellespont or at Erythrae. The book was preserved in the temple of Apollo at Gergis. Thence it passed to Erythrae, where it became well known. Some authorities believe that it was this collection that made its way to Cumae and thence to Rome.

According to the old Roman legend, the Sibyl of Cumae offered to sell nine mysterious volumes to King Tarquin the Proud, and being refused, destroyed first three and then three more, demanding the same price after each incineration, until the king was impressed enough to buy the remaining three at the figure that was asked for the original nine.

The Cumaean sibyl was beloved in her youth by Apollo, and the god promised her anything she might ask. So she pointed to a heap of dust and begged to be allowed to live as many years as there were grains in the heap. Angered that she did not ask for himself, Apollo granted the request, but took advantage of her neglect to stipulate that she was to retain her youth. So she grew horribly withered and ugly, until she dried up. By last accounts she had shrunk into a mere voice and was kept in a vase in a temple near Naples.

This legend reminds us of the lady of Lübeck who rashly wished to live forever, and she is now so fallen away that the people

of the old Hansa town keep her in a small bottle that hangs on a column in the high church at Lübeck. Once a year she stirs and



THE CUMAEAN SIBYL.

then they feed her with the Holy Sacrament. But to return to the Sibylline Books.

Tarquin stored the precious volumes in the temple of the Capitoline Jupiter and created a college of patricians to be their caretakers. It is uncertain of just what the books consisted, for the members of the college were under oaths of secrecy regarding them, and these obligations were kept all the more strictly by reason of the remembrance that one of the guardians who had ventured to reveal some of the contents was condemned by Tarquin to suffer the punishment of a fratricide. Most of our knowledge on this point has been gathered together in Niebuhr's *Roman History*, a work whose apparent neglect is probably due to its poor English translation.

Niebuhr thinks that the Sibylline Books consisted of palm leaves covered partly with symbolical hieroglyphics and partly with Greek hexameters. This latter peculiarity required the custodians to know Greek and had its share in the Hellenization of Rome. When consulted it was probably shuffled and a page opened at random, in the same way that Orientals use Hafiz or the Koran, and many Christians make predictions from the Bible. Such was the custom at Præneste, where a similar collection existed in the Temple of Fortune. Here the pages were slips of wood, which were taken up together by a boy and one of them drawn by the inquirer. Tradition said that a nobleman of Præneste found them in the cavity of a rock which in a series of dreams he had been commanded to cleave open.

It is certain, however, that the Roman collection of sibylline writings did not concern the future. They were questioned as to the proper rites and ceremonies that were required in time of special danger, like famine or an impending battle, when the ordinary means of access to the gods seemed inadequate. They could be consulted only on the express order of the senate. It was through them, or some other of the *libri fatales*, "the books of fate," that the Romans buried alive two Greeks and two Gauls, a man and a woman of each nation, for in fact, along with the Cumaean books, the college instituted by Tarquin the Proud guarded the Etruscan prophecies of the nymph Begoe, and the Latin one of the Marcii brothers, the Tiburtine Sibyl, and others of the same sort. They were all books of fate. Like the Greeks, every Etruscan city seems to have possessed such. We know of the Veientine ones from their having touched the destiny of Rome and the Veii in connection with the draining of the Alban Lake. But the Roman library of supernatural wisdom perished in the year 83 B. C., when fire destroyed the Capitoline temple during the first civil war.

The Greek origin of the Sibylline Books is indicated by the

fact that when the temple was rebuilt, ambassadors were sent to Erythrae to obtain duplicates, and after inspecting the sacred writings of this and other shrines, returned to Rome with about a thousand verses. This collection became even more famous than its predecessor. It mingled prophecy and warning with its liturgical instructions, and many political events were affected by the mysterious sentences said to have been found in it.

Needless to say, the influence of many personages was sufficient to swell the number of sacred runes. One of its most notorious sayings was that which declared that Parthia could be conquered only by a king, with the inference, that as Julius Cæsar was about to invade that kingdom, he was also about to assume the crown. Strange to say, this prophecy was fulfilled, but it was not a Roman king that conquered Parthia. But the scandal caused by these so-called predictions assumed such proportions that Augustus thoroughly revised the collection and cast out many verses as spurious. Rome seems to have been flooded with this class of literature and Augustus destroyed all that could be found in private hands. The authorized version was placed in the Temple of Apollo Patronus and was burned in Nero's time. Soon another collection appeared, and it may have been this one that we hear of existing in the year 363. In 399 the Christian emperor Honorius commanded its destruction, together with that of the other pagan memorials of Rome. This order was obeyed by Stilicho, probably in the following year.

But it was none of these Sibylline Books that found favor with the Christians. Quantities of writings attributed to the Gentile prophetesses were in general circulation at a very early date, and in them the Christians found passages relating to their affairs. Augustine, Justin and Jerome allude to them favorably, the last declaring that the sibyls were rewarded with prophetic powers on account of their chastity. Lactantius carried the subject to the extreme. He and other preachers were fond of quoting them to the pagan philosophers, who were made merry thereby and who declared the whole literature fraudulent. These sibylline leaves are still in existence, and were printed at least four times in the nineteenth century. In 1890 a translation by Terry of some selections, under the title of *Sibylline Oracles* was issued in New York. Modern scholars consider them to be a conglomerate of Christian and Jewish writings, though Bishop Horsley in the early years of the last century argued in their favor with learning and ingenuity.

Another reason for the Christian respect for the sibyls lay in a strange tradition concerning one of their number. It was said

that Augustus inquired of the Tiburtine Sibyl if he should accept the divine honors decreed by the senate. The sibyl, after some days of meditation, took the emperor apart and showed him a vision of an altar, and above the altar an opening heaven, where, in a glory of light stood a beautiful virgin holding an infant in her arms, and a voice said, "This is the altar of the son of the living God." Whereupon the emperor caused to be erected near the Temple of Jupiter an altar bearing the inscription, *Ara primogeniti Dei*. The temple is now gone and on the site stands the church now known as the *Ara Coeli*, "the altar of heaven." In the east transept is a chapel now dedicated to St. Helena. The altar of this chapel is reputed to enclose the very altar of Augustus. Nearby, a bas-relief illustrates the story in rude fashion. Church traditions give this work of art a fabulous age; it dates at least from the twelfth century, while the legend itself can be traced to Byzantine writers of the eighth. But it is a strange and suggestive fact that the sibyl is commemorated at a place possibly identical with the spot where the Sibylline Books were once deposited.

Alongside of the Tiburtine sibyl, the church also revered her of Cumae. Virgil, in his strange fourth bucolic, declares that the golden age and the expected infant of which he sings, fulfil the final prophecy of the Cumaean song. As Christian commentators long regarded this bucolic as a prophecy of the coming of Christ, sometimes of his second coming, the Cumaean Sibyl was therefore considered to have foreseen the Messiah. And even though some modern theologians now shrink from finding their worthies in other than Biblical dispensations, we find a trace of the older attitude in one part of the Roman Catholic liturgy. The service for the dead still includes the *Dies Irae*, the masterpiece of medieval Latin poetry, composed by Thomas of Celano in the fourteenth century. The poem opens with a stately warning of the day of judgment, which the author declares to have been predicted by David and the sibyl: *Teste David cum Sibylla*. Translators, both Catholic and Protestant, have softened the word "sibyl" into prophet.

In the days of the Renaissance the revived interest in paganism increased the respect for the sibyls. They received independent attributes and histories. One was actually reputed to have married a son of Noah, and to have foretold the Tower of Babel and the coming of Christ. This seeress is the one who seems to have been known either as the Sabbaean or the Babylonian, but whom Michelangelo labeled Persica.

The sibyls frequently appeared in art. They figure in the win-



dows of Beauvais Cathedral. Raphael painted them over an arch in the church of Santa Maria della Pace in Rome. Finally with



THE PERSICAN SIBYL.

Michelangelo's Sistine frescoes the cultus found its grandest expression in the apotheosis of the sibyls alongside of the prophets of Israel.

But the sibyls were not the only pagan worthies to receive a kind of reverence among thoughtful souls. In the eastern church many of them have official honor. Dean Stanley saw in the porticoes of several churches of Moscow and in the Iberian monastery in Mt. Athos pictures of Homer, Solon, Thucydides, Pythagoras and Plato, as pioneers preparing the way for Christianity. In the west Pavia looked up to Boethius like a saint; the Venetian Republic sent to Alfonso of Naples as its most precious gift, a bone reputed to be the leg of Livy; and Plato narrowly escaped canonization. In early Christian times Tertullian spoke of Aristotle as *patriarcha haereticorum*, while Luther called him *hostis Christi*. Some writers saw in the Alkestis of Euripides a prefiguring of the death and resurrection of Christ. Above all, Virgil was honored. In the protection of Naples his bones assisted those of the patron saint Januarius. The authors of many miracle plays bring him on the stage as one of the Messianic prophets. On a twelfth century stall in the Cathedral of Zamora in Spain, he appears in the company of many Old Testament figures, carrying the word *progenies*, taken from the famous line of the fourth bucolic. He also appears in Vasari's pictures in a church in Rimini, while in Raphael's fresco his words *iam nova progenies* serve to indicate the Cumaeen sibyl.

Nor is this reverence for Virgil incomprehensible. The noble character of the man and of his poems made it pitiable that his name should be omitted from the roll of the blessed, because of his one involuntary fault of not being baptized. This feeling is well illustrated by the legend of St. Paul's visit to the poet's grave at Naples, when the apostle cried out in tears, "What would I not have made thee had I found thee still alive, O greatest of poets!" As late as the fifteenth century a sequence narrating this incident used to be sung in the Mass of St. Paul, in Mantua, the poet's birthplace.

Virgil's reputation as a prophet constituted one of his strongest claims to ecclesiastical veneration. Some perfervid critics have found in the warning that he puts into the mouth of Helenus, in reference to the dangers of the Straits of Messina, a prophecy of the earthquakes of 1693 and 1908. Less surprising are the conclusions that have been drawn from his fourth bucolic, where he sings the birth of a wondrous child who shall herald the dawn of a golden age. Many readers have thought that here Virgil was foretelling the approaching advent of Christ. Some modern commentators believe that he may have been acquainted with some of the Hebrew prophetic literature. At any rate the fourth bucolic probably played

its part in the evolution of the popular idea of the poet, changing him first to the saint of Naples, and then to Vergilius, the mighty magician. The history of this development has been beautifully worked out in Professor D. Comparetti's study of *Vergil in the Middle Ages*.

Seneca might also be included in the ranks of the pagan prophets. His "Medea" contains some curious lines, which seem to anticipate the discovery of America. They are thus Englished by Ella Isabel Harris:

"And the times come with the slow-rolling years  
When ocean shall strike off the chains from earth,  
And the great world be opened. Tethys then,  
Another Tethys, shall win other lands,  
And Thule cease to be earth's ultimate bound."

Can it be that some tradition pervaded the classic world of the existence of a western continent? Perhaps some Phœnician ship crossed the Atlantic. It is possible that Columbus knew these lines and that they gave him a stronger hope that the mystery of the western ocean was not impenetrable. John Fiske remarks that in a copy of Seneca's tragedies, bought at Valladolid by Ferdinand Columbus and now to be seen in the Biblioteca Colombina, there is appended to these prophetic lines a marginal note in script to the effect that they have been fulfilled by Admiral Christopher Columbus in the year 1492.