Authority and Propaganda—The Case of the
Potter’s Oracle

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1 “Apocalyptic” Propaganda in the Potter’s Oracle

The Potter’s Oracle is discussed within the context of apocalyptic writings for various reasons. One reason is that both the Oracle and apocalypticism in general share the ambition to overcome a concrete crisis that has a religious and political motivation. The Chaosbeschreibung, or combat myth, therefore describes a key aspect in both sources.1 Furthermore, the prophecy of the coming of a “king from Helios” or the “sun” in the Potter’s Oracle, as embedded in the context of political propaganda, paves the way for the end-time expectation of a salvific or savior king, who is awaited in ancient Jewish texts and in sources like the Third Sibyl or the Fourth Eclogue of Virgil in a quite similar way.2 A second reason is that the concept of eschatology in the Potter’s Oracle could also serve as an example of apocalyptic eschatology. Relevant parts of the prophecy are related to the hope for an annihilation of the Greeks, the so-called “girdle-wearers” (cf. P2 13–14 par. P3 26–27 and P2 27–28 par. P3 49–50: 


οἱ ζωνοφόροι). The hope for annihilation comes along, in the context of the *Potter’s Oracle*, together with the hope for a “king,” a future savior king, as mentioned above. This combination of motifs is attested also in the *Third Sibyl*. Furthermore, this combination is preserved also in sibylline traditions from late antiquity, such as in the *Tiburtine Sibyl* (4th–6th century CE), wherein the following passage highlights the struggle between the nations:

The 36th third sun is the third generation. *Kingdom will rise against kingdom, people against people*. There will be wars, but not in the city of the Romans; there the people will be hospitable and merciful.

The motif of war clearly alludes to more ancient apocalyptic traditions, such as appear in 4Q246 ii 2–3, the “Son of God-Text,” or 4 Ezra 6:24; 13:31. The continuation of the preceding passage from the *Tiburtine Sibyl* explains further that the “fourth sun,” representing the “fourth generation,” is the era of the coming of the anointed king: Jesus.

With regard to the *Potter’s Oracle* and the *Third Sibyl*, John Collins explains the different roles of the “kings:”

The *Potter’s Oracle* and the Sibylline Oracle, then, put forward rival claims as to who was the true “king from the sun.” For the Egyptian oracle, it was a native king who would overthrow the Greeks. For the Jewish Sibyl, it was the Ptolemaic king in whose reign Jerusalem would be restored.

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3 See, e.g., Karlheinz Müller, “Die Ansätze der Apokalyptik,” in *Studien zur frühjüdischen Apokalyptik* (SBAB 11; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1991), 19–33, esp. 25–28. Müller prefers a rather unconvincing third-century BCE date for the Oracle. In addition, his claim that Antiochus III from Syria is the one referred to with “the one who will be hateful to all men” (P2 16–17: cf. below) is highly unconvincing, because it was, most significantly, Antiochus IV Epiphanes who fought the Ptolemies.
