"I Will Speak . . . with My Whole Person in Ecstasy": Instrumentality and Independence in the Sibylline Oracles

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1 Introduction

Scholarly debate continues about the nature and extent of prophetic agency in the ancient world, particularly when the prophets under consideration are not male. Martti Nissinen explores this very question in a recent essay. Focusing on prophets in the Ancient Near East and in Greece, Nissinen understands prophetic agency to be a subset of religious agency, and he argues that it could


3 Nissinen relies on the work of sociologist Laura M. Leming here, citing her definition of "religious agency": “a personal and collective claiming and enacting of dynamic religious identity. As religious identity, it may include, but is not limited to, a received or an acquired identity, whether passed on by family, religious group, or other social entity such as an educational community, or actively sought. To constitute religious agency, this identity is claimed and lived as one's own, with an insistence on active ownership” (Laura M. Leming, “Sociological Explorations: What Is Religious Agency?” Sociological Quarterly 48 (2007): 73–92, esp. 74; quoted in Nissinen, “Gender and Prophetic Agency,” 37). For Leming, this is a modern category, but Nissinen argues that it is also applicable to the ancient world.
take two (potentially compatible) forms: “instrumental” agency, in which the prophet is a passive intermediary, and “independent” agency, in which the prophet is an active agent. Nissinen explains that “[t]hese types of agency are neither gender-specific nor mutually exclusive, because the prophetic agency is ultimately defined by the audience.” Both male and female prophets, then, could simultaneously occupy instrumental and independent roles in their prophetic activity, as understood by the recipients of their prophecies.

A complicating factor in many scholarly debates about a prophet’s agency is the disconnect between a literary representation of a prophet and the reconstructed historical experience of that prophet. This occurs frequently in discussions about the Pythia at Delphi, for example. This paper will offer a case study of female prophetic agency in the ancient world that bypasses that disconnect between history and literature by examining a prophetess who did not exist in history—the Sibyl of the Jewish and Christian Sibylline Oracles.

This case study will not touch down on one particular historical moment; rather, it will trace the ongoing development of a discourse about inspiration. Despite the geographical and temporal diversity of the texts in this collection, a coherent picture of inspiration emerges in the Sibylline Oracles, and that picture is one of inspiration as divine control. The Sibyl’s inspiration entails a lack of awareness, compulsion, exhaustion, and pain. This essay traces these themes in the Oracles and briefly locates the Sibyl’s inspiration alongside other descriptions of Greek and Roman prophets. Throughout the collection, the Sibyl’s agency with respect to God is largely instrumental.

The plot thickens, however, when we consider the selection and continuous use of the Sibyl by Jews and Christians. Here too, Nissinen’s categories of instrumental and independent agency are useful. They have the potential to describe not just the interaction between the Sibyl and the deity, but also the interaction between sibylline traditions and the Jewish and Christian writers. These authors and editors take up the Sibyl as a useful authoritative voice to proclaim a message about their god, but they are careful to restrict her power by aligning her with their own traditions. They make sure to delimit her authority even while they invoke it. They do this by relocating the Sibyl in space and time, bringing her into their own authoritative stories and recasting her as a servant of their god. They firmly subjugate her and the type of

5 Ibid.