Jeff W. Childers, *Divining Gospel: Oracles of Interpretation in a Syriac Manuscript of John*, Manuscripta Biblica 4 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2020). Pp. xi + 230; $99.99.

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Divination in Syriac Christianity is a relatively new topic of scholarly inquiry. Despite an abundance of sources, particularly for recent periods,[1] reliable syntheses have until now been lacking. The book under review, a masterful study by Jeff Childers centered on a sixth- to seventh-century manuscript of John's Gospel, British Library Additional MS 17,119—a manuscript that includes a divinatory apparatus, a fact not noted in earlier descriptions—portends an auspicious future for the understanding of divination in the Syriac sphere in late antiquity. Further, as Childers shows, the divinatory apparatus of this manuscript fits within a widespread tradition of oracles attached to the Gospel of John; the oracles are referred to within the texts themselves as "interpretation" (Greek ἑρμηνεία, Syriac ܦܫܪܢܐ, Coptic ⲉⲣⲙⲏⲛⲓⲁ, Armenian թարգմանութիւն, Latin *interpretatio*), implying that they are to be understood as explications of the oracular meaning of Gospel passages.

[1] The later Syriac divinatory tradition focused on astrology and had clear connections with contemporary astrological traditions in Greek and Arabic. The medieval Book of Medicines (ܣܦܪ ܐܣܝܐ ܕܡܕܝܢܐ) incorporates an astrological section, and two other Syriac astrological texts are attributed to Daniel and Ezra. See E. A. W. Budge, *Syrian Anatomy, Pathology, and Therapeutics, or "The Book of Medicines"*, 2 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1913); G. Furlani, "Di una raccolta di trattati astrologici in lingua siriaca," *Rivista degli Studi Orientali* 7 (1918): 885–889; idem, "Eine Sammlung astrologischer Abhandlungen in arabischer Sprache," *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie* 33 (1921): 157–168; idem, "Astrologisches aus syrischen Handschriften," *ZDMG* 75 (1921): 122–128; A. Fodor, "Malhamat Daniyal," in *The Muslim East: Studies in Honour of Julius Germanus*, ed. G. Káldy-Nagy (Budapest: Eötvös Loránd University, 1974), 85–159. An East Syriac manuscript from Mardin, CCM 000178, is an additional witness to the Daniel and Ezra texts (https://w3id.org/vhmml/readingRoom/view/501121).

Childers's study thus contributes to a wider conversation regarding Christian divinatory practices in late antiquity.

The book includes a table of contents, eight chapters, and a bibliography. Following the bibliography is an appendix listing the Syriac words that occur in the oracles of BL Add 17,119, which can function as a concordance of these portions of the text. Finally, there are indices of the manuscripts cited, of biblical citations, of ancient authors, and of subjects (including the names of modern authors).

The book includes 14 figures showing color photographs of manuscripts, including four images of BL Add 17,119. In addition, many figures in chapter 3 show page layouts of the manuscripts figuring in the discussion. One could wish for more manuscript photographs, especially of BL Add 17,119, but those which are included suffice to give an impression of the script and layout and to allow some of the readings to be checked. Fig. 1.1 on page 2, showing fol. 52v of BL Add 17,119, takes up about three quarters of the available space on the page; were the image enlarged just a bit, it could have approximated the actual size of the leaf, which would have helped to illustrate the comments on page 1 concerning the manuscript's unusual dimensions.

The core of the book is chapter 5, which contains the analysis of the *puššāqē* in BL Add 17,119. Each *puššāqā* is transcribed and translated, and parallels for each one are adduced from Greek, Armenian, Coptic, and Latin Divining Gospels (the Peshitta text of the Gospel, which is available from other sources, is not reproduced here). However, the other seven chapters are far from being mere auxiliaries to chapter 5.

Chapter 1, "Opening the Gospel," sets BL Add 17,119 within a context of popular religious practice in late antique Christianity. Childers assembles evidence, including many quotes from church fathers, of the use of John's Gospel for apotropaic purposes. In addition to the chapter's independent value as an

essay on the culture of religious text artifacts, this contextualization of the Divining Gospel is a significant theoretical step, as I will discuss below.

Chapter 2, "Divination in Late Antique Christian Practice," gives an erudite tour through divinatory practices from the Greco-Roman world through late antique Christianity, ending with a categorization of the various types of Christian divination.

Chapter 3 brings together all the diverse manuscript evidence for the tradition of Divining Gospels. Here Childers describes the 20 manuscripts that factor in his study according to four types: (1) manuscripts with segmented layout including passages of Gospel text at the top and oracular "interpretations" underneath (Childers considers this to be the earliest type); (2) manuscripts that integrate the "interpretations" with their associated Gospel readings as a single block of text (BL Add 17,119, the focus of this study, is the sole surviving example of this type); (3) manuscripts that include primarily the Gospel text, with oracular "interpretations" added secondarily in the margins; and (4) manuscripts that have an uncertain connection to the Divining Gospel tradition, including one fragment (Firenze, Istituto Papirologico "G. Vitelli," PSI XIII 1364) that contains only oracular material with no extant Gospel readings.

Chapter 4 sets up the philological analysis of BL Add 17,119 in chapter 5 by giving a codicological analysis of the manuscript, including a discussion of its provenance.

Chapters 6 and 7 attempt to set BL Add 17,119 in the context of late antique Christian divinatory practice, seeking to answer the question how a manuscript such as this would actually have been used. This includes a detailed description of a hypothetical encounter in which the manuscript's scribe, Gewargis, consults the book through sortilege to obtain an answer for a client (pp. 193–197). If parts of these chapters are speculative, it

is nevertheless refreshing to have a theoretical approach to the relationship between book and practice so clearly set forth.

Finally, chapter 8 addresses the demise of the tradition of Divining Gospels, a demise heralded by the rules attributed to Jacob of Edessa (d. 708), which rules explicitly forbid monks from providing oracles from the Gospels for clients (or, for that matter, from the Psalms, or from the text known as "Lots of the Apostles").

Childers has made a tremendous achievement in integrating BL Add 17,119 and the evidence from Greek, Armenian, Coptic, and Latin manuscripts into a single coherent explication. In effect, he has singlehandedly illuminated late antique Syriac divination as a component of a multicultural Christian tradition. This tradition included an oracular book of Psalms, an oracular Gospel of John (the "Divining Gospel," of which BL Add 17,119 is an example), and various books of oracles that are distinctly Christian but are not framed as interpretations of scripture. Childers groups all these texts under the rubric of *sortilege*, or the casting of lots. In the Divining Gospel, the oracles are numbered, allowing each oracle to be referenced according to a number obtained by casting lots.

An example, taken from p. 144, may serve to illustrate how consistent this tradition is. On fol. 65v of BL Add 17,119, after John 17:1–2 (the beginning of Jesus's intercessory prayer, ending with "that he might give eternal life to all whom you have given him"), the following oracle is copied in red ink:

ܗܘ ܕܨܒܝܬ ܢܗܘܐ ܠܟ

Interpretation: What you desire will be yours.

This oracle is numbered 248 in the margin, in red ink like the oracle itself. As Childers shows, parallel oracles belonging to the Divining Gospel tradition are attested in Coptic, Greek, Latin, and Armenian, with minor variation in the verses to which the oracle is attached, the text, and the numbering:

Language	Associated verses of John	Translation of text	Number
Syriac	17:1–2	What you desire will be yours.	248
Coptic	17:3	What you desire will happen to you.	(not attested)
Greek	17:1–2	What you desire will happen to you.	(not attested)
Latin	16:19–20	The matter is about to happen to you.	246
Armenian	17:1b–2	What you desire will happen.	256

This particular example is unusual in that all the known versions of the tradition include this oracle; in most cases, due to the fragmentary condition of the manuscripts, attestations are lacking from one or more versions. The degree of variation from one version to another in this example is typical of the book as a whole. No two versions are identical. The degree of variation is considerable, particularly if one accounts for the variation in the placement and numbering of the oracles. Nevertheless, those familiar with the unrestrained variation characteristic of magical text traditions will be struck with how mutually consistent the texts are. (It should be noted that the idiomatic translation of the Syriac partially obscures its closeness to the parallels: ܠܟ ܗܘܐ, literally "it will be to you," or more idiomatically "it will be yours," could represent a wooden translation of the Greek γιν[εται σοι] "it will hap[pen to you].") There is no doubt that Childers is correct in treating these examples as witnesses to a single text tradition.

The presentation of the texts in this volume also reflects a correct understanding of the nature of the textual tradition. Childers eschews any attempt to reconstruct a standard text or to emend the Syriac version based on the parallels. Thus, rather than presenting a single main text in chapter 5, with the variants relegated to a critical apparatus, he reproduces all the versions of each oracle in parallel. Childers writes the following concerning the nature of the textual tradition (p. 83):

> Whatever the integrity and coherence of this tool's "first edition" may have been, through copying, translation, and perhaps especially through revision due to usage, subsequent editions and versions evolved in different ways to produce quite a range of different books. We can easily see that they belong together as a set and that they share a common ancestry. But what is true of ancient lot texts generally also applies to the Divining Gospels specifically: "[w]hat we encounter in the transmission of *sortes* are fluid texts and free, creative lines of textual transmission so that these different lot texts cannot be squeezed into traditional scholarly manuscript stemmata."

Childers here quotes from a 2019 essay by AnneMarie Luijendijk and Willian E. Klingshirn on "The Literature of Lot Divination."[2] Thus, where the parallel texts suggest that a scribal change has occurred, Childers gives a diplomatic reproduction of the parallels and includes a comment in a footnote. For example, on page 111, in the oracle following John 4:10, the Syriac reads ܐܢ ܫܪܝܬ, "if you begin," but the parallels read "if you believe," suggesting an original Syriac reading ܐܢ ܗܝܡܢܬ "if you are confident." Childers gives the reading of BL Add 17,119 (ܐܢ ܗܝܡܢܬ) as the main one and includes a footnote noting the possible emendation and stating that "a small inner Syriac error or

[2] In *My Lots are in Thy Hands: Sortilege and Its Practitioners in Late Antiquity*, ed. A. Luijendijk and W. E. Klingshirn (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 25.

revision would account for the difference." (Note, however, that in the table on page 80, the reading of this passage that is presented includes the emendation: ⲁⲛⲁⲥⲧⲁ ⲛ̀ⲥ.)

In his theoretical analysis in the introductory and closing chapters, Childers raises some issues that I wish were developed further. The first issue is the relationship between Christian divination and ritual power. This relationship factors in the organization of the introductory chapters and justifies the content of chapter 1. The overall plan of chapters 1 through 4 moves from the general to the specific. Childers first discusses the widespread Christian use of scriptural books as objects of power in late antiquity, especially the carrying of copies of the Gospel of John and of amulets inscribed with its opening verses, for protection against malevolent forces, something on which church fathers such as John Chrysostom commented (chapter 1). This establishes the context for a discussion of late antique Christian divination (chapter 2). The discussion then turns to the Divining Gospel tradition as a specific case of Christian divination (chapter 3), and finally to manuscript BL Add 17,119 as an especially complete example of the Divining Gospel tradition (chapter 4). Implicit in this overall plan is the assumption that apotropaic ritual somehow helps to explain text-based divination. More to the point, Chapter 1 is meant to "establish the reasons why late antique Christian editors would choose a biblical codex—and John's Gospel in particular—to host an extensive divinatory apparatus" (p. 18).

Yet the relationship between ritual power and divination is never explicitly elaborated. We do get some hints in chapter 1, such as the following: "As a sacred object, the Holy Bible lent divine potency to such things as prayers for protection or healing as well as to divination—though some parts of the Bible were seen to be more potent than others" (p. 14). Here divination, like texts of protection and healing, is thought to rely on the "divine potency" of the Bible. But it is unclear how

this divine potency would be required in the divinatory tradition, which focuses on the text itself rather than on the power of the text artifact as an object.

A more elaborate hint is given near the end of the chapter:

> Perhaps more than any other Gospel, the Gospel of John, a book of great majesty, mystery, and comfort for many Christians, was seen to embody the presence of the incarnate Christ as the Word of God. People recognized the power of the incarnation not only in John's teachings and text but even in certain material objects inscribed with John—including codices of the Gospel.
>
> One way this peculiar reverence for John expressed itself in Late Antiquity is in the production of the Divining Gospel. We have not given much consideration yet to one of the most common expressions of respect for scripture as an agent of divine power and wisdom—the use of the Bible for divination.... Popular reverence for scripture, and John in particular, combined with the abiding interest in divination to produce the Divining Gospels. (pp. 17–18)

Here Childers points to "reverence" or "respect" for John's Gospel as a motivating factor. But what was it about this Gospel that would make it a suitable vehicle for divination? Childers gets closest to the point when he mentions that this Gospel was "an agent of divine power and wisdom." This chapter dwells at length on the use of the opening words of John, as well as the use of codices of this Gospel, as agents of power. But he has not established the perception of the text of the Gospel as an agent of wisdom. In the phenomenology of the Divining Gospel tradition, the wisdom hidden in the text seems to be more essential than the power emanating from the text. A Divining Gospel is designed to serve the needs of those in search of answers, and those answers are presented as interpretations of the scriptural text. There is no indication within the Divining Gospel tradition of apotropaic use either of the text or of the

object on which it is inscribed. A statement by Ambrose on the mysteries contained in the Gospel of John may be more to the point regarding the divinatory use of this Gospel:

> Yet in the book of the Gospel according to John—John, who with greater clarity than the others saw the great mysteries and recounted and explained them—the intention is to see in the blind man [John 9:1–7] this mystery prefigured. Now all the evangelists are saints, and all the apostles, except the traitor [Judas Iscariot], are saints. Yet it was St. John, the last to write a gospel as the friend sought out and chosen by Christ—he it was who trumpeted forth the eternal mysteries in the clearest tones. Everything he has said is a mystery.[3]

The opening words of John 1, which feature prominently in apotropaic practice, do not seem especially significant in the Divining Gospel tradition. As Childers shows on p. 101, the Syriac *puššāqā* associated with these opening words is wanting, but parallel texts advise passivity: "Leave it, do not be contentious" (Greek); "Withdraw, do not fight" (Latin); "Leave it, do not struggle" (Armenian). In fact, this interpretation may indicate an approach quite different from that of the amuletic tradition. The latter exploits the fact that the prologue of the Gospel of John, to quote Childers, "presumes a backdrop of cosmic conflict and emphasizes the victory of light over its opponent, the darkness" (p. 16).

We may tend to link apotropaic and divinatory practices as being similarly "marginal" with respect to official religious practice or as incorporating a "magical" approach to the supernatural, but the texts and vocabulary associated with these practices are nevertheless different, and one may question

[3] Quotation taken from E. Yarnold, *The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation: The Origins of the R.C.I.A.* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994), 125.

whether those who engaged in these practices viewed them as mutually explanatory.[4]

A second issue has to do with the concept of text-based divination. Childers uses this term broadly in his discussion of the varieties of divination in chapter 2, including instances in which the text is the medium of transmitting an oracle as well as instances in which the oracle is framed as an interpretation of a preexisting sacred text. On pp. 25–27, a number of different techniques, such as the use of written queries submitted to a deity, the use of tickets containing answers from which the deity would choose, and the use of extensive written collections of oracles accessed by the casting of lots, are grouped together under the heading of text-based divination. On p. 30, Childers uses a more specific definition: "Furthermore, Christianity's reverence for its sacred texts as the chief authoritative source of that knowledge indicates another point of compatibility, in principle at least, between Christianity and text-based divination, that sought to read the divine will through an examination of the written word." Here the definition of "text-based divination" is essentially bibliomancy, the interpretation of a written text to divine the future.

To be sure, both the broad and the narrow definitions of text-based divination are relevant to the Divining Gospel tradition. The oracles are clearly depicted as "interpretations" of the Gospel text, which seems most closely related to divination based on mystical interpretation of Homer and of Vergil's *Aeneid* (pp. 25–26), while the numbering of the oracles suggests

[4] There is a distinction between ⲙⲁⲅⲟⲥ "magician" (one who might practice apotropaic magic) and ⲙⲁⲥⲧⲓⲥ "diviner"; while these are typically used as pejorative terms, it is still significant that different terms are used for these functions. Moreover, despite the frequent use of scriptural passages in texts of ritual power, the word ⲙⲉⲑⲛⲏⲩⲉ is not part of the technical vocabulary of these texts, nor do divinatory texts typically use the terms ⲙⲟⲩϩⲉ "binding," ⲙⲁⲧⲟ "anathema," etc., which feature in texts of ritual power.

that the lots could be accessed by an external means such as the casting of lots. Childers also raises the possibility that the oracles of the Divining Gospel may derive from a separate collection of written lots, from which source they may have been applied secondarily to the Gospel of John, although he notes that many of the oracles seem adapted to the themes of the Gospel text (p. 84). But a more systematic categorization of the types of text-based divination would help to clarify what the various practices described in chapter 2 have to do with the Divining Gospel.

Childers envisions a three-stage development, first "from reliance on conversational oracles tied to specific locations to the use of standard written manuals" (p. 27) and ultimately to "Christian appropriation of text-based divination" in the form of the Divining Gospel tradition (pp. 30–31). He tentatively locates both of these developments in Egypt (pp. 27–28, 31). While the "development from shrine to book was neither uniform nor strictly linear" (p. 27),[5] Childers maintains that "an increased reliance on [written] texts as vehicles of [oracular] divine communication marks an important development in ancient religion, one that certainly includes the growth in the use of lot divination texts" (p. 27). Yet with the inclusive definition of text-based divination, one is left wondering how this historical development relates to the Divining Gospel. The latter embodies a very specific approach to divination: the notion that God has hidden information about the fortunes of individuals in the scriptural text, so that divination can be a form of scriptural exegesis. Examples of a similar approach are known (such as the oracular use of Homer and Vergil mentioned above), but do we have examples situated in the right time and place to have influenced the Divining Gospel?

[5] Here he cites D. Frankfurter, who writes of the persistence of divination through procession oracles in Egypt even after the emergence of ticket oracles (a practice which Childers loosely classifies with text-based divination).

Moreover, do the Divining Gospel's closest comparanda help to shed light on the culture surrounding the Divining Gospel tradition? Thus, the more pertinent questions of the cultural history of the Divining Gospel depend on a prioritized treatment of the various types of divination.

There are some instances of mistakes in the text. The following is not an exhaustive list, but it may serve in lieu of an *errata* page:

p. 36: ⲉⲭⲙⲡⲉⲓϩⲱⲃ should be ⲉⲭⲙⲡⲉⲓϩⲱⲃ.

p. 46: In the third Syriac quote in the right column, ܟܬܝ ܟܬܒ should be ܟܬܒ ܟܬܝ.

p. 80: footnote markers 135 and 136 in table 3.3 should be 134 and 135 respectively.

p. 80, right column, line 18: The numeral 76 is written as ⲟⲥ but should be ⲟⲍ.

p. 82, right column, line 11: *peregino* should be *peregrino* (compare the transcription on p. 142).

p. 144, under John 17:1–2: The manuscript (BnF copte 156) reads as follows:

ⲡⲉ̅ⲧⲕⲉⲡⲓⲑⲩⲙⲓⲉⲣ[
ⲫⲛⲁϣⲱⲡⲉⲛⲁⲕ:

Crum, in the 1904 study cited in the footnote, transcribes this as ⲡⲉⲧⲕⲉⲡⲓⲑⲩⲙⲓ ⲉⲣⲟ ⲫ ⲫⲛⲁϣⲱⲡⲉ ⲛⲁⲕ. It is likely that brackets were omitted from around the first ⲫ in Crum's article. Theoretically, the grammar would also permit ⲡⲉⲧⲕⲉⲡⲓⲑⲩⲙⲓ ⲉⲣⲟⲫ ⲛⲁϣⲱⲡⲉ ⲛⲁⲕ, but the amount of space presumed to exist on the right side of the fragment, and the somewhat low likelihood of ⲉⲣⲟⲫ being broken up between two lines, suggest that Crum's reconstruction is correct.

p. 197 note 50: "Frankfurter 1995" should be "Frankfurter 1997" (his book chapter "Ritual Expertise in Roman Egypt"). Another article by Frankfurter is also relevant here: David Frankfurter, "Dynamics of Ritual Expertise in Antiquity and Beyond: Towards a New Taxonomy of 'Magicians'," in *Magic and Ritual*

in the Ancient World, ed. Paul Mirecki and Marvin Meyer (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 159–178.

p. 212, left column: some entries in the bibliography are out of alphabetical order (Cuvigny, then de Bruyn, and then Collins).

All in all, Childers's study is a crucial act in the understanding of late antique Syriac divination within its wider Christian context. The book succeeds on many levels, both as a thorough philological treatment of BL Add 17,119 and as a contribution to the cultural history of late antique Christianity. As a clear exposition of a divinatory practice exemplified by manuscript evidence, it has also given us much to follow up on. Even those elements which are speculative or require further elaboration do not detract from the core arguments concerning the character of the Divining Gospel. Future investigations in this book's domain will do well to give serious attention to its insights.