
JEFF W. CHILDERS, *Divining Gospel. Oracles of Interpretation in a Syriac Manuscript of John (Manuscripta biblica 4)*. Berlin – Boston: De Gruyter 2020. XI, 230 pp. – ISBN: 978-3-11-061721-4 (€ 86.95).

- FLORIN FILIMON, University of Münster (filimon@uni-muenster.de)⁰

The book under review focuses on a unique codex of the Gospel of John in Syriac, now held in the British Library with the shelfmark Add. 17,119. If its biblical text received due attention when the text of the *Peshitta* was established, the ‘secondary’ material of the codex was left aside: embedded into and dispersed throughout the text of John there are three hundred and eight brief statements introduced by the term “interpretation” (*puššāqā*), of which CHILDERS provides for the first time a full edition with an English translation.

Biblical codices containing very similar short responses, either positive or negative, either simple statements or exhortations, survive from different Christian traditions – besides the Syriac, there are manuscripts in Greek, Coptic, Latin, and Armenian. The earliest fragments with such responses date back to the fifth-sixth century (see the repository of witnesses given by CHILDERS at pp. 57–76). Despite a certain degree of variation, the “interpretations” (titled ἐρμηνεῖαι in the Greek manuscripts) that accompany the text of John (hereafter *Herm.Jn*), and only exceptionally that of Luke, belong to a coherent tradition (pp. 52, 78–82). Probably subsequently, as indicated by the dating of the surviving evidence mainly in Greek and Slavonic, but also in Armenian and Georgian, the *herm.* were slightly reworked and attached to the Psalms (hereafter *Herm.Ps*). Aside from their misinterpretation by modern scholars as succinct patristical commentaries on the Gospel according to John, the oracular nature and function of the *Herm.Jn* have been contested, and even recent scholarly discussions have claimed that the *herm.* initially served as exegetical reflections on the biblical text or even as translations, though without denying their later divinatory use.

0. Disclaimer: The reviewer would like to acknowledge that given his lack of proficiency in Syriac, throughout this review no remarks on the edition and the English rendition of the Syriac source-material is made.

As explicated by CHILDERS, who coined the term¹ and placed it emphatically in the book's title, the phrase "Divining Gospel" designates a copy "of John's Gospel that include[s] a specific traditional collection of oracular statements that are each tied to selected portions of the Gospel text, constituting a volume designed for use in sortilege" (p. 52), or, in short, a copy "of John's Gospel that incorporate[s] a sortilege apparatus" (p. 206).

The book consists of eight chapters, followed by an appendix (with the Syriac words occurring in the Syriac *Herm.Jn*) and by four indices (covering the manuscripts, the biblical references, the ancient and modern authors, and the subjects mentioned throughout the book).

The first two chapters (pp. 1–49) provide the reader with sufficient background before delving into the main topic, which is the manuscripts with *Herm.Jn*, and the Syriac one. Besides disclosing some details on the Syriac Divining Gospel, chapters 1-2 introduce the topic of the relationship between Christianity and books, with the expected emphasis on *the Books*, and exemplifies the key role of the Christian Scripture and particularly the Gospel of John in the "popular religious practices" – a concept with which the author assumes that the reader is familiar. References are made to literary and material attestations of the amuletic use of the biblical text of John and the presumed protective and healing powers of scriptural codices. The ambivalent attitude of ecclesiastic authorities towards some of these practices and the latter's occasional reproof in the acts of the canons and monastic prescriptions is a crucial point made. In chapter two the discussion glides towards the divinatory use of the Scripture, the sortition practices, and the cleromantic texts that the Christians readily adopted and further developed, especially in the Egyptian milieu, such as the lot-text attributed to the magus Astrampsychos (*Sortes Astrampsychi*). In fact, CHILDERS suggests that the *Herm.Jn* emerged either in Egypt or in Palestine (p. 83), even if one should not minimize the role that the peculiar Egyptian climate played in the preservation of *Herm.Jn* witnesses (p. 68).

The third chapter (pp. 51–84) opens with the reception of *Herm.Jn* in scholarship, but in its main part CHILDERS surveys the known manuscripts of *Herm.Jn*. The detailed presentation is structured by the classification of the witnesses into four categories according to three criteria, one being whether

1. Previously in: *Divining Gospel: Classifying Manuscripts of John Used in Sortilege*. In: LIV INGEBORG LIED – MARILENA MANIACI (eds.), *Bible as Notepad. Tracing Annotations and Annotation Practices in Late Antique and Medieval Biblical Manuscripts* (Manuscripta Biblica 3). Berlin 2018, pp. 66–84.

the *Herm.Jn* are prime material or later additions to the codices. Accordingly, CHILDERS discerns between witnesses with original *herm.* and those with secondary *herm.* The layout of the manuscripts receives special emphasis and provides a further distinction within the group of codices conceived to accommodate the *herm.* Thus, most of the witnesses fit into the group of manuscripts with segmented layout, that is, those having on each page three textual elements: first, a portion of John's text is disposed on the upper part, followed by the term "interpretation", which is centered and functions as a heading for the oracular statement placed underneath. Conversely, the Syriac codex of John alone represents the category that has the *herm.* integrated into the text of the gospel. Particularly helpful is the graphic representation of the sometimes reconstrued *mise-en-page* of eight of the manuscripts with *Herm.Jn*. Another category of witnesses comprises fragments that have been associated with the tradition of *Herm.Jn*, even if given their defective state, their identification as Divining Gospels cannot be firmly established.

Unlike in the case of the codices specially devised to contain the *herm.* and the portions of John that each of them "interprets", the designation "Divining Gospels" as defined at p. 52 (quoted above) appears less adequate when applied to the biblical manuscripts that were updated at a later stage with the *herm.*: the Cambridge, University Library, Nn. 2, 41 (well-known also by the siglum D, used by CHILDERS) and the Paris, BnF, lat. 11553. By doing so, one overemphasizes one function of the book, that of an instrument in divination, at the expense of other(s), such as providing readings for personal devotion. Even after the addition of the *herm.*, the two preserved manuscripts were most certainly not exclusively used in divination. Hence, while the two codices of NT are of key importance in the Divining Gospel tradition and they may be included in this group for heuristic purposes, they do not quite make "a third category of Divining Gospel" (as at p. 69; even if later at p. 75 CHILDERS notes that D "scarcely qualifies as a Divining Gospel", the nuance is because the *herm.* were added at the bottom of folio with the text of Luke). The description of the Syriac Divining Gospel as well as its reconstructed history is sketched in the fourth chapter (pp. 85–96). Noteworthy, due to its peculiar layout it is difficult to precisely determine whether the *herm.* were chained to the Johannine sections that precede them or rather those that follow them. Furthermore, given the fluid nature of the *Herm.Jn* tradition and the fact that the connection between *herm.* and the biblical text is not always discernable, the sequence in the material with segmented layout cannot be assumed for the Add. 17,119

without a caveat, rightly posited by CHILDERS (p. 89). Secondly, when the ms was dismembered, the system became partly lacunose (pp. 93–95). The folios 63 and 64 went missing and were replaced on paper during the twelfth century. The *herm.* were not the main concern of the two hands responsible for this restoration of the ms, but the seven statements were later inscribed in the margins. The change of the layout meant the loss of the four *herm.* on f. 63, as they turned illegible once the margins were damaged. On the other hand, the addition of the *herm.* indicate that the lot system was still in use in the twelfth-century. The first six Syriac *Herm.Jn* had a different fate, since the replacement of the first folios of the codex did not include the corresponding statements. The omission could be caused by the lack of either a model which the copyist could have used or the interest into divination of the possessor(s) (p. 95). In the fifth chapter (pp. 97–154) CHILDERS provides the edition of the Syriac *Herm.Jn* in a format that has each *herm.* standing close to its parallels in Greek, Coptic, Armenian, and Latin, whenever a connection between the former and the latter within the series can be established. That is, the parallels are not drawn based solely on similarities in content.

Two elements allow for the Syriac *herm.* to be situated in the Add. 17,119: the segment of John that precedes them and the folio on which they stand. Another element, which doubtless played an important role in the way the *herm.* were used, are the numbers written with Syriac letters that were assigned to each *herm.* (from 7 to 308). Below the English translation and visually set apart by a line, CHILDERS presents the *similia* from other witnesses, as said. The parallels are provided with translation, and, when existent, with the elements mentioned above. Footnotes offer conjectures and further observations.

Since CHILDERS astutely never considered seeking an *Urtext*, he avoided intervening into the Syriac text so that it would agree with its parallel(s), such as reverting the transposition of two letters that would bring the Syriac in line with the Greek (pp. 98–99). Since the *herm.* make sense in their way, the modern scholar must presume that the medieval readers (and practitioners) were using the oracular statement as written and, therefore, both meaningful variants must be preserved. Similar phenomena can be witnessed within the tradition of the Greek *Herm.Ps*: e.g., a parallel reading of ταχέως ἐπικαλοῦ καὶ γί[νεται] is ταχέως ἐπιαβου καὶ γίνεται.

The methodology to which CHILDERS adheres throughout his study, that of considering codices as complex material artifacts, results in him providing

a semi-diplomatic edition of the texts. In doing so, he is also following in the steps of scholars that have previously discussed the hermeneiai material (Greek and Latin), such as RENDEL HARRIS and OTTO STEGMÜLLER.² Furthermore, since the texts occur in one single witness, not normalizing the texts is generally the recommended editorial choice.³

Nevertheless, at least in the case of Cambridge, University Library, Nn. 2, 41 (D), such a choice of editorial policy appears to have its disadvantages. But first, in the philological introduction, concerning D, CHILDERS writes: “the text preserves idiosyncratic orthography, with explanatory notes or corrections as appropriate” (p. 100). Not only does the scribe of the *Herm.Jn* ignore known orthographical conventions very often, but the odd readings (beyond the usual iotacisms) are marked by inconsistency, rendering the text, as it is, not always easily comprehensible, even when accompanied by the English rendition and a couple of conjectures given in footnotes. Preserving the text with all trivial scribal misspellings comes against a pragmatic concern of an editor of medieval texts, that of aiding the modern reader. There are no authorial intentions behind the “orthographical instability” (as pertinently formulated by CHILDERS at p. 75) of the *herm.* in D and therefore, there appears to be no solid reason for keeping forms such as *παργμα/ παρνηγμα/ παραυμα/ παρυματος*. The normalized (hence, user-friendly) version of the *herm.* should stand as text and the readings in the manuscript, when deemed relevant, should appear in the apparatus criticus. As in the case of most medieval texts, these issues would have been easily resolved with a digital edition.

Some problems remain with the edition of D. Within the bulk of forms that are normalized in the footnotes, some words are accentuated, others are not (e.g., *τελειοῦται* at p. 101, n. 15, but *δει* at p. 105, n. 46). Two ms readings should receive standardized equivalents in footnotes when they first occur: *μή* at p. 101 (D 285v), and *ἔρχεται* at p. 113 (D 312v). At p. 103, n. 23, *ταπεινόω* should be *ταπεινώσον*. At p. 106, n. 56, *διαχώρισις* should replace *διαχωρησις* for “division”. The *herm.* on ff. 303r-v, not 203r-v, are missing (pp. 108–109). At p. 111, n. 90, the normalized form of *δικάζῃ* is *δικάζη*. At p. 111, n. 93, *καμην* should be normalized as *καμεῖν*, not *καμνειν*; at p. 112, D f. 309r reads *ἠθέλησας ποιῆσαι*, not *ἠθελῖσα επησηε*.

2. RENDEL HARRIS, *The Annotators of the Codex Bezae*. London 1901; OTTO STEGMÜLLER, *Zu den Bibelurakeln im Codex Bezae*. *Biblica* 34/1 (1953) pp. 13–22.

3. ALESSANDRO BAUSI et alii (eds.), *Comparative Oriental Manuscript Studies: An Introduction*. Hamburg 2015, p. 342.

At p. 114 (D 313r), αλι is read as κολή, perhaps under the influence of the Syriac and its Armenian correspondents; one should consider ἄλλη, since the scribe writes occasionally double-lambda as a single consonant (e.g. D 307r, αλον for ἄλλον). At p. 115, the *herm.* on D, f. 316v is the 61st, no 62nd (the counting resumes correctly). At p. 116 (D 318v), the *herm.* reads τελειον (thus, τέλειον), not τελιοντι.⁴ If one really seeks, there are a few inaccuracies in the English rendition: at p. 107, the participles τελειούμενον and τελούμενον are translated differently (“will be accomplished” vs “is accomplished”). At p. 116, φανεροῦται (ms φανερουτε) is rendered “you will be disclosed”, perhaps on the account of the Syriac correspondent. At p. 116 (D 319v), τὸ ἐνθύμημα γίνεται should be rendered “what you have in mind will happen”. It must be acknowledged, however, that CHILDERS’ main task is to produce an edition of the Syriac *herm.* The presence of the *herm.* from D, as of those from other surviving materials, in order to offer a synoptic view over the system would probably justify a revision of the edition of the *sortes* apparatus in D.

The rest of the book, which is organized into three more chapters, addresses various issues concerning the Syriac *Herm.Jn* and similar texts. Hence, within chapter six (pp. 155–175) the themes covered by the *herm.* are pointed out. This offers not just an overview of the issues on which the clientele of the Syriac *Herm.Jn* was making queries but allows observing once more that some of the *Herm.Jn* in Syriac, Latin, and Greek are indeed topical headings that during the chain of transmission made it into the corpus of *herm.* It is therefore plausible that at an early stage, the *herm.* existed as a list of oracles arranged under topical headings (pp. 162–164). Another subject is the mechanisms through which the *Herm.Jn* could have been consulted. While the Syriac corpus does not contain any specific instruction, based on prefatory descriptive and/or graphic (diagrammatic) materials from within the *sortes* genre, CHILDERS reconstructs plausible scenarios on the ceremonial dimension of interrogating the Syriac codex. The vagueness, hence, the openness of some *herm.* and the specific character of others, underlines the key role that practitioners held in the process of consultation. The latter’s hermeneutic efforts were needed in order to turn the *herm.* compatible with the query of the client – these are issues revisited also in the next chapter. Their interpretative role is what has granted the or-

4. Elsewhere, at p. 41, n. 110, ἡξιώθης is rendered as if a third person singular form (“was made worthy”). The book is almost free of typos, yet one worth mentioning is due to the editor: *Tollo lege* (p. 21).

acles attached to segments of John their name across the Christian cultures that adopted them, and why and how the lots are indeed “interpretations” lays at the centre of the eighth chapter. It is not only just that “calling the sortes ‘interpretations’ grounds their authority in scripture and therefore in God” (p. 179), but sometimes the interactions between the *herm.* and the text of John to which they were attached are discernable. CHILDERS demonstrates that with some exceptions, the Gospel text is not the source of the *herm.*, but the *herm.* seem to have been selected from a corpus of lots and then reworked so that they would interact on different levels with the biblical text. Reading both the segment of John and its *herm.* could have provided the practitioner (the professional intermediary, rather than the inquirer) with enough material to infer a divine reply to a wide range of concerns.

The last six pages (pp. 203–209) refer to the demise of the genre, its possible causes, and some questions that remain unanswered. If one considers the latest Divining Gospels that survive, one assumes that the genre was abandoned sometime in the tenth century. However, its parallel development, the *Herm.Ps* endured for much longer, as proven by the Armenian material dating from the seventeenth century. The *Divining Gospel* is much more than the anticipated edition and contextualization of the oracular statements embedded into the text of in the Syriac Gospel executed by a certain Gewargis in sixth or seventh century Damascus as an instrument of sortition.⁵ Through a thorough discussion of lot divination methods analogous to the *Herm.Jn*, CHILDERS establishes conclusively the nature of this once overlooked material. His arguments are compelling, and many of the assumptions made, such as the selective function of the numbers assigned to each of the *herm.*, can be confirmed through the example of other later lot-texts. Aside from the minor blemishes put forward here, this is an outstanding piece of scholarship and a fundamental work, which will remain so for years to come.

Keywords

divination; lots, sortition; hermeneiai; Late Antiquity; prognostication

5. Anticipated by the author’s previous four scholarly interventions on this topic from 2016–2019.