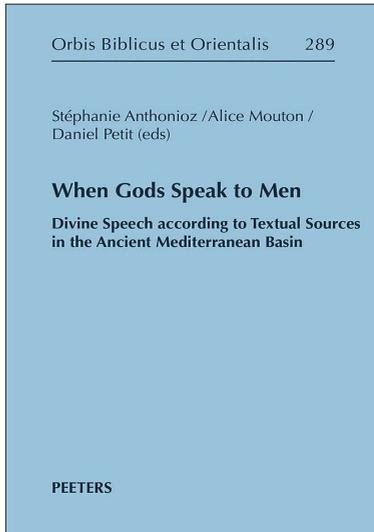


WHEN GODS SPEAK TO MEN



ANTHONIOZ, STÉPHANIE,
MOUTON, ALICE & PETIT, DANIEL
(eds.) (2019) *When Gods Speak to Men. Divine Speech According to Textual Sources in the Ancient Mediterranean Basin*. Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 289. Leuven, Paris & Bristol CT: Peeters. 138 pp., €72,00 [ISBN 978-9-0429-4132-8].

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WHEN THE GODS SPEAK TO MEN DERIVES FROM A SYMPOSIUM held at Lille in 2018, itself the culmination of a longer series of seminars by a research group that was both interdisciplinary and international. The volume is well produced, and each paper provided with full scholarly apparatus. All papers are published in English and the volume is provided with four indices.

When the Gods speak to Men comprises a short introduction by the editors followed by eight substantive papers, each of which explores one or more bodies of texts in which various deities have speaking parts. Dominique Lefèvre discusses examples from Pharaonic Egypt; Alice Mouton and Amir Gilan consider Hittite

literature, dealing respectively with dream narratives and historiography; Martti Nissinen discusses the materiality of oracles from Assyria to the Dead Sea Scrolls; Stéphanie Anthonioz deals with oracles in the Torah and the Prophets; Claire Le Feuvre reviews the distinction between divine language and the language of mortals in a range of Greek texts from Homer to Dio Chrysostom; Manfred Lesgourges examines the functions of secretaries and other religious specialists in and around the oracular sanctuaries of the Hellenistic and Roman periods; and Romain Loriol offers a thoughtful reading of Cicero's *On the Response of the Haruspices*. Each paper is grounded in a small body of texts, but each also explores one or more of a series of wider issues, and some range widely in their comparisons from Avestan literature to Old Icelandic poetics of erudition.

At the heart of the enquiry is exegesis, ours and theirs. A common strand is the observation that revelation is never directly accessible to us, or to the ancients. The speech of the gods must at once be interpreted, and in the cases we have access to it was also recorded and sometimes put on display. But not by just anyone. As Lesgourges puts it, at the end of a discussion of the possible roles of *grammateis*, *neokoroi*, prophets and *chresmologoi* (among others) "writing god's words became a strategy of controlling a peculiar kind of knowledge: oracles."

The diversity of the material discussed is striking. Several contributors make a virtue of the range of scripts, languages, media and generic conventions involved. How the various gods spoke depended to a great extent on genre. Narratives survive from several literatures in which conversations between deities are recorded, both formal 'councils of heaven' and exchanges between individual deities. Mesopotamian, Egyptian and Greek literature all provide examples. Otherwise, gods are more taciturn, and perhaps over time they withdraw behind their human exegetes. Quite a few of the utterances discussed fall into the broad area of divination, like the epiphanies to sleeping mortals (message dreams) in which Hittite gods explained, predicted and occasionally commanded. Gods and angels continued to appear in dreams throughout the Bronze and Iron Ages well into late antiquity. Prayers seeking such epiphanies are also recorded, and the editors note in their introduction the phenomenon of the 'silent god', the deity who is unresponsive and uncommunicative. It is not always clear whether divine utterances have some special significance compared to other means of communication (such as other kinds of oracle, meteorological phenomena, the signs observed by Roman augurs and interpreted by Etruscan haruspices). Many of the technologies of divination were astonishingly long lived and crossed cultural and linguistic boundaries with ease, despite the efforts of various specialists to control their arcane user knowledge.

A number of contributors are interested in the materiality of divine speech as it survives today. Nissinen's chapter stands out as a piece of comparative research, considering cuneiform, epigraphic Aramean, Greek oracle texts alongside documents from Qumran, showing how each medium imposed different constraints on how the gods' words might be recorded, and revealing the range of different institutional forms that the control and publicising of oracles too. Anthonioz also illustrates the complexity of prophesy in the Hebrew Bible and the *Book of Jubilees*, revealing ambiguities over authorship, sometimes Mosaic, sometimes divine. Angels who dictate or read out heavenly scrolls or present them to favoured individuals would reappear at the origins of Montanism, Islam and the Church of the Latter-Day Saints.

The unity of the volume depends not on explicit links made between the contributions, but in a shared set of procedures and preoccupations. There are some unexplored differences between them. The most fundamental is the question of what it means to put together examples stretching from the Fifth Dynasty to the Antonine Age and geographically from the Bronze Age Near East to Roman Italy. Some authors write as if we are observing a single tradition, occasionally treated as united by some common Indo-European ideas. Le Feuvre in one of the most wide-ranging papers argues for a persistent distinction between the language of gods and the language of men that recurs, with variations, from Vedic and Sanskrit Literature to Homer, Pindar and Platonic thought and has some kind of a kinship with the Poetic Edda. Other contributors seem to write as if they are exploring structural similarities, the kind of phenomena that will occur in any religious system in which communication between gods and humans is thought possible and important. Perhaps it is not surprising that connections made between contemporary societies like the Bronze Age kingdoms of the 2nd millennium BCE or the petty kingdoms of the Iron Age Levant are most rewarding. At the very large scale this reader felt that structural similarities explained more than common Indo-European structures of thought. But perhaps the most fascinating result of this project is the demonstration of how much can be learned from close attention to the materiality of traces of divine speech, interpreted and recorded by mortal men for so many different local purposes.