

ANNEMARIE LUIJENDIJK

Forbidden Oracles?

*Studien und Texte zu
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89

Mohr Siebeck

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AnneMarie Luijendijk

Forbidden Oracles?

The Gospel of the Lots of Mary

Mohr Siebeck

ANNEMARIE LUIJENDIJK, 1996 Th.M. from the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam; 2005 Th.D. from Harvard University; 2006–12 Assistant Professor of Religion at Princeton University; since 2012 Associate Professor of Religion at Princeton University.

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Dedicated to my children
Kees, Erik, Rosemarie and Annabel with love.

Preface

This book centers on *The Gospel of the Lots of Mary*, a previously unknown text preserved in a fifth- or sixth-century Coptic miniature codex. It presents the first critical edition and translation of this new text. My book is also a project about religious praxis and authority, as I situate the manuscript within the context of practices of and debates around divination in the ancient Mediterranean world.

Over the past few years, this small ancient codex with its biblical language and optimistic worldview has been my daily companion. I have relished getting to know it as a text and artifact. Yet the joy I have gleaned from researching and writing this book has been due not only to this fascinating Coptic manuscript, but also to the counsel of colleagues and friends, and generous institutional support. As I now send the codex and its text out into the world, it is a pleasant duty to acknowledge those who have helped me in completing this book. In the pages of this preface it is impossible to thank them adequately, and words are insufficient to express my gratitude. I alone am responsible for any shortcomings and mistakes.

My deep thanks go to Melanie Johnson-DeBaufre and Laura Nasrallah, who read multiple, even rough drafts. Through conversations with them this book was improved and took on shape. At the moments when it mattered most, they helped me with their sharp insight and quick feedback. David Frankfurter and William Kling-shirn both read through the entire manuscript and offered constructive criticism, for which I am very grateful. It will be clear from the following pages and footnotes that I have also benefitted tremendously from their written work. I owe much thanks to Janet Timbie for her invaluable help with the translation and interpretation of the Coptic text. Peter Brown gave me helpful feedback on the chapters that I sent him; I am honored to be his colleague.

It has been a privilege for me to present my research at Harvard Divinity School (with the codex present!), the University of Cincinnati, the University of Manchester, the University of Pennsylvania, and Columbia University, and multiple times at the Catholic University of America as Affiliate Scholar of the Center for the Study of Early Christianity. Special thanks go to Karen King and Laura Nasrallah, Peter van Minnen, Kate Cooper, Philip Rousseau, Robert Ousterhout, and Roger Bagnall for inviting and hosting me. I have also presented my work at the International Congress of Coptic Studies in Rome, at the Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting, and at Princeton University. I am very grateful for the feedback from and conversations with colleagues along the way.

In working on this book, I have benefitted greatly from the help of my research assistants. Heidi Wendt and Teresa Early assisted me in the early phases of my re-

search. I am much indebted to Lance Jenott, who proved a great conversation partner in translating a deliberately vague text. He also formatted the Coptic text. My warm thanks go to Flora Thomson-DeVeaux for creating the bibliography, and especially for being the best editor possible. In the final stages of preparing the manuscript for publication, I benefitted from the expertise of Joel Estes and Philip Forness. Special thanks to Phil for spotting several additional biblical allusions in the text. Finally, I am grateful to Bryan Kraemer for his meticulous work in compiling the indices.

These past years, Princeton has been a stimulating place for me to research and teach. It has been a pleasure to be a part of the vibrant intellectual community of the Religion Department and the wider university, and I acknowledge here gratefully the support and encouragement I have received at Princeton. I especially thank my colleagues in the Department of Religion: John Gager, Martha Himmelfarb, Naph-tali Meshel, Elaine Pagels, Peter Schäfer, Moulie Vidas and also Buzzy Teiser. I can fondly recall many lunch conversations about our research with Judith Weisenfeld. I am grateful to Leora Batnitzky for being a wonderful chair of the department. I am pleased to thank Dimitri Gondicas, Director of the Seeger Center for Hellenic Studies, for his support and collaboration in innumerable ways. It has been an honor to be a faculty member of the Princeton Society of Fellows over the past years and I thank all the fellows for the engaging weekly meetings, especially Molly Green, Mary Harper, and Susan Stewart. For their assistance and professionalism, I thank the incomparable Religion Department staff: our department manager Lorraine Fuhrmann, Mary Kay Bodnar, Patricia Bogdziewicz, Jeffrey Guest, and Kerry Smith. I also greatly value the help of the Princeton University librarians and Article Express.

Precious time to conduct research and write this book was made possible through the generous support from the Melancthon W. Jacobus University Preceptorship in Religion, a Stanley J. Seeger Sabbatical Research Grant with support from the Group for the Study of Late Antiquity, and an American Fellowship from the American Association of University Women.

I have been fortunate to explore this text with students. When teaching Elementary Coptic I at Harvard Divinity School, I enjoyed reading passages of the text with Benjamin Dunning, Carly Daniel-Hughes, Anna Miller and Taylor Petrey. At Princeton University, I had the pleasure of discussing this text and other divinatory matters in the Religion Department Junior Colloquium (Fall 2009 and 2011). My warm thanks go to Michael Flower, with whom I co-taught a Program in the Ancient World graduate seminar on Prophecy, Oracles and Divination.

As I moved beyond my dissertation and first book, my Doktermutter Karen King and Roger Bagnall remained important conversation partners, whose scholarly erudition I deeply admire and whose advice I treasure. When I presented my initial deciphering of this text in the New Testament Upper Seminar at HDS, François Bovon was the respondent. I miss him and am sad that he could not see the final product.

Since I began working on this manuscript, multiple similar texts have come to light and I thank colleagues who have generously shared their work with me, especially Wolf Peter Funk, Alex Kocar, and Kevin Wilkinson. I acknowledge Guido

Bastianini and Rosario Pintaudi for sending me images of sortes manuscripts in their collections.

Ioli Kalavrezou and Alicia Walker discovered this object in the Sackler collection at Harvard University for the 2002 exhibition “Byzantine Women and Their World.” I am obviously very grateful to them. It was Amy Bauer of the Sackler Museum who first reached out to me about this codex; I have greatly appreciated her help in making it accessible to me, and the excitement of that early encounter with the codex has stayed with me. My thanks go also to Annewies van den Hoek, in this context for lending me her digital camera and tripod, but much more for support and conversation over the years. Isabella Donadio from the Digital Resources at Harvard Art Museums has been both kind and patient with me in the process of photographing the codex, for which I thank her.

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It has been a pleasure to publish this book with Mohr Siebeck. I thank Henning Ziebritzki and editors Christoph Marksches, Martin Wallraff and Christian Wildberg for accepting my book in this series. I am also indebted to Bettina Gade and Katharina Stichling for their professionalism and Gründlichkeit, and for their patience with me.

I am grateful to my parents Ary and Gerie Luijendijk-Hordijk for their unfailing support of me throughout my life. I dedicate this book to my beloved children Kees, Erik, Rosemarie and Annabel, and thank them for the joy they bring. I hope that they, too, may find the love of learning. Last but not least, I am glad to thank my husband, Jan Willem van der Werff, for all his support over the years. I am so happy to share my life with him.

Easter 2014

AnneMarie Luijendijk

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Introduction

A few days before Christmas several years ago, I received an email from Amy Bauer, curator of Harvard University's Sackler Museum, asking me if I could take a look at a Coptic book. At the time, I was a doctoral student working on a dissertation about Christians in papyrus documents from the ancient Egyptian city of Oxyrhynchus, and about to teach a graduate course in Coptic in the spring semester. Assuming that this Coptic book was a 19th century printed text, I replied that I would take a look at it and inquired what kind of book it was. Bauer responded: "A sixth-century manuscript".¹ The very next day, I went over to the Sackler Museum, outfitted with a notebook, digital camera, a tripod, and a good deal of curiosity.

When Bauer brought the object out of the magazine and unwrapped for me a stack of tiny pages enveloped in brown leather covers, I was immediately struck by its size – the codex was only as large as my palm. I deciphered the words on the first page: *The Gospel of the Lots of Mary, the Mother of the Lord Jesus Christ*, and wondered: What kind of gospel is this? What is the text about? Who owned and used this codex? And why is it so small? Here I tell the story of that Coptic book – rather, that Coptic booklet.

Over the past century or so, manuscript finds have greatly enlarged the library of ancient Christian texts and have added multiple long lost gospels to the inventory. From the *Gospels of Mary* and *Thomas* to the recently published *Gospel of Judas*, these newly discovered writings have deeply enriched our understanding of early Christianity. It is interesting to open here another new gospel, one that turns out to be very different in content and contribution.

In my research, I quickly discovered that our new gospel was not a story about Jesus, but a previously unknown text of Christian oracular answers that would be received in a divinatory session. Despite its designation as *gospel*, this book has no narrative or plot, nor does it contain sayings of Jesus. As a matter of fact, Jesus appears only sporadically. Rather, this book contains a series of oracles. These were not intended to be read in progression or even in order, but individually, after retrieving them through a divinatory procedure ascribed to lot. With the two facing pages of the opened book featuring one oracle, the book is laid out to display only one oracle at a time. People who faced difficult decisions or needed insight into the future would consult a diviner, who performed a ritual to locate an oracle in the codex and then interpreted the divinatory text. In Egypt and the wider Mediterranean world, this practice – sortilege – was both common and controversial.

¹ The manuscript was displayed at the exhibition "Byzantine Women and their World", see my description in the catalogue, Luijendijk, "Miniature Codex".

Sortilege

While sortilege remains a relatively understudied or isolated topic in scholarship on religion of antiquity, this does not mean that it was a fringe phenomenon in ancient society.² On the contrary, lot divination was widely practiced in antiquity, just as it is in many present cultures. Its prevalence in the ancient world is attested by biblical traditions. Although not all biblical authors approve of divination, both the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament abound with instances where casting lots determines someone's fate. The sentiment expressed in Proverbs 16:33 conveys the concept of many lot decisions: "The lot is cast into the lap, but the decision is the Lord's alone." The divine will determines how the dice fall.³ This is, indeed, what happened to Jonah. In the book of Jonah, the sailors, about to suffer shipwreck in a terrible storm, cast lots in order to find out who had imperiled their voyage. The lot (as the reader already expects) reveals Jonah as the culprit, who had rebelled against God's specific command to preach to Nineveh. When his shipmates reluctantly throw him overboard, the storm subsides.⁴

Likewise, the authors of writings in the New Testament interpret the outcome of lot divination as a divine decision. In a matter as weighty as deciding Judas's replacement and thus Jesus' twelfth disciple, the remaining eleven apostles turn to sortilege. First, the disciples pray to the Lord – an important aspect of divination, which is also prescribed in later books with lot oracles. Then, as the text reports rather matter-of-factly: "They cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles" (Acts 1:20b–26). Because the practice of casting lots is treated positively in the stories of Jonah and Matthias, later Christian lot books repeatedly refer to them in order to legitimize controversial oracular practices.⁵

² Recently, studies by Evelyn Burkhardt, David Frankfurter, Fritz Graf, Pieter van der Horst, Sarah Iles Johnston, William Klingshirn, Franziska Naether, and Johannes Nollé have begun to address the place and significance of lot books. Burkhardt („Hebräische Losbuchhandschriften“, 95) notes rightly that although Hebrew *goralot* were clearly a very popular genre among the magical and divinatory manuscripts of Judaism, they have been treated rather „stiefmütterlich“ in scholarship. This is true for all traditions of sortilege.

³ Our text has a similar statement: "The matter is appointed for you by God" (Oracle 32). Johnston ("Introduction", 15) remarks: "All means of sortition ... rely on what scholars of divination call 'randomization'. That is, participants ensure that the lots or the dice are allowed to move freely, randomly, up to the moment that they give their answer by emerging from the jar that holds them (*sortes*) or coming to a stop on the table across which they roll (dice). Those who use such randomizing methods understand them to guarantee that no unscrupulous human can predetermine the outcome ..., that superhuman agencies can intervene and guide the objects, or both."

⁴ Jon. 1:4–16, esp. verse 7: "The sailors said to one another, 'Come, let us cast lots, so that we may know on whose account this calamity has come upon us.' So they cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah." See other examples of the use of lots in, e. g., Lev. 16:8–10; Num. 26:56; Josh. 7:16–18 and 1 Sam. 14:40–42.

⁵ Augustine approves of the instance in Acts, writing: "Now there are many ways in which God speaks with us. ... He speaks through a lot (*per sortem*), just as he spoke concerning the choice of Matthias in place of Judas" (trans. Klingshirn, "Divination and the Disciplines of Knowledge, 114). However, Jerome (*Commentaire sur Jonas* I, 7, ed. Duval, 194, 196) considered the Jonah story just as the one of Matthias a privilege for certain individuals, not a precedent for the community (nec sta-

In antiquity, divinatory practices permeated all levels of society. For many people today, the word “oracle” evokes the mysterious Pythia at Delphi, delivering war strategies to kings in opaque hexameters.⁶ Or perhaps for others, the term calls to mind the story of Alexander the Great, who undertook an arduous journey through the Egyptian desert to inquire at the Siwa oracle whether he was indeed the Son of God. Yet the practice of seeking oracles to obtain divinely-inspired answers was not exclusively the purview of the elite.⁷ Enslaved people consulted lot oracles about gaining freedom, pregnant women asked about giving birth, merchants wanted to know about success in business, travelers inquired about their voyage home, and emperors sought insight about the outcomes of battles. From impressive, inscribed monuments erected on public places in Asia Minor to small strips of papyrus folded into tiny sealed packages from an Egyptian martyr shrine, as well as to our new text, epigraphic and manuscript evidence show that sortilege was ubiquitous in the ancient Mediterranean world.

Where could one consult an oracle in antiquity? The possibilities extend from grand sites like Delphi to a diviner with a book visiting the inquirer at home. Some people traveled far to visit the oracles of Delphi, Didyma, or Claros – sites that, as we know from inscriptions, welcomed visitors from all over the region.⁸ Rich people could send slaves to submit questions in their stead. But there were also opportunities for people to consult the divine without having to travel to an oracular site. Book oracles, called *sortes* (from the Latin *sors* = lot, indicating that one would obtain the answers by casting lots), allowed for consultation on the spot; the oracle could even come to the petitioner! Pieter van der Horst refers to *sortes* as “instant oracles”,⁹ and Fritz Graf describes them as “oracles that preceded the event, where a preexistent answer was waiting for the question to come.”¹⁰ Our codex is one such form of a mobile and ready-made tool for divination.

tim debemus sub hoc exemplo sortibus credere, uel illud de Actibus Apostolorum huic testimonio copulare ubi sorte in apostolatam Matthias eligitur, cum priuilegia singulorum non possint legem facere communem). See also Van der Horst, “*Sortes*”, 154 n. 40.

⁶ So also Björck, “Heidnische und christliche Orakel”, 86: „Mit dem Begriff Orakel verbinden wir Moderne vielleicht allzu schnell die Vorstellung von außerordentlichen Geschehnissen, die in Sage und Geschichte erzählt sind; wir denken an die Pythia, wie sie in dunklen Sprüchen die Schicksals von Völkern und Helden verkündet.“

⁷ Van der Horst, “*Sortes*”, 143.

⁸ Fox (*Pagans and Christians*, 174) provides a map indicating from where people traveled to Claros (“Client cities of the oracle at Claros, attested in the Greek during the Imperial period”).

⁹ As Van der Horst (“*Sortes*”, 143) states: “The range of possibilities that the art of prognostication offered to persons who wanted to know what the gods had in store for them, or demanded from them, was immense.”

¹⁰ Graf, “Rolling the Dice”, 52.

The *Sortes* Family

Our codex belongs to a large Mediterranean family of lot books and adds a new, previously unpublished, member to the *sortes* clan. The family consists of inscriptions, papyri, and parchment manuscripts, written in Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Syriac, Provençal, and Coptic. In the chapters that follow, the textual relatives introduced here will situate our codex, helping us to trace the transmission of texts, formulate ideas about its use and divinatory method, and imagine an archaeological provenance.

The *sortes* family shares several notable characteristics that allow scholars to study them as a subgenre of oracles. For one, *sortes* provide a way of “prognostication, or rather problem-solving, by means of the drawing of lots (*sortilegium*) or the casting of dice (astragalomancy), or other randomizing practices”.¹¹ Additionally, *sortes* directly address a person in the second person singular. Moreover, they present the answers not in poetic hexameters as oracles do, but in prose.¹² Furthermore, *sortes* share a binary worldview with stark contrasts between good and bad events. Theirs is a world populated with adversaries and enemies, the lives of the inquirers shadowed by the threat of danger, illness, and death. Yet *sortes* also have their rosy side, promising happiness, a good life, abundant harvest, and prosperity.

In spite of their shared characteristics, the *sortes* family also displays considerable diversity. Lot books differ in their method of consultation: some present clients with preformulated questions, while others provide answers to questions clients formulate themselves. In the first of these systems, the lot book contains a series of questions with short, matching answers. Have you ever wondered: “Am I to become successful?”, “Will the one who is sick survive?”, “Am I to escape from slander?”, “Will I have an inheritance from someone?”, “Will I be a teacher?”, or “Have I been poisoned?”¹³ People who pondered such general problems could consult a lot system written in Greek called the *Sortes Astrampsychi*.¹⁴ This collection consisted of 92 questions and 103 answers.¹⁵ The inquiry, “Am I to become successful”, could, for instance, yield the response: “You’ll soon succeed for the better.”¹⁶ Similarly, a person with a pressing problem about poison could receive the sage advice: “You’ve indeed been poisoned. Treat yourself.”¹⁷

As is clear from the many copies preserved in the papyrological record, the *Sortes Astrampsychi* were hugely popular in Late Antiquity. They also enjoyed a long afterlife in different guises. For instance, a manuscript from Gaul copied around the year

¹¹ Van der Horst, “*Sortes*”, 143–4.

¹² As Klingshirn (“Christian Divination”, 107–8) observes, the fact that *sortes* are in prose and not in hexameters indicates that “they were not represented as deriving directly from Greek shrines”.

¹³ See the translation and accompanying notes to Pseudo-Astrampsychus, *The Oracles of Astrampsychus* by Stewart and Morrell (“Popular Handbook”, 283–324).

¹⁴ For a detailed study of this book, see Naether, *Sortes Astrampsychi*.

¹⁵ A longer, later edition of the text was also in circulation.

¹⁶ 19 (number of the question) + 10 (my chosen number) = 29; the chart refers to section 79, where it then is answer 10.

¹⁷ 91 + 5 (I picked 5 this time) = 96; the answer is in section 89, 5.

600 called the *Sortes Sangallenses* is a Latin adaptation of the *Sortes Astrampsychi* (or similar lot text).¹⁸

Ticket oracles are a related divinatory system yielding specific answers. Here a client submits two almost identical, sealed tickets to a shrine: one with a query phrased positively, the other negatively. The priests hand back the ticket with the correct formulation as the divine answer. We have such tickets in Demotic, Coptic and Greek.¹⁹ In rare instances, both tickets have been preserved. A Greek example, submitted to the shrine of Saint Philoxenus in Oxyrhynchus in the sixth century, reads:

O my Lord God Almighty and St. Philoxenus my patron, I beseech you by the great name of the Lord God, if it is your will and you are helping me to take the banking-business, I beseech you to bid me learn this, and speak.

Its negatively-formulated twin reads:

O my Lord God Almighty and St. Philoxenus my patron, I beseech you by the great name of the Lord God, if it is not your will that I speak either about the bank or about the weighing-office, to bid me learn this, in order that I may not speak.²⁰

We will probably never know if the inquirer became a banker. But when he received back one of the tickets, he at least knew what to do.

Our text belongs to the second type of lot system, where a client could pose any question and would receive a general answer, or, as satirist Lucian of Samosata put it more bluntly, an “obscure and ambiguous” answer.²¹ This vagueness was not the mistake of careless or ignorant composers, but was deliberate. Ethnographic research into divinatory practices in Africa has shown that the ambiguity of oracular answers serves a clear purpose: it allows openings in the dialogue between the di-

¹⁸ See Klingshirn (“Christian Divination”, 102–5) on the manuscript. On the relation with the *Sortes Astrampsychi*, see *ibid.* 105. Naether (*Sortes Astrampsychi*, 284) observes: „Da ... weitere Orakelbücher dieser Gattung bekannt sind, ist es nicht statthaft, alle auf *einen* Archetypus zurückzuführen. Sie entstammen ähnlichen Traditionen, die es zu untersuchen gibt.“ (She discusses those traditions in chapter 5 of her book). Naether (*ibid.*) states: „Allerdings bestehen zwischen *Sortes Sangallenses* und *Sortes Astrampsychi* frappierende Ähnlichkeiten in den abgefragten Themen, Antwortzusätzen und der inhaltlichen Struktur, so dass von einer zumindest einseitigen Beeinflussung ausgegangen werden muss.“ More generally on the afterlife of the *Sortes Astrampsychi*, see Stewart, “Popular Handbook” 289: “The work quickly became a folkbook. Its true author was unknown or forgotten, its popularity continued, and the text was reworked in smaller and larger ways in the passage of time.” Stewart (*Sortes Astrampsychi*, xiv–v) details the changes from the list of questions in *Astrampsychus* to the Christian inquiries (“Hae sunt quaestiones pristinae earumque mutatae per interpolationem formae”), finding nine instances.

¹⁹ In fact, as Papaconstantinou (“Oracles chrétiens”, 281–6, esp. 281) has demonstrated, the system is known already from Pharaonic times.

²⁰ P.Harris 54 and P.Oxy. XVI 1926. Translations from Youtie, “Question to a Christian Oracle”, 253–4. See also Clarysse, “Coptic Martyr Cult”, 389.

²¹ Characterizing the oracular responses by Alexander of Abonoteichus, second-century satirist Lucian of Samosata (*Alexander the False Prophet* 22, trans. Harmon, 205) writes that Alexander “gave responses that were sometimes obscure and ambiguous, sometimes downright unintelligible, for this seemed to him in the oracular manner”.

viner and the client. Oracles require interpretation. The general and deliberately ambiguous wording of the *sortes*, like those in a newspaper horoscope or fortune cookie today, made them adaptable to any situation. But they also thereby exacerbated the hermeneutical vulnerability that Lucian exploits in his satire.

Some of the divinatory books spring from sacred texts, such as the Greek *Sortes Homericæ* and the Latin *Sortes Virgilianæ*, consisting of abstracts and selected sentences from Homer and Virgil respectively.²² In Jewish, and later in Christian, circles the system was also applied to the Bible, hence the *Sortes Biblicæ* (in Greek). This category also includes the so-called *hermeneiai*-manuscripts, in which short divinatory phrases preceded by the Greek word *hermeneia* (explanation) are penned in the margins of biblical books, most often in the Gospel of John. These exist in Greek and/or Coptic.²³

Another branch of these *sortes* are the so-called dice-oracles. These are Greek texts, incised on large monuments and prominently displayed on the market places of cities and towns in southwestern Anatolia.²⁴ In his study of these inscriptions, Fritz Graf showed how their placement in the public square reveals their broader function in ancient society, as these texts gave divinely-inspired advice in such matters as commerce, travel, family life, and health.

With regard to language: the entire *sortes* family has only a few Coptic members, or more accurately, few manuscripts have been published.²⁵ Besides our new Coptic text, the longest Coptic *sortes* text is a seventh- or eighth-century Coptic papyrus codex of unknown provenance, now at the Vatican library, edited by the Belgian scholar Arnold Van Lantschoot in 1956.²⁶ Although both texts share verbal similarities, the Vatican manuscript has short, numbered answers and therein differs substantially from our codex, which gives longer, more general answers.

²² For *Homeromanteia*, see, for instance: P.Lond. I 121, Suppl. Mag. II 77, SB XX 14231, 14232 and P.Oxy. LVI 3831. The latter contains the instruction on using the oracle: on what days and at what times, and what one should do to prepare.

²³ On these *hermeneiai*, see Quecke, „Zu den Joh-Fragmenten mit ‚Hermeneiai‘“, and idem, „Zu den Joh-Fragmenten mit ‚Hermeneiai‘ (Nachtrag)“, Metzger, “Greek Manuscripts of John’s Gospel with *hermeneiai*”, Parker, “Manuscripts of John’s Gospel with *Hermeneiai*”, and Porter, “Use of *Hermeneia* and Johannine Papyrus Manuscripts.”

²⁴ Graf, “Rolling the Dice”, 54. Seventeen inscriptions are known; Graf (*ibid.*, 58) divides them in three different groups. See also the indepth study of Nollé, *Kleinasiatische Losorakel*.

²⁵ Several scholars are preparing editions of new Coptic texts: for instance, Delattre on texts from Antinoë, Funk on a Middle Egyptian quire, and Kocar on fragments from Oxyrhynchus.

²⁶ P.Vat.Copt. 1, see Van Lantschoot, “Collection sahidique”, 36–52 and the English translation by Meyer, *Ancient Christian Magic*, 251–6, no. 126 “Collection of oracles”. This codex presents 114 short answers on 12 fragmentary folia. The answers are numbered. With small gaps, numbers 21–72 and 153–219 are preserved. This enumeration indicates that substantial parts of the codex have been lost; in Van Lantschoot’s estimation (“Collection sahidique”, 2–3) at least 10 folia are missing. At several places in this manuscript, subject headings, alas only fragmentarily preserved, subdivide the answers. On the top of folio 8 of the papyrus it reads: “153. Regarding [trial?] and testimony” (*ibid.*, 46). Van Lantschoot (*ibid.*, 50) reconstructed another heading as: “[Regarding] life and [safety].” A word of caution on the edition is in place. In multiple cases, Van Lantschoot supplied readings, but they are not certain and it is not clear to me how he achieved them. Nor did he specify how he made his edition.

The most important other Coptic *sortes* manuscript for our booklet is its text's closest relative: an early seventh-century manuscript consisting of two palimpsest fragments from a parchment codex, found at the church of St. Colluthus in Antinoë, published by Lucia Papini in 1998.²⁷ On the broken bifolium, only four answers remain of what was presumably a larger codex. Two of those answers are almost verbatim parallel with our codex's text (Oracles 12 and 31); the other two share sentences with our text, but in a different order. I explore this text further throughout the book.

Sortes and Social History

With their focus on solving everyday problems, lot books provide rich material for social historians. Polymnia Athanasiadi has remarked:

Oracles were the psychiatrists of the ancient world and much more. When in distress, the individual had recourse to Apollo ... and usually went away with renewed confidence in the future. Throughout antiquity ... consultation on private matters remained a normal oracular function.²⁸

Through these texts we enter a world both radically different from ours and yet also strikingly similar. Lot texts give us glimpses into everyday anxieties. A sense of real physical vulnerability about health, travel, love, and professional success is still very recognizable, even if mediated by texts.

In order to appreciate these texts as artifacts of the ancient past, we must understand the role and function of *sortes* and other divinatory texts in antiquity as tools for religious consultation about large and small concerns. In the past, some scholars looked down on sortilege. For instance, Otto Stegmüller missed the point when he disparagingly states about a papyrus with *hermeneia* marginalia that “as regards their content, these oracles are obviously worthless”.²⁹ But those who engaged in divination took it seriously, even if others marginalized it and we moderns may be uneasy with it. While some ancient authors such as Cicero and Lucian of Samosata pointed to the potential for corruption and manipulation, we should presuppose the religious and thus practical significance of divination in the everyday lives of people.³⁰ Insights of ethnographers such as David Zeitlyn have helped to grasp this more fully. Zeitlyn observes:

²⁷ Inscribed on both sides, the page came from a codex. However, the layout of the codex differs from that of our codex. According to Papini (“Fragments of the *Sortes Sanctorum*”, 396): “Of the former text (in Coptic) we can see only feeble traces of letters in a capital style, which were written in the opposite direction in respect of the following text, and, on the flesh side, the lines which were necessary to arrange the writing.” The first text was written in a very neat uncial hand. The original rulings of the first manuscript are still visible.

²⁸ Athanasiadi, “Philosophers and Oracles”, 45. Also Graf (“Rolling the Dice”, 69) credits the oracle he is discussing, the dice oracles from Asia Minor, with “psychological insight”: “The implied speaker is not only gifted with superhuman knowledge, but with sound psychological insight.”

²⁹ Stegmüller, „Zu den Bibelorakeln“, 15 („Inhaltlich sind die Orakel natürlich wertlos“).

³⁰ In his *De divinatione* Cicero lays out arguments for and against the validity of divination in two books, narratively framed as a discussion between his brother Quintus and himself. Cicero (*De*

It is possible to do divination as a game, as a procedure without any cognitive or emotional load being carried. However, such cases (which occur both in Europe and elsewhere) are aberrant. They point to the usual perceived purpose of divination: to find answers to questions. Generally, divination is used as a means of resolving problems.³¹

Many currently working on the topic recognize full well that these practices were an important means of decision-making in antiquity.³²

Thus divination is also intensely related to power and authority, group formation, and group identity. That divination was ubiquitous and taken seriously by its ancient practitioners is clear from the ways in which it was contested by secular laws and church canons that prohibit these divinatory practices in no uncertain terms, deeming them inappropriate and dangerous.³³ Government officials and emperors issued decrees against divination. For instance, in 199 CE, the Egyptian prefect sent out a circular that was to be posted in public, stipulating that all who were found to engage in divination or magic would be put to death.³⁴ Similarly, the historian Ammianus Marcellinus reports the forced closing of the Bes ticket oracle in Abydos, Fayum, at the orders of emperor Constantius in the year 359.³⁵

Church leaders also condemned Christian divination, naming it among a series of crimes that Christians should not commit and forbidding it repeatedly at church councils. Although earlier we observed instances where lot divination was practiced in biblical writings, church leaders could also fall back on biblical prohibitions of such practices. One law prescribed:

divinatione I.1, trans. Falconer 222–3) defines divination – he refers here to the Greek word μαντική – as “the foresight and knowledge of future matters” (praesensionem et scientiam rerum futurarum). In Book II, Cicero (*ibid.*, II.9, 378–9) disproves his brothers positive stance on divination with an emphasis on science, stating: “Now you must admit that divination is not applicable in any case where knowledge is gained through the senses” (Ad nullam igitur earum rerum, quae sensu accipiuntur, divination adhibetur). See also Denyer, “The case against divination”. Lucian (*Alexander the False Prophet* 8, trans. Harmon, 185) describes how Alexander “the false prophet” was acutely aware that “both to the one who fears and to the one who hopes, foreknowledge (πρόγνωσις) is very essential and very keenly coveted ...”

³¹ Zeitlyn, “Divination as Dialogue”, 189. Bolte (*Zur Geschichte der Punktier- und Losbücher*) has shown that people begin to play lighthearted games of divination by the end of the fifteenth century. He (*ibid.*, 198) bases this on „scherzhafte Losbücher, die oft ausdrücklich versichern, daß sie keinen Glauben beanspruchen“.

³² The composer of Proverbs phrases it so well: “Casting the lot puts an end to disputes and decides between powerful contenders” (Prov. 18.18). On taking lot divination seriously and out of a negative, denigrating point of view, see Frankfurter, *Religion in Roman Egypt* (and throughout much of his scholarship), Klingshirn, “Christian Divination”, 102, Naether, *Sortes Astrampsychi*. Burkhardt („Hebräische Losbuchhandschriften“, 142) observes: „Die ernsthafte Einstellung der hebräischen Losbücher ist ein weiterer Ausdruck für das Grundanliegen, sie in den Kontext gottesfürchtiger Religiosität zu stellen.“

³³ On the topic, see Kippenberg, “Magic in Roman Civil Discourse”.

³⁴ A copy of the letter has turned up in the papyrological record: SB XIV 12144 (P.Coll.Youtie I 30), see Parassoglou, “Circular from A Prefect”, and revised edition by Rea, “New Version of P. Yale Inv. 299.” See further discussion of this papyrus in chapter 4.

³⁵ Ammianus, *History* XIX 12 (trans. Rolfe, 534–45). See discussion in chapter 4.

When you come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you, you must not learn to imitate the abhorrent practices of those nations. No one shall be found among you who makes a son or daughter pass through fire, or who practices divination, or is a soothsayer, or an augur, or one who casts spells, or one who consults ghosts or spirits, or who seeks oracles from the dead. . . . Although these nations that you are about to dispossess do give heed to soothsayers and diviners, as for you, the Lord your God does not permit you to do so (Deut. 18:9–14).³⁶

Augustine of Hippo even labeled people that consult *sortes* “foes of God” (*inimici Dei, omnes consultores sortilegorum*).³⁷ William Klingshirn has examined the extent to which lot divination encountered ecclesiastical resistance in the West, especially Gaul. The strict prohibitions not only give an indication of early church leaders’ anxieties, they also show that lot divination was practiced widely in that region and even conducted by clergy themselves.³⁸

What makes divination so contentious, so dangerous to the leadership? In order to grasp what is at stake, I argue, building on Laura Nasrallah’s work in her book *An Ecstasy of Folly*, that this is an epistemological concern.³⁹ At stake in the discourse on divination is access to knowledge: knowledge about political developments such as the life and especially death of emperors, knowledge about everyday concerns, and knowledge of (or access to) God.

The Gospel of the Lots of Mary

There is much we do not know about our text. Unlike other ancient texts, the *Gospel of the Lots of Mary* does not mention an author, not even under a pseudonym. We also do not learn of specific addressees. The place and date of its composition remain unknown. Some of these features our text shares with other Gospels. But unlike other Gospels, which have a long history of scholarship, beginning already in antiquity, no ancient writer referred explicitly to our text, whether approvingly or disapprovingly. Thus, we are left to piece together what we can from the text itself.

This book presents the first critical edition and English translation of a new text. It also places this text and the miniature codex within the broader framework of the social history and religious practice in Late Antiquity, with a focus on divination. Precisely because texts such as these were often condemned or considered marginal, the interpretation of this text represents a form of Christianity that is less widely known – one that focuses on non-elites.

³⁶ See also 2Kings 17:17–8.

³⁷ “Ergo inimici Dei omnes amatores mundi, omnes inquisitors nugarum, omnes consultores sortilegorum, mathematicorum, pythorum” (*Enarr. in Ps. XCI* 10, quoted from Weiland, *Oordeel der Kerkvaders*, 10 n. 1). In *Enarr. in Ps. CXL*. 18 (ibid. 10 n. 2) the word *sortilegos* is mentioned again. On Augustine’s attitude towards divination and divine communication, see Klingshirn, “Divination and the Disciplines of Knowledge”.

³⁸ Klingshirn, “Christian Divination”.

³⁹ See Nasrallah, *Ecstasy of Folly*.

The book consists of two parts. The edition of the Coptic text, my translation and a textual commentary, and images of the manuscript make up Part II. In the first chapter of Part I, I open the codex and begin to read its text. I consider why the book is called a gospel, given that it is so different in content from our expectations of Christian books. I will also examine the appearances of the text's characters: Mary, the archangels Gabriel and Michael, God and Jesus, and, generically, "enemies". Then I discuss the text's striking theology, showing that we have entered a world that is both familiarly Christian and at the same time strange and unknown. This everyday text provides fascinating glimpses into a milieu that is otherwise difficult to see: it is thoroughly Christianized, yet not Christo-centric; larded with biblical allusions, yet Jesus Christ plays a marginal role. Finally, I examine the text's exclusive focus on the client.

The second chapter takes a closer look at the codex as artifact. This entails an examination of codicology and palaeography, since both help to establish a date for the codex. I also investigate the possible provenance and context of this book and discuss possible reasons for its miniature format.

In the third chapter we encounter the book's users: diviner and client. Here I explore the way the book functioned for each by examining its material format, the layout of the pages, and the instructions provided in various other divinatory texts.

Finally, in the fourth chapter I contextualize our codex within the wide-ranging ancient discourse on divination. Those advocating the prohibition of divination had strong voices. Conversely, the other side in this debate has been largely silent (or silenced), yet also resilient. The people who composed our text, or those who practiced divination with this codex, have left no musings about what they thought about and did with lot texts. We can, of course, read the church canons and other prohibitions against the grain to reconstruct the positions they forbid. With this little codex, we have a well-preserved voice in defense of divination. Thus I view this book in its entirety, as text *and* artifact, as a participant in the larger debate on divination and access to divine foreknowledge in antiquity. As such, this miniature codex, which asserts its own trustworthiness and reliability, preserves an oft-neglected perspective in the controversy about access to God. We hear that voice in multiple resonances through its text: in its title, proudly claiming to be a gospel, its answers full of biblical allusions, the exhortations to trust it, and also through its materiality: in its probable archaeological provenance and connection with church spaces and Christian clergy. Indeed, this little codex has a much larger story to tell.