Divining gospel: Classifying manuscripts of John used in sortilege

Jeff Childers
Abilene Christian University, childersj@acu.edu

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Divining gospel: Classifying manuscripts of John used in sortilege

1 Introduction

In the year 624, the Byzantine emperor Heraclius was conducting a counter-offensive against the Persian army led by Khusro. After suffering years of devastating loss due to the relentless advance of the Shah’s armies, Heraclius finally had Khusro on the run, plundering down fire temples as he chased him deeper into Persian territory. Still Khusro eluded direct confrontation. As winter began to set in, Heraclius’ advisors debated whether the army ought to continue the pursuit or turn and winter in Albania instead. In order to resolve the debate, Heraclius availed himself of a problem-solving strategy common in his day: divination. The chronicler Theophanes Confessor reports: “The emperor commanded that the army purify itself for three days. Then, upon opening the divine gospels, he found a passage instructing him to winter in Albania. So at once he turned and hurried to Albania.”¹

Unfortunately, Theophanes provides us with no further details. What gospel text would have sent Heraclius to Albania? Did he merely open the codex randomly to a passage and somehow divine from it a clear course of action—or did he use more elaborate techniques and esoteric mechanisms by which to determine a course of action on the basis of the passage he read? Was it a plain gospel codex or a book especially designed for the purpose of divination? Who else was involved in the process—members of the clergy, for instance? Theophanes is very helpful on many details of Heraclius’ campaign, but rather vague about the emperor’s practice of divination, leaving us with many unanswered questions.

Probably the most common ancient way of practicing sortes biblicae, as it is typically known, involved turning to a passage of Scripture at random in order to find guidance in the words at which one happened to land,² a method that is at least compatible with Theophanes’ bare description. Both Anthony of Egypt and Augustine of Hippo famously received clarity about their respective vocations in such a way.³ However, other methods of using Scripture for divination were available. We know that specialized oracular devices accompanying the biblical text also existed, though the surviving evidence is scarce and fragmentary. Often referred to as hermeneia manuscripts, these books contained Scripture along with a divinatory apparatus for use in sortilege (i.e. the drawing of lots for the purpose of divination). Books having the Gospel of John were especially popular and came to be connected with an elaborate system of divination, vestiges of which still survive. These remnants of “divining gospels” illuminate a distinctive facet of the late antique and medieval reception of biblical texts and the artifacts bearing the texts.

In this paper we will examine manuscripts having the text of John’s Gospel along with sortilege material, i.e. divining gospels, seeking to classify the various forms of extant evidence. I will describe several kinds of manuscripts, based on the layout of pages and whether the sortilege material is original to the execution of the manuscript or secondary. The hermeneia are a kind of annotation that cohabited in different ways with the gospel text in different books. A comparison of witnesses will show the dissemination of the oracular system. After describing the characteristic forms and layout of this material in the witnesses, particularly in a little studied Syriac manuscript, I will discuss what these features tell us about how these unusual books were used. Although recent discussions of hermeneia manuscripts propose that the hermeneia are to be understood as primarily exegetical or even liturgical, the evidence considered here will confirm the long-standing view that their main function was divinatory, validating our use of the terms sortilege, oracles, and sortes when discussing these materials. Yet before we briefly examine the contents, in order to establish the basic character of these systematic annotations, we will allow the extraordinary Gospel of John to establish some context.

2 Codices of John as objects of power

In the world of Christian Late Antiquity, text-bearing objects were often revered as relics of mysterious power.


Portions of Scripture commonly served as amulets and biblical codices were thought to manifest the divine presence in oath-swearing contexts and at ecumenical councils. Central to these uses is the materiality of the objects themselves, connected to but transcending the specific textual contents of the books.

Although a variety of biblical texts and textual objects containing Scripture were put to bibliomantic uses, the Gospel of John has held a special status in this regard, perhaps due to the enigmatic qualities of its language. For instance, Augustine exhorts his hearers to cure their headaches by sleeping with a copy of the Gospel rather than using other amulets (In Joh. tr. 7.12). The smallest extant Latin biblical manuscript is the Chartres St. John, a tiny codex of John (71 × 51 mm) from the late fifth or early sixth century (Paris, BnF, lat. 10439). It probably served as an amulet before it was put into the reliquary of the Virgin's shirt at Chartres in the eleventh century. Similar is the oldest intact European book, the famous Stonyhurst Gospel (London, BL, Add. 89000). Also a diminutive volume (138 × 92 mm), this Latin codex of John was apparently buried with St. Cuthbert (+687) when he was reinterred at Lindisfarne in 698. These codices of John seem to have functioned as relics, material objects bearing special power.

The actual text of John itself was seen to be especially potent also. For instance, John's opening statements of power feature prominently in early Coptic amulets with scriptural incipits, they are used apotropaically in Arabic amulets and Syriac healing charms, and a thirteenth-century Benedictine charm for the protection and healing of sheep begins with a recitation from the opening of Joh. 1. In the early seventeenth century, a certain sorcerer in Nottingham was known for selling copies of John's Gospel for ten shillings apiece as protection against witchcraft. Perhaps more than any other biblical book, the Gospel of John has been used in ways that reveal an enduring belief in its mystical power—including its role in practices of divination. Ancient hermeneia books held a special status in this regard.

### 3 Hermeneia as oracles

In many ways, the hermeneia books resist analysis; not many have survived and most of what remains is fragmentary or corrupt. The limited and rather broken nature of the evidence have made it difficult to speak with great confidence about the precise nature and use of these materials. Yet the age, distribution, and diverse expressions of the hermeneia indicate that the surviving evidence represents the thin vestiges of a once widespread and common phenomenon. A comparison of diverse witnesses yields compelling clues as to the purpose of these tools. For instance, a small corpus of Greek and Greco-Coptic hermeneia manuscripts of John survive. These papyrus and parchment fragments date from the fifth-eighth centuries; they contain portions of John's Gospel and additional statements that are prefaced by the term ἐρμηνεία. To take one example, the fifth- or sixth-century papyrus fragment P.Berol. 11914 [GA 𝔃⁴⁰] contains the text of Ioh. 3,14–18 and 4,9–10 in Greek (on r²). Column 4 has Ioh. 4,10, Jesus' declaration to the Samaritan woman, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water” (NRSV). Beneath that text is a space, then the following Greek and Coptic statements:

ερμηνεία

hermeneia

εάν να πιστεύσεις χάρα
ρα! σοι γίνεται

εκαθαναπτετές ζευγνύ

[ιού πάτριος ηλιοκόμενος]

if you believe, there
will be joy for you

if you have trust, there
will be joy for you

---

6 Gamble 1997, 238. Since Augustine is commenting on John, it is not unlikely that he has this Gospel particularly in view, though that is not certain. Sanzo contends that such references in Augustine and Chrysostom are to objects that contain only select portions of the Gospels rather than entire codices (Sanzo 2014, 161–64).
9 See Blant 1894, 8–13.
10 See examples listed in Sanzo 2014. Portions of the other canonical gospels were also used in this manner.
11 For Syriac examples, see Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Library, Syr. 156 (Goshen-Gottstein 1979, 103–5), and Gollancz 1912, xxvi, lix, lxi; for Arabic examples, see Bosworth 1976, 128.
12 Salter 1907–8, 1:18.
14 Extant evidence for hermeneia occur mainly in Gospel and Psalms manuscripts.
16 See the discussion in Porter 2006, 322–25. David C. Parker analyzes the biblical text preserved in these witnesses (Parker 2006, 48–68).
17 Stegmüller 1953, 17; also Metzger 1988, 164.
The oracle is Mark’s Gospel; see discussion below.

Also referred to as Codex Bezae Cantabrigiensis.

Notes:
1. The manuscript has Ἐλθε ἀπεκριθή ("if you begin"), possibly due to a misreading of ἐλθε.
2. Also referred to as Codex Bezae Cantabrigiensis.
3. In Codex Bezae, the sorts are written in the bottom margin of Mark’s Gospel; see discussion below.
4. The oracle is 46th in sequence, though Bezae’s statements are not numbered.
5. Also referred to as Codex Sangermanensis 1.

Each page of the manuscript contains sequential passages of John in Greek, under which are similar bilingual hermeneiai.

Some of these manuscripts are entirely in Greek, whereas others are in Greek and Coptic, and at least one manuscript is entirely in Coptic. That the oracular material in these early fragments draws on a large and complex tradition becomes evident when we compare parallel occurrences in other witnesses, each of which belongs to different manuscript traditions.\(^{18}\) Having written about these relationships at length elsewhere,\(^{19}\) here I simply illustrate their interconnectedness across a range of sources that we will be treated in greater detail below. The following table provides texts and translations of parallel sorts from four different manuscripts, along with their approximate locations in the gospel text and their numbers or positions in their respective sets of hermeneiai:

The correlations between the contents and locations of the hermeneiai material in these Greco-Coptic, Syriac, Latin, and Armenian witnesses demonstrate the basic interrelatedness of this material. It is obvious that they are drawing on a common tradition.\(^{20}\) But what was the function of the material?

The use of the term hermeneia, i.e. “interpretation,” led some early scholars to presume the statements were somehow exegetical.\(^{21}\) However, most came to understand them as oracular in function. Stanley Porter has tentatively argued for something of a return to the former view, drawing attention to certain interactions between the hermeneia material and the contents of John’s Gospel.\(^{22}\) More recently, Wally Cirafesi advanced a new proposal, suggesting the statements are liturgical in nature, arising from a bilingual context in which “translations” of the liturgical notations (i.e. hermeneia) were deemed necessary or at least useful.\(^{23}\) I discuss this proposal elsewhere,\(^{24}\) and although the bilingual aspects of some of the early witnesses beg further explanation, I do not find a liturgical reading of the material to be as helpful in illuminating their function as Cirafesi does.

Porter is certainly right to criticize the older view that sees no substantial connection between the hermeneia and the text of John, yet his characterization of the statements as “reflections on the biblical text” underplays their oracular function and exaggerates their ability to function as commentary or gloss on the biblical text.\(^{25}\) Bruce Wilkinson’s conclusions seem to me to be stronger, in which he acknowledges that the language and placement of the hermeneia owe something to the content of John’s Gospel, yet their force is still primarily oracular. Wilkinson and I have independently come to similar conclusions. However, few of these studies take into account the Armenian evidence\(^{26}\) and none of them refer to the aforementioned Syriac manuscript, that I am in the process of editing.\(^{27}\) A consideration of this evidence reinforces our understanding that the material was designed for use in the practice of divination. The following

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\(^{18}\) For dates and other details of the manuscripts in Table 1, see Table 3 and the discussion below.

\(^{19}\) Childers 2013, 327–32.

\(^{20}\) J. Rendel Harris observed and studied the close connections between the material in Codex Bezae and Sangermanensis (Harris 1901, 65–74), whereas Stegmüller noted the parallels between that material and the hermeneia in the Johannine papyrus and parchment fragments (Stegmüller 1953, 13–22). These affinities have also been addressed in Metzger 1988, 165–67; Outtier 1996, 74–78, and Wilkinson, forthcoming. I am grateful to Kevin Wilkinson for sharing his research with me in a prepublication form.

\(^{21}\) For a survey of the history of scholarship on hermeneia manuscripts, see Cirafesi 2014, 47–52; see also the discussion in Jones 2016, 34–37.

\(^{22}\) Porter 2007, 579.

\(^{23}\) Cirafesi 2014, 63–67.

\(^{24}\) See Childers 2017, 259–60.

\(^{25}\) Cf. Porter 2013, 60–63, in which Porter takes the hermeneia materials as evidence that early Christian communities were reflective and theologically constructive.

\(^{26}\) Wilkinson (forthcoming) attends to the Armenian witnesses.

\(^{27}\) For a preliminary discussion of this manuscript, see Childers, forthcoming.
statements (sortes) taken from the sixth- or seventh-century Syriac manuscript, London, BL, Add. 17119 will illustrate:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Folio</th>
<th>Biblical Text</th>
<th>Sors (text and translation)</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10r</td>
<td>Ioh. 3,30</td>
<td>ܐ ܠܟ ܡܗܕܐ ܨܒܘܬܐ ܡܢ ܐܠܗܐ ܝܗܝܒܐ</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Interpretation: this matter is given by God</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14r</td>
<td>Ioh. 4,42</td>
<td>ܐ ܠܟ ܡܗܕܐ ܨܒܘܬܐ ܡܢ ܐܠܗܐ ܝܗܝܒܐ</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Interpretation: from a stranger (will) come a fine report</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26r</td>
<td>Ioh. 6,69</td>
<td>ܐ ܠܟ ܡܗܕܐ ܨܒܘܬܐ ܡܢ ܐܠܗܐ ܝܗܝܒܐ</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Interpretation: this matter (will) result in conflict, but in the end it (will) turn out well</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31v</td>
<td>Ioh. 8,16</td>
<td>ܐ ܠܟ ܡܗܕܐ ܨܒܘܬܐ ܡܢ ܐܠܗܐ ܝܗܝܒܐ</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Interpretation: the partnership/participation is fitting</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32r</td>
<td>Ioh. 8,20</td>
<td>ܐ ܠܟ ܡܗܕܐ ܨܒܘܬܐ ܡܢ ܐܠܗܐ ܝܗܝܒܐ</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Interpretation: it is not time for you to begin</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43v</td>
<td>Ioh. 11,4</td>
<td>ܐ ܠܟ ܡܗܕܐ ܨܒܘܬܐ ܡܢ ܐܠܗܐ ܝܗܝܒܐ</td>
<td>224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Interpretation: you will get something you do not expect</td>
<td>287</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47v</td>
<td>Ioh. 11,46</td>
<td>ܐ ܠܟ ܡܗܕܐ ܨܒܘܬܐ ܡܢ ܐܠܗܐ ܝܗܝܒܐ</td>
<td>287</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Interpretation: a good deliverance</td>
<td>298</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>59v</td>
<td>Ioh. 14,29</td>
<td>ܐ ܠckeditor ܡܗܕܐ ܨܒܘܬܐ ܡܢ ܐܠܗܐ ܝܗܝܒܐ</td>
<td>298</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Interpretation: he/it (will) not judge you; do not fear</td>
<td>298</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>76v</td>
<td>Ioh. 20,5</td>
<td>ܐ ܠckeditor ܡܗܕܐ ܨܒܘܬܐ ܡܢ ܐܠܗܐ ܝܗܝܒܐ</td>
<td>298</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Interpretation: the matter that you seek (will) find</td>
<td>298</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>79v</td>
<td>Ioh. 21,3</td>
<td>ܐ ܠckeditor ܡܗܕܐ ܨܒܘܬܐ ܡܢ ܐܠܗܐ ܝܗܝܒܐ</td>
<td>298</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Interpretation: in five days a good thing (will) happen to you</td>
<td>298</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes:
1 Or, “a good thing will be yours.”

London, BL, Add. 17119 is a Syriac text of the Gospel of John. Integrated into the text are a series of these statements, originally 308 in number, numbered and rubricated, though a few of them are missing. This substantial corpus of statements helps us decipher their basic significance. In the Syriac manuscript, the statements (sortes) are called ܡܕܡ ܕܠܐ ܡܣܟܝܬ ܢܣܒܬ (Puššāqē), i.e. “interpretations,” using an expression corresponding to the Greek term hermeneiai. Apart from the problem of occasional errors and confused readings, the sense of some of the Puššāqē/hermeneiai is obscure.28 Although labeled “interpretations,” they are not interpretations in the usual sense. At times they resonate with terms or themes in nearby biblical texts, as in the context of Ioh. 7, where Jesus is falsely accused and Puššāqē 105 enjoins, “do not fear slander.” The oracle adjacent to Jesus’ request for a drink in Ioh. 4,7 speaks of “refreshment and gain” (Puššāqē 44). Oracles regarding court decisions and judgements seem especially frequent in the scenes of Jesus’ trials in Ioh. 18. Yet the main thrust of the statements seems to lie outside Scripture.29 The statements make little sense as direct comments on the biblical text. Instead, they are couched as responses to a person’s inquiries about particular topics. In form and function, they are reminiscent of other surviving lot oracle collections with roots in pagan practice, such as Sortes Astrampschi and Sortes Sangallenses.30 Like the former, the puššāqē are brief; they also deal with some of the same topics, such as inheritance, travel, and business. The term hermeneia, rather than indicating “translation” or “interpretation” in the usual senses, parallels the usage we find in the Byzantine Riktologion. The Riktologion is a tool for divination having a numbered series of passages, based mostly on the Gospels, followed by the term ἐπρήμνεω and an oracular pronouncement.31 The Riktologion is clearly a tool for sortilege, with divinatory hermeneiai. Perhaps unsurprisingly, its collection begins with Ioh. 1,1.

As I have tried to show elsewhere, the pattern of the hermeneiai’s placement shows that their potency relies not only on the authority of the sacred codex of John but even on very specific elements of the narrative itself, sometimes in sophisticated ways.32 In this sense, they are “interpretations,” justifying Porter’s cautions against seeing them as capricious attachments to the Gospel.33 Yet the hermeneia by which the user of these tools connected Scripture to the needs and concerns of inquirers exhibits a different mode of interpretation than is common in patristic and medieval commentaries or homilies. These “interpretations” are essentially oracular in nature and divinatory in purpose, drawing their potency from their

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29 Most give no moral instruction, nor do they carry obvious liturgical functions—indeed, very few of the statements have any explicit religious content at all, Christian or otherwise.
30 Browne (ed.) 1983; Stewart 2001; Brodersen 2006. The Latin Sortes Sangallenses appear to derive from the same archetype as the Sortes Astrampschi (Stewart 1995, 136–38; text edited by Winnefeld 1887).
31 See Drexel 1941, 311–18; Canart/Pintaudi 1984, 85–90; Outtier 1996, 77–78. An example: number 31 in the Riktologion paraphrases Ioh. 15,7 (“if you remain in me and I remain in you”), after which it presents the following word of hope: Καλὸν τὸ πράγμα σου ἀποκαλύφθως ἐστίν, ὁ δὲ θρόνος, καὶ βοήθεωρ έχες παρά τῷ θεῷ (Drexel 1941, 317).
33 See Porter 2007, 579.

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28 I am indebted to Sebastian P. Brock for his suggestions regarding the translation of some Puššāqē.
location alongside Scripture in artifacts believed to bear sacred power. They are “divining gospels,” a distinct type of Gospel manuscript that contains the Gospel of John and divinatory apparatus. The following analysis indicates that these books were made specifically for divinatory purposes; hence the classification, “divining gospels.”

The divining gospels have not been extensively studied as such, their relative neglect being due probably to several factors. First, the surviving evidence is meagre. Where the biblical hermeneia manuscripts have attracted attention, it is primarily their qualities as New Testament witnesses that have interested scholars. Finally, the materials are puzzling in many ways and not easy to interpret. The remainder of this article seeks to expand our understanding of the divining gospels by classifying the witnesses according to their formal characteristics.

4 Manuscripts of John with sortilege material

In what follows, every known instance of the divining gospels will be classified according to their basic codicological features, dates, language/s, the manner by which the divinatory material is connected to the gospel text (for example original or secondary), and the formal structure of the materials, i.e. their arrangement on the page. One of the most noticeable aspects of this tradition is its fragmentary nature. The majority of witnesses survive as scraps, with barely a few lines of intact text. One Damascus fragment is lost and we now have only Hermann von Soden’s description to guide us. In two instances, the fragments are so damaged that we cannot be certain they came from divining gospels, though their characteristics lend strong support to that speculation. By contrast, an early Syriac witness preserves the largest surviving number of hermeneiai. One unique source has hermeneiai without accompanying gospel text. Yet together they preserve elements so closely related that nearly all of them derive from a tradition of similar materials: an apparatus of divinatory hermeneia connected with manuscripts of the Gospel of John, i.e. divining gospels.

4.1 Overview of manuscripts

Table 3 lists the manuscripts being analyzed. They may be classified according to three basic types. The first type are manuscripts with hermeneia that are original to the copying of the manuscript but having a page layout that clearly segregates the hermeneia from the gospel text, by such means as spacing and changes of text alignment (for example centering). The second type has hermeneia that are original to the book’s production but they appear in-line with the gospel text, i.e. they are integrated into the columns of the Gospel text. The third type consists of manuscripts in which the hermeneia are secondary additions to the books, written into the margins at some point after the books’ original production.

Figures are provided for selected manuscripts. They depict reconstructions of basic layouts, showing the placements and relationships between biblical text, headings (for example “ερμηνευτα”), the hermeneiai, ancient translations of the hermeneiai, and numbers. Not all these items occur in every instance. The figures are not exact representations of the manuscripts but they illustrate the many shared characteristics of these artifacts, delineating certain peculiar features as well.

Table 3: Manuscripts of John with sortilege material

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A) Manuscripts with original hermeneiai and segregated layout</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manuscript</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrus-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sammlung, P.Berol. 11914</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 New Haven, Yale University, Beinecke Library, P.CYBR 4641</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Montserrat, Abadia Roca, P.Monts. VI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roca 4.51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.2 Witnesses with original sortilege material and segregated layout

It is likely that the sortilege material originated separately on the basis of originally pagan models and that its sortes were applied as a body of annotations to John. Yet many of the extant witnesses have hermeneiai (or sortes) that are original to the production of the book; they appear to prefer a page layout in which each page has a separate block of gospel text with its attached hermeneia, even if this results in large blank spaces.
Manuscript 1. Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung, P.Berol. 11914 [GA \(\text{𝔓}^{63}\)] is a fifth- or sixth-century Greco-Coptic papyrus fragment with four pages.\(^{39}\) It is part of a codex that opens to about 18.5 \(\times\) 30 cm (Figure 1), containing portions of the Gospel of John in Greek. One page has Ioh. 4,10, followed by a space, under which the term ερμηνεία appears, then a sors in Greek and Coptic centered below the gospel text. As discussed above, the content of the hermeneia is basically the same as in four other manuscripts (in Greek, Syriac, Latin, and Armenian). The other three pages are laid out the same way—one with Ioh. 3,14–15, followed by 3,16–18; then another with Ioh. 4,9. The rest of the codex is lost. At the top of each page, a later hand has added numbers.\(^{35}\)

Figure 1 reconstructs the basic layout, thereby illustrating a structural format that occurs in many of the manuscripts of this type.\(^{36}\)

Manuscript 2. Brice Jones recently found and published New Haven, Yale University, Beinecke Library, P.CtYBR 4641 [Sa 972], a Coptic fragment of the fifth–seventh centuries.\(^{37}\) Originally part of a codex, it is now a single leaf, with Ioh. 3,17–18 on one side and 3,19–20 on the other (now 14.6 cm high \(\times\) 9.1 cm wide).\(^{38}\) The text is entirely

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\(^{35}\) The numbers do not appear to correspond closely to those in other witnesses with numbers. For example, the hermeneia on Ioh. 3,14–15 has the number \(\text{𝔓\(\text{ΙΒ}\)}\), i.e. 112, yet the matching Syriac sors in London, Bl., Add. 17119 at Ioh. 3,15 is numbered \(\text{𝔓\(\text{ΘΩΝ}\)}\) and the Latin in Par. lat. 11553 after 3,11 is numbered \(\text{𝔓\(\text{ΧΣΘΥ}\)}\). However, closer investigation may reveal more about connections between the numbers.

\(^{36}\) The illustrative figures are the creations of the author, yet the image shapes and proportions are based on the remains of the actual ancient manuscripts (as known from catalogues, photographs, and digital imaging), as is the amount and positioning of text. Gray silhouettes approximate the manuscript leaves in their present state, with bold outlines indicating the likely or at least possible original outline of the pages. The fragmentary nature of most of the manuscripts necessitates a certain amount of speculation in reproducing the layouts; furthermore, each image depicts only a representative sampling of the layout of each manuscript.


\(^{38}\) Jones 2014, 206 suggests it was originally somewhere between Turner’s 9–11, i.e. between 10–15 cm square or rectangle.
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on the page, especially on the recto. The term ἐρμηνεία is plainly evident under the gospel text, followed by fragmentary statements centered at the bottom of the page, and the staurographic sign Ⱍ (see Figure 2). The fragment preserves no numbers. On the recto, the gospel text ends higher on the page and is lost, and only a small, indecipherable amount of the sors remains, along with the sign Ⱍ. The remnant suggests a folio of about 20 × 18 cm (and taller than wide).

Manuscript 3. The sixth-century papyrus fragment Montserrat, Abadia Roca, 83 [GA Ψ80; P.Monts. Roca 4.51] contains the Greek text of Ioh. 3,34 on one side, with very little surviving on the other. Once belonging to a codex, the editor believes it was part of a complete book of John.39 Once again, surprising amounts of blank space are evident

Manuscript 4. The sixth-century papyrus fragment Wien, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, G. 36102 [GA Ψ76] has the text of Ioh. 4,9 on one side and 4,11–12 on the other.40 The overall page layout (now 14 × 11 cm) is similar to that of the aforementioned examples. The Greek gospel text


Figure 2: Montserrat, Abadia Roca, 83 (= P. Monts. Roca 4.51) (left) and Paris, BnF, Copt. 156 (right)
has space beneath it, followed on both sides by the term ἐρμηνεία, centered, under which follow fragmentary statements.


The manuscript included the Greek text of Ioh. 6, along with Greek hermeneiai centered at the bottom of the page, under the centered and rubricated term ἐρμηνεία (Figure 10). The hermeneia with Ioh. 6,26 matches the Syriac sors numbered 83 at Ioh. 6,27, the Latin number 78 at Ioh. 6,25, and the Armenian palimpsest text occurring in the 89th position, at Ioh. 6,26–27.

The manuscript included illegible numerals at the top, contained within rectangles, perhaps similar to those in P.Berol. 11914, above. Von Soden was astonished at the "great waste of space" evident in the book’s construction; his description of the fragment allows us to postulate a familiar, albeit size) had varying amounts of text on them, with generous margins and spaces at the bottom (Figure 3). On several leaves, the term ἐρμηνεία is visible at the bottom, followed by sortes in Greek. As in the previous manuscripts, the segmentation of the text appears to be determined by the occurrence of hermeneiai. After Ioh. 11,49–52, the hermeneia reads ὁμοιότητα καὶ αὐτή (iv.d), which matches the Syriac sors numbered 177 at Ioh. 11,46, "a good salvation" (ܪܐܙܐ ܗܢܐ, which matches the Syriac sors numbered 305 at Ioh. 21,17 in the Syriac: "keep this mystery," which matches the occurrence of hermeneiai. After Ioh. 11,49–52, the hermeneia reads ὁμοιότητα καὶ αὐτή (iv.d), which matches the Syriac sors numbered 177 at Ioh. 11,46, "a good salvation” (ܡܪܝܐ ܒܝܬܐ ܡܪܝܐ, London, BL, Add. 17119, f. 47v), and the Latin form of the same, numbered 173 in the margin and located at Ioh. 11,10: salus bona (Paris, BnF, lat. 11553, f. 130r).

Manuscript 9. The seventh-century parchment fragment Berlin, Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung, P.Berol. 3607 + P.Berol. 3623 [GA 0210] has portions of the Greek text of Ioh. 5, 6 and 7 on its two remaining leaves of what had originally been a codex. Connections with the material in the Syriac, the Latin, and Codex Bezae are evident. For instance, a sors numbered 76 in this manuscript matches Syriac sors number 74 in London, BL, Add. 17119 (f. 19v), and the Latin number 70 in Par. lat. 11553 (f. 127r), all in the same basic context of Ioh. 5. The fragments now measure about 5 × 6 cm and 7.2 × 6 cm. The structure of the page is the same as occurs repeatedly in these manuscripts.

Manuscript 10. In 1903, von Soden described a fragment discovered in the Kubbet el Chazne in Damascus, now lost, von Soden 1902: XI [GA 0145]. The seventh-century parchment had the Greek text of Ioh. 6, along with Greek hermeneiai centered at the bottom of the page, under the centered and rubricated term ἐρμηνεία (Figure 10). The hermeneia with Ioh. 6,26 matches the Syriac sors numbered 83 at Ioh. 6,27, the Latin number 78 at Ioh. 6,25, and the Armenian palimpsest text occurring in the 89th position, at Ioh. 6,26–27. The manuscript included illegible numerals at the top, contained within rectangles, perhaps similar to those in P.Berol. 11914, above. Von Soden was astonished at the “great waste of space” evident in the book’s construction; his description of the fragment allows us to postulate a familiar, albeit
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Figure 3: New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, H. Dunscombe Colt Collection, P.Colt 3

hypothetical, original page structure (24.5 × 19 cm) similar to the other manuscripts in this category.

Manuscript 11. The eighth-century Armenian palimpsest Graz, Universitätbibliothek, 2058/2 follows the same basic format as we have seen. The upper text is that of a tenth-century Georgian liturgical Psalter from Sinai, but the lower writing is an eighth-century Armenian text of the Gospel of John (Figure 4). As we have already seen and I have shown in greater detail elsewhere, it includes many sortes matching those found in other witnesses (originally 318 sortes). The Armenian evidence of this manuscript is incomplete and often illegible, but it is possible to perceive aspects of the original format. Numbers occur at the top of the page. Beneath a portion of biblical text, the hermeneiai are regularly set off by blank spaces and centered. The term hermeneia does not regularly occur, though the Armenian equivalent (թարգման[...]) prefaces its first oracle at Joh. 1,1 (f. 66v). The reconstructed layout in Figure 4 presents a familiar appearance (original page 13.7/8 × 21.5 cm).

Manuscript 12. The eleventh-century Armenian manuscript Yerevan, Mesrop Mashtots Institute of Ancient Manuscripts (Matenadaran), 9650 has the complete Gospel of John, with hermeneiai. As Bernard Outtier has shown, its sortes match some of those in Codex Bezae and Par. lat. 11553; it is now apparent that correspondences also occur with the Syriac London, BL, Add. 17119. Like the other

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49 I am indebted to Erich Renhart at the University Library in Graz, who kindly shared with me his research prior to publication.
50 Childers 2017, 256–58.
51 See Outtier 1996, 76; Outtier 1993, 182.
52 Renhart 2009, 223.
53 Outtier 1996, 76.
witnesses with a segregated layout, it locates its sortes at the bottom of each page, connecting them with specific portions of John’s text, as Figure 5 illustrates.

Two manuscripts do not formally belong to this category due to the absence of definite sortes and the term hermeneia. However, certain features of these fragments have aroused suspicions that they derive from hermeneia manuscripts. The seventh- or eighth-century papyrus manuscript, New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, H. Dunscombe Colt Collection, P.Colt 4 (GA 𝔓60, van Haelst 460; TM 61677; LDAB 2828; P.Ness. 2, 4) consists of 20 fragmentary folios of the Greek text of Joh. 16–19. Since no hermeneia are visible, it may not belong in this set of witnesses. However, its characteristics bear a strong comparison with the other hermeneia manuscripts, especially P.Colt 3. As with the others in this category, a new sentence or thought begins at the top of each page. Each of the diminutive leaves, now about 9 × 8 cm, lacks the bottom portion—perhaps not surprising, since it emerged from the ground as a mud-caked mass. Only a few short lines of gospel text occur on each page, with occasional blank spaces beneath the text. If, as it appears, P.Colt 4 is a hermeneia manuscript that has lost the bottom portion and its oracular material, its original layout would have been similar to the others. The eighth-century parchment leaf Wien, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, P.Vindob. G 26084 (GA 0256; van

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54 Casson/Hettich 1950, 94–111.

55 Joseph van Haelst classified them together, saying about this manuscript that “les pages comportaient des oracles bibliques” (van Haelst 1976, 167).
Haelst 446; TM 61686; LDAB 2837) is also similar.\textsuperscript{56} It contains brief portions of Ioh. 6. Its layout and spacing have led to the conjecture that it may once have been part of a hermeneia codex (now 4 × 4 cm), though no hermeneia is visible.\textsuperscript{57}

The twelve manuscripts indisputably belonging to this category show that specialized codices with both the text of John and a complex system of oracular hermeneiai may not have been uncommon in times past. These divining gospels were of sufficient number and distribution to have left significant, albeit often fragmentary traces in different languages. They seem to have achieved a standard form no later than about the fifth century, presumably first in Greek, with earliest surviving attestation coming from Egypt. The codices were typically of John alone, without other gospels or books, and often had rather unusual page layouts. Given the amount of space that scribes appear to waste for the sake of segregating specific portions of the Gospel and their attached hermeneiai together, either the book’s meaning or its practical use must have dictated page layout, possibly both. As I have shown elsewhere,\textsuperscript{58} those who constructed these books grouped certain hermeneiai with particular portions of John’s Gospel text due to thematic or terminological resonances. However, it is likely that the practice of sortilege itself also helped determine the pattern that recurs throughout this body of witnesses, since this layout—including the assigned numbers, in some instances—would facilitate the selection of particular pages as part of the process of divination.

The Armenian witnesses echo the “standard” early form evident in the most ancient Greek and Greco-Coptic evidence.

\textsuperscript{57} van Haelst 1976, 163.
\textsuperscript{58} Childers 2017, 260–62; see also Wilkinson, forthcoming.
4.3 Manuscript with original hermeneiai and integrated layout

Manuscript 13. One extant witness is suggestive of a second major class of divining gospel, in which the sortes have been fully integrated into the Gospel text. This unique codex is in the process of being edited.59 The Syriac London, BL, Add. 17119 contains the gospel of John on 83 parchment leaves, in a regular estrangela hand of the sixth or seventh century.60 This compact volume (about 22 × 13 cm) has no Ammonian/Eusebian sections, no harmony at the bottom of the folios, and no šāḥē, the ancient chapter divisions commonly found in Syriac Gospel manuscripts.61 No liturgical notes appear. The absence of these typical features is striking, and it further differentiates the manuscript as unusual in its production. Most distinctive of all, the manuscript includes 308 numbered and rubricated hermeneiai,62 called puššāqē in Syriac (ܩܫܩܐ), as we have seen. But they are actually integrated into the main Gospel text, in the same hand and script, though in red ink (Figure 6). A number of examples have already been presented, showing that many of its sortes match those occurring throughout the tradition, in content, placement, order, and number. Apart from the fact that this codex contains the most complete, legible, and generally oldest set of hermeneiai discovered so far, one of its most striking features is its unique layout.

What would account for this integrated structure? In comparison with the other codices surveyed above, this editor has reduced blank space and minimized wasted leaves by consolidating the text. The result is a page with multiple hermeneiai, but one whose form also contributes to the sense that the hermeneiai and the biblical text are tightly connected, basically inseparable. In the previous examples, single bodies of text and hermeneiai are separated into distinct pages in ways that must have facilitated their divinatory use. Perhaps the practitioner of the Syriac book could rely on the numbering system alone when seeking sortes, without the need for the same segregation that we see in the examples above. Unfortunately, the mechanics of these books’ usage remain vague, so that we are left to speculate. But the result of the Syriac layout is that this book associates its oracular material even more intimately with the Gospel text. What may have started as a kind of annotation transforming the function of the Gospel quickly developed into a standard part of the structure of special books, as we saw in the previous category; and now, here, the material that was once external to the text and appended to the bottom of the page has actually been fused with the text.

4.4 Manuscripts with secondary hermeneia material

A final major category of divining gospel incorporates secondary divinatory material. Two surviving codices are known to fit this classification.

Manuscript 14. Par. lat. 11553 [Beuron 7; g1], also known as Sangermanensis 1, is a ninth-century Latin Bible (large, 40 × 32.5 cm) with 185 hermeneiai,63 though they are not called such in the manuscript. The statements are in the margins alongside the text of John (ff. 125r–134v) and keyed to sections of that gospel. Their hand is somewhat later than that of the main gospel text, and so it appears likely that the hermeneiai are secondary to the original production of the book. The other parts of the Bible in Par. lat. 11553 have no sortes. The many connections between this set of Latin hermeneiai and those in some of the witnesses described above show that it is reliant upon the same system. The arrangement of the sortes places them in the margins, normally numbered, with signs in the text to help delineate the sections (Figure 7). Not every numbered section in John in this manuscript has hermeneiai. In the middle of the book, prior to the manuscript’s presentation of the Eusebian Canons, a wheel occurs, divided into eight sections and filled with a broken series of numbers leading up to 316 (f. 89v). Although this would appear to be a device to help the diviner select the right response,64 the mechanism of its operation is obscure. Some of the numbers in the wheel do not correspond to sections in John with sortes, though most do. Figure 7 illustrates the layout.

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59 For further discussion of the manuscript see Childers, forthcoming.  
60 See Wright 1870, 71–72.  
61 The only other Syriac manuscript known to contain only the Gospel of John is Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Library, Syr. 176 (dated 1091/92, 1491/92, or 1591/92), a manuscript having the Harklean text of John and the Harklean Masora. See Goshen-Gottstein 1979, 110–11; Juckel 2006, 107–21. I am indebted to Andreas Juckel for unpublished information on Peshitta and Harklean manuscripts that have been collated for the Novum Testamentum Graecum Editio Critica Maior.  
62 The first six are actually missing due to a defect at the beginning of the manuscript.  
64 Sangermanensis does not use the hermeneia formula or headings, with perhaps one exception: the statement numbered 247 (f. 132v) reads, interpretati causa tibi immanet in which interpretati appears to correspond to ἐρωτευτα. Harris misunderstood the term interpretati and corrected it to insperata (Harris 1901, 68).  
65 See Harris 1888, 60–61.
Manuscript 15. One of the most intriguing witnesses is the famed Codex Bezae, Cambridge, University Library, Nn.241 [GA 05; Dd]. As we have already seen, it contains hermeneia whose contents and sequence relate closely to many of the others. This Greco-Latin bilingual manuscript of the Gospels and Acts (now 26 × 21.5 cm) was copied in the fifth century, though its set of strictly Greek hermeneia is later. The biblical text is arranged so that the Greek text is on the

For an early study of Bezae’s hermeneia, see Scrivener 1864, xxvii, 451–2, who did not understand their purpose; J. Rendel Harris studied the manuscript more closely (Harris 1901, 45–74; see also Stegmüller 1953, 13–22; Metzger 1988, 165–7; and Outtier 1996, 74–78).
left facing page of the codex and its parallel Latin text on the right. The hermeneiai occur on both Greek and Latin pages. Written in a rough hand in the bottom margins of the leaves, these statements have been dated to as early as 550–650 and as late as the ninth or tenth century. They include the prefatory expression ἐρωτικόν and various distinguishing marks, comprising the staurogram †. The Greek expressions of the sortes are notoriously corrupt and idiosyncratic. They are not numbered, though in sequence they often match other sets, especially in the Syriac and Latin manuscripts. Most unusual, the hermeneiai occur in the margins of the Gospel of Mark, not in John. However, Bezae’s “Western” order of the Gospels puts Mark in the fourth position. Furthermore, the layout is strikingly familiar to that of manuscripts with segregated hermeneiai. Like the hermeneiai in the Johannine papyri and parchment fragments, Bezae presents only one oracle per page, at the bottom of the page. Perhaps for the editor or copyist who transformed Bezae into a divinatory tool by incorporating these annotations, the important thing was to recreate the familiar layout, replicating a set of hermeneiai at the bottom of the pages of the fourth gospel—despite the fact that this happened to be the Gospel of Mark in this unusual manuscript. Yet considering their rough, unnumbered, and disconnected presentation, it is not unlikely that the hermeneiai migrated to the margins of Mark’s Gospel from the margins of a copy of John, or perhaps from a set of the hermeneiai circulating independently, albeit in a particular order. In any case, it appears certain that the editor or copyist responsible for adding hermeneia to Codex Bezae did so on the basis of a familiar structural model drawn from a more “conventional” divining gospel.

5 Summary of analysis

What impressions may we draw from this corpus of evidence? We know that sortilege involving the biblical text enjoys a long and ancient tradition. Yet these materials

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67 David C. Parker prefers the earlier date (Parker 1992, 43, 49), but Bruce C. Metzger dates it to the ninth or tenth century (Metzger 1988, 165–6).

68 Outtier 1993, 181.

show that highly specialized divinatory books connected to the Gospel of John seem to have become fairly common by the fifth century.\(^7^0\) This is evident by the broad dissemination of the witnesses discussed above, but also reinforced by the patristic warnings\(^7^1\) and repeated canonical proscriptions against the practice of sortition using the biblical text.\(^7^2\) For centuries, there must have been a sustained and lively fortune-telling industry using biblical texts in both the East and the West.\(^7^3\) Although Psalters were also popular for this purpose,\(^7^4\) codices of the Gospel of John were the vehicle of choice,\(^7^5\) and a particular set of *hermeneiai* or *sortes* developed that was adapted to and routinely circulated with the text of John in the form of divining gospels. As I have shown elsewhere, many of the *hermeneiai* resonate strongly with the gospel texts to which they are attached.

In view of this evidence, it would appear that by the fourth century an elaborate system of *sortes* had been devised, almost certainly based on existing pagan models, but deliberately adapted for use in connection with codices of John created specifically for this purpose, i.e. divining gospels. They were probably Greek at first, though popular interest in these tools led to the production of bilingual and vernacular translations. They may have existed as separate volumes before they were added to the pages of Gospel books in order to facilitate this arcane method of interpretation. The fourth- or fifth-century Firenze, Istituto Papirologico “G. Vitelli,” PSI XIII 1364 (van Haelst 1177; PSI inv. 2182; TM 64567; LDAB 5797) may support such a conclusion.\(^7^6\) One side of this single small (7.5 × 10 cm) parchment folio reads, ερμήνευα χαί παρακολουθήσας τὸν λόγον,\(^7^7\) a statement that resonates with the Syriac oracle number 17 at Ioh. 1,44, “Interpretation: it will not happen and you will not hear the word” ܟܠܝܡ ܟܠܝܡ ܐܢܬ ܠܐ ܬܚܛܐ (Cambridge, University Library, NN.241, f. 2894r). On the other side of the fragment we have ερμήνευα / ακολουθήση / σοι καὶ κα / χως οἱ γνῇ νεται, which is nearly the same as Codex Bezae’s next statement, ερμήνευαν + ακολουθήσαν καὶ καλὸν σὺ γινετέ (f. 294v), and oracle number 18 in the Syriac manuscript at Ioh. 1,46: “pursue [and] it will turn out well for you” ܟܠܝܡ ܟܠܝܡ ܐܢܬ ܠܐ ܬܚܛܐ ܠܟ. Furthermore, at Ioh. 1,42, oracle number 18 in the Latin codex Sangermanensis reads, et bene, a vestige of the same statement (Par. lat. 11553, f. 125v). The interrelationships are clear, since we encounter effectively the same oracles, in the same order, in the same position within the set in at least two or three other witnesses. PSI XIII 1364 (= PSI inv. 2182) is fairly intact. But whether it was originally part of a volume of independent oracles or was cut from a larger leaf—for example one that contained a portion of the text of John—we cannot be sure. Yet it is certainly related to the same system of sortilege as we see throughout the divining gospels.

Whether the system originally circulated independently or not, probably the earliest layout for the divining gospels as such had the requisite passage of John and its paired *hermeneia* segregated onto a single page, as in the first type of evidence discussed above (manuscripts 1–12). Presumably this facilitated the book’s use in sortilege. In time, however, some book producers chose to compress the material, as in the Syriac manuscript, presumably relying solely on a system of numbering in order to use the book, rather than segregation of the *sortes* and page spacing. But others preserved the original segregated layout, as we see in the later Armenian manuscripts. In the celebrated Codex Bezae, these notes have made their way around again to become secondary additions to the

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\(^7^0\) The practice and earliest tools may have originated in Egypt, as so many magical traditions did, from which the phenomenon became more widespread. The fact that the most ancient extant witnesses happen to come from Egypt does not mean the phenomenon itself originated there, however.

\(^7^1\) For example, see criticisms in Augustine and Chrysostom, helpfully discussed in Gamble 1997, 237–60; Sanzo 2014, 161–64.

\(^7^2\) See the Syriac *Admotions for Monks* attributed to Rabula of Edessa (411–35) and the rules attributed to Jacob of Edessa († 708), that explicitly prohibit using the Gospels, Psalms, and “the lots of the Apostles” in this way as well (texts in Vööbus 1960, 31, 95).

\(^7^3\) See Charlemagne’s 789 prohibition against divination and the use of the Gospels or Psalms for sortilege (Duplex Legationis Edictum 20, MGH, *Capit. 2*:164; the reference and helpful discussion are in Klingshirn 2002, 110).

\(^7^4\) On *hermeneia* in Armenian and Georgian Psalters, see Outtier 1993, 182.

\(^7^5\) The long association of the material with John’s Gospel is underscored by a unique occurrence in *Puššāq 62* at Ioh. 5,3, which quotes a portion of Ioh. 5,14 as the oracle: ܟܠܝܡ ܟܠܝܡ ܐܢܬ ܠܐ ܬܚܛܐ (”behold you are well, do not sin,” f. 15v). Sangermanensis 1 (f. 126v) and Codex Bezae (f. 318r) have nearly identical statements, albeit in Latin and Greek, respectively. See also Harris 1901, 64, n. 1.

\(^7^6\) See van Haelst 1976, 355, number 1177. Digital images at: http://www.psi-online.it/documents/psi;13;1364 (accessed 16 November 2017). Another possible witness is the lost Firenze, Istituto Papirologico “G. Vitelli,” PSI I, p. VI, a papyrus fragment from Oxyrhynchus of unspecified date, identified by Girolamo Vitelli (see van Haelst 1976, 354, number 1172) and apparently containing a single Greek oracle statement with no gospel text. It was not edited and is presumably lost.

\(^7^7\) Text as given by van Haelst 1976, 355.
margin of an entirely different text, attesting to the endurance of the primitive form.

Just as the aforementioned proscriptions against sortilege are aimed at clergy, it is likely that the users of the hermeneia manuscripts were clerical. Yet we do not know how the users of these tools would be approached by inquirers or how the diviner would correlate the inquirer’s concerns to particular responses. Clear instructions accompany the Sortes Astrampsychi and practitioners of the Sortes sanctorum used a prescribed system of die-casting or knucklebones. None of the surviving hermeneia witnesses include these sorts of instructions and the surviving evidence is rife with puzzling corruptions and inconsistencies. Yet the patterns of ordering and thematically distributing the sortes indicate a more elaborate system than that of simply turning to passages at random (for example, sortes biblicae), as do the sporadic systems of numbers. The occasional intrusions of topical headings into the sortes reinforce the theory that inquirers addressed their queries to specific topics, though topics of a more general sort than we see in Astrampsychi, the statements in which are more pointed. Whereas in the divining gospels the sortes former prefer to speak in terms of a “thing, matter, affair,” the sortes of Astrampsychi focus on particular situations. Specific questions were probably not a part of the divinatory apparatus from which the divining gospels drew; they may have been more like Sortes sanctorum, another ancient Christianized tool for sortition, whose statements are often longer and more florid, but also very general in focus. When consulting someone with a divining gospel, an inquirer’s questions may have been specific, but the sortilege apparatus welcomes a general approach to the process of divination. Still, we are at a loss to know for certain precisely how these tools were used. Indeed, we are only just beginning to study this material as a corpus. The process of preparing an edition of the material in the Syriac London, BL, Add. 17119 is underway, at which point more thorough comparative analyses will be possible.

6 Conclusion

Scripture has always enjoyed a central status and authority within the Christian tradition. However, the ecclesiably sanctioned literary and dramatic contexts of its use—for example commentaries, homilies, and liturgies—provide only a partial glimpse into the diverse function of Scripture within historic communities of textual practice. The analysis of ancient bibles as material objects inhabiting a living tradition supplies another and often overlooked perspective. From vestigial traces in several different languages and in monuments of diverse provenances, we see that the synthesis of gospel and hermeneia created distinctive artifacts. From a fairly early period, some communities produced and used divining gospels, i.e. copies of John’s Gospel that included explicit and sophisticated divinatory content. This material, by which the book’s user could gain guidance in response to their questions, draws much of its potency from its residence in the sacred material object. Furthermore, in these books, the gospel text and the specialized notes appended to it fused, facilitating a different sort of hermeneutic and synthesizing a somewhat subversive authority. Though unconventional by sanctioned ecclesial standards, the users of these divining gospels were “interpreters,” bringing Scripture to bear on the pressing questions and daily lives of common Christian folk, outside the official contexts of liturgical practice and theological deliberation.

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79 Topical headings are evident here and there in the hermeneia of the Syriac manuscript London, BL, Add. 17119, in Codex Bezae and in Sangermanensis 1. On the latter two, see Harris 1901, 70–71. None of these witnesses provides a full list of topics, but the apparently accidental intrusions of topical headings into the material show the close interrelationship of the material and its shared ancestry.
81 For further discussion on this point, see Childers, forthcoming.
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