The Sixth Sibylline Oracle as a Literary Hymn

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In 1856 C. Alexandre remarked that the twenty-eight-line poem that comprises Book 6 of the Oracula Sibyllina is “not so much a prophecy as a hymn, and, apart from the meter, nearly a lyric.” Subsequent commentators have used the term “hymn” to characterize Book 6, but no one has provided a formal literary analysis of the book as such, or tried to classify it within a larger hymnic tradition. The following study is offered toward that end.


2 Excursus 615: “non vaticino, non historiae sed potius hymno similis ... paene lyricus.”

3 Collins (406) does not address the poem’s hymnic or poetic qualities. Thierry but not Heitsch includes it in his collection. M. Lattke, Hymnus: Materialien zu einer Geschichte der antiken Hymnologie (Göttingen 1991) 25, has an up-to-date bibliography but no new contribution.
The poem is best described as an “oracular hymn” that celebrates, as a vaticinium ex eventu, the career and apotheosis of Jesus of Nazareth. An unusually large number of bucolic diaereses and a relatively high poetic quality set Book 6 apart, statistically and stylistically, from the rest of the Sibylline corpus. The poem’s chief importance, however, derives from its status as our first extant piece of Christian hexametrical poetry. Lactantius’ citation (Div. Inst. 14.15–22, published ca 311) provides the decisive terminus ante quem and makes Book 6 at least as early as P.Bodm. 29 (“The Vision of Dorotheus”), hailed by Kessels and van der Horst as “the earliest known specimen of Christian hexametric poetry.” Their dating of the Dorotheus poem to the late third century, however, is nearly a century too early and has been convincingly refuted by J. N. Bremmer. Book 6, then, written at least a generation before Lactantius and—as I shall argue—in Syria-Palestine by a Christian Middle Platonist during the Severan period (193–235), is the real beginning of Christian poetry.

Part I of this study presents a text, translation, and line-by-line commentary on the poem with a new interpretation of some troublesome lines and stylistic and semantic parallels from hymns, oracles, and other relevant literature. Part II addresses the problem of the poem’s mixed genre and its literary and historical contexts. This two-part format best facilitates discussion of this little known work within the larger context of Greek hymns. Impatient readers are invited to read the hymn and proceed directly to Part II.

A 71% incidence (20/28 lines) as compared with 44% for the Orac. Sib. as a whole. I base these numbers on the text I produce below. In his study of the Sibylline hexameter based on Geffcken’s edition, J.-M. Nieto Ibáñez, El Hexámetro de los Oráculos sibilinos (Amsterdam 1992) 156–60, reckons 64.2% for Book 6 (18/28), as compared with 60% for Theocritus, 58% for Nonnus, and 56% for Homer.

I

Book 6 owes its current place in printed editions of the *Oracula Sibyllina* to Alexandre, the first to separate it from Book 7. Most Mss. of the major Φ and Ψ families include Book 6 with the subscriptions λόγος ἐκτος, στίχου ἕκτη. In establishing a text, given the complicated textual history of the *Orac. Sib.*, I agree with Geffcken (and reproduce here with abbreviated apparatus) the *Mischtext* he concedes is inevitable. Where I have differed from him I have done so, following his own advice and precedent, using parallels drawn from hymns and related literature.

ἀθανάτου μέγαν ὑπὸν αὐίδιον ἐκ φρενὸς αὐδῶν, ὃς θρόνον ψυστός γενέτης παρέδωκε λαβέσθαι οὕτω γεννηθέντι. ἐπει κατὰ σάρκα τὸ διασώ ἡγέρθη, προχοαῖς ἀπολουσάμενος ποταμοῖο.

5 Ἰορδάνου, ὃς φέρεται γλαυκῷ ποδὶ κύματα σύρων. ἐκ τυρὸς ἐκφεύγας πρῶτος θεὸν ὤγεται ἥδι πνεῦμα ἐπεγινόμενον, λευκὰς πτερύγεις πελεῖς.

ἀνθήσει δ’ ἀνθὸς καθαρὸν, βρύσουσι δὲ πηγαί. δεῖξε δ’ ἀνθρώποισιν ὁδοὺς, δεῖξε δὲ κελεύθους.

10 οὐρανίας· πάντας δὲ σοφοὺς μῦθοι διδάξει. άξεί δ’ ἐς τε δίκην καὶ πείσει λαὸν ἀπειθή

αἰνετὸν αὐχέςας πατρὸς γένος οὐρανίδαο· κύματα πεζεύσει, νόσον ἀνθρώπους ἀπολούσει,

15 ἐκ δὲ μής πῆς ἄρτον κόρος ἐσσέται ἄνδρῶν,

3 τὸ διασών φ Ψ / δοθέειν Ω 6–7 ἐκ Ψ Φ / ὡς Ω θεόν ὤγεται ἥδι πνεῦμα ἐπεγινόμενον Fabricius / θεὸν ὤγεται ἥδιν πνεύματι γεννηθέντα Ω / θεόν ὡς τε καὶ ἥδιν πνεύματι γεννηθέντα Φ / θεόν ὡς τε ἥδιν πνεύματι γεννηθέντα Ψ 12 βρύσουσι codd. aut βρύσουσι βρύσουσι Lact.4.13 (Migne) 11 άξεί Φ Ψ / άξεί Ω ἀπειθή Alexandre / ἀπειθή codd. 13–15 secundum Lact. 4.15, 25 15 pῆς cf. Lact. 4.15 16 / σπείρης Ω / ἰκες Φ Ψ

6 Unobserved by Parke, *SibProph* 168, 171 n.5, who believed that “Book 6, the most explicitly Christian of the *Oracula Sibyllina* ... as transmitted ... is very short and probably defective.”

7 OS xxvi: “Es bleibt aber immerhin von Wert, einmal einen Blick auf die Parallelliteratur zu werfen.” A full discussion and complete apparatus at OS ix–lī, 130ff.
A great son, the subject of song, I sing from the heart immortal,
To whom a begetter most high gave a throne to possess
Before he was born. After he, in the flesh, has been a second time
Raised, having bathed in the streams of the river
And having fled fire, he shall be the first to see God,
A sweet spirit, alighting on the white wings of a dove.
And a pure flower will blossom, and springs will surge.
He will show people the ways and the paths,
Heavenly ones, and will teach all with words of wisdom;
And to justice will bring, and persuade, unpersuadable folk,
Boasting praiseworthy descent from his father, son of Ouranos.
He shall tread the waves, and cure human disease;
He shall raise those who have died and banish much grief.
And from one purse shall be surfeit of bread for mankind,
When David’s house shoots forth a sprout. In his hand
the whole world rests, earth and heaven and sea.
He will hurl lightning to earth—just as once at his first
manifestation
They saw him, those two born from each other’s sides.
20 There will be a time when the earth shall rejoice in the hope
of a child.
For you alone, land of Sodom, is destined calamity.
For you were malicious, and did not recognize your own
God
When he was here playing with mortal perceptions. With
acanthus
You crowned him, and terrible gall you mixed
25 Into his food and his drink. That will cause you calamity.
O wood, happy wood, upon which God was
stretched,
Earth shall not hold you, but you shall see a home in
heaven
When your fiery eye, O God, flashes forth like lightning.

Commentary

1. ἀθανάτου ... ἐκ φρενὸς: ἀθανάτος is possibly an adjective used
absolutely as a noun (sc. θεοῦ) as Collins and Kurfess translate, but
this leaves an awkward repetition of Jesus’ father in the genitive then
in the nominative (γενετής). It is better taken as an adjective with
φρενὸς. Medea prophesies from an ἀθανάτου στόματος at Pind. Pyth.
4.11 and in a Hellenistic epigram Apollo, the Sibyl’s patron deity,
agelessness (cf. Ov. Met. 14.130), she was imagined as a perennially
aged woman if not, with the conflation of yet another myth, a shriv-
elled-up cicada wishing very much to die (Hellenicus, FGrHist 4F140;
Petron. Sat. 15.48; SibProph 57f), a motif first attested in the

ἐκ φρενὸς: The phrase amplifies the emotion with which the hym-
nist sings, i.e., “from the heart” as at Aesch. Cho. 107, Sept. 919; cf. Il.
9.343, ἐκ θυμοῦ φίλεον. For the resultant hyperbaton with ἀθανάτου
cf. [Longinus] who says that this figure is “the truest mark of
strenuous emotion” (Subl. 22.3f). Here the emotional intensity
inherent in the idiom ἐκ φρενὸς is heightened by the hyperbaton.
Note also the prophetic CPPlvt, which “sees something more than is
apparent” that Prometheus offers as proof for the veracity of his
prophecies to Io: σημεῖα σοι τᾶς ἐστὶ τῆς ἐμῆς φρενὸς ὡς δέρκεται
πλέον τι τοῦ πεφασμένον (PV 842f; for this usage cf. Nonnus Par. Jo.
The Sibyl is, in these opening lines, laboring under the weight of time and inspiration.

ἀοίδιμον: “a subject of song.” This, the only epithet of the anonymous son in this hymn, occurs only twice in the Orac. Sib., here and at 14.310 (a late 7th c. Jewish oracle) of an unnamed diabolical prince. Other than at Hymn. Orph. 72.5, where Tyche is hailed as ἀοίδιμος, I find no example of it predicated of a Greek divinity. In Greek literature this somewhat rare word is variously used to describe prophets, poets, heroes, emperors, and villains. Predicated of Helen and Hector in Homer (Il. 6.358), it means “notorious,” a passage imitated/parodied by Callimachus (Ap. 121), who uses the word of the μάντις Teiresias. Homer’s ἀοίδιμος in bucolic diaeresis was the model for its use in later prosody, though it has a more positive meaning at Hymn. Hom. Ap. 299, where it refers to the god’s oracular sanctuary (νῦν; cf. Pind. Pyth. 8.59).

With the meaning “famous for song” Pindar refers to himself as an ἀοίδιμον in Paeon 6.1–6, as does the Christian Dorotheus (VisDor 272). We also find the adjective in a Delphic oracle (ca 3rd c. B.C.) predicated of the poet Archilochus (see further W. Peek, “Neues von Archilochus,” Philologus 99 [1955] 4–50):

ἀδανατός σοι παίς καὶ ἀοίδιμος ὁ Τελεσίκλεις.

ἔσται ἐν ἀνθρώποισιν, ὦς ἄμπρωτος σε προσείκει
νησί άποθροίσκοντα φιλήν εἰς πατρίδα γαίαν.

Note the syntactical parallels here with the hymn: ἀδανατός and ἀοίδιμος occupy the same position in the line; both texts use the future tense and preserve the anonymity of the son in question. The occurrence of this Archilochus oracle at Anth. Pal. 14.113.1 suggests that it once circulated in a florilegium. The author probably modeled his first line on oracles available to him via such a source—perhaps this one. Eusebius (Praep. Evang. 5.32–33.1) quotes these lines (as far as ἀνθρώποισιν) and knows that the unnamed παίς of the oracle is Archilochus. From this he concludes that Apollo is a false prophet because the god sanctions so shameful a poet, the likes of which “even the noble Plato banished from his Republic.” This vehement disavowal suggests that someone (Christians?) used the oracle, divorced from its original context, as a prophetic proof-text.

Herodotus’ use of the adjective (2.79) to describe the mytho-historical figure Linus is also apt: “called by various names,” this Linus was ἀοίδιμος throughout the Near East, the only-begotten son (παῖς μονογενεύς) of Egypt’s first king, who died young and is since honored by laments. This same “Linus,” the legendary tutor of Orpheus (Diod. 3.67; D.L. proem. 3), later becomes a pseudonymous authority for Greek hexameters composed by Jews and remained current in Christian circles as well (Aristobulus apud Eus. Praep. Evang. 13.12.13, 13.34; see further H. Attridge in Charlesworth 823f).
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IV Maccabees, a Hellenistic Jewish encomium, speaks of a martyr's life (10.15) and death (10.1) as ὀιόδιμος and is largely responsible for the meaning "of famous memory" or "renowned" in Christian hagiographies and sermons, where the martyr is ἐ.g. εὐδοκίμος μὲν παρὰ θεῷ, ὀιόδιμος δὲ παρὰ ἀνθρώποις (Basil Caes. PG XXXII 1272). Eulogy and encomium combine in two epigrams from the Anth. Pal: in a sepulchral epitaph the poem itself is a μνήμα ... ὀιόδιμον (669.1); in another, "Lord Christ gives the nod of assent" (ἔνευσεν ... ἀναξ Χριστός) to a Nicomedes who has entered into a βίον ... ὀιόδιμον (8.141.1). In both poems ὀιόδιμον is in the first line and in the same sedes as our hymn. From these uses of ὀιόδιμος it is clear that Jesus is being analogized to a Greek hero, martyred in his prime.

αὔδω: This denominative verb from the substantive αὐδή (which can mean "song" or "ode," ἐ.g. Pind. Nem. 9.10f) is related to ἀείδω, "to sing," the verb par excellence for hymnic preludes (Janko 9f; Race 5ff) and is used in this way by ἐ.g. Pindar (Ol. 1.7). In the hymnic prologue to the Orphic Hymns αὔδω at line-end is the single verb used to invoke a pantheon of twenty-five deities and daimones (line 39). In oracles Apollo uses it, also at line-end (τίς σοφία πρῶτος πάντων, τούτῳ τρίκοδ' αὔδῳ, Diod. 9.3.2=L. Andersen, Studies in Oracular Verses: Concordance to Delphic Responses in Hexameter [=Historisk-filosfiske Meddelelser 53 (Copenhagen 1987)] no. 72). αὔδω sets this first line, indeed the whole poem, squarely in both the hymnic and oracular traditions.

2. ὁ: The relative pronoun (or adverb) whose antecedent is the god in the accusative case is a well-known hymnic feature (Janko 9f); ὁ. Hymn. Hom. Cer. 1.1f, Merc. 1ff, Bacch. 7.1f.

θρόνον: Cf. Orac. Sib. 7.32: τῷ γὰρ τ' αὐτὸς ἔδωκε θεὸς θρόνον.... The throne or "seat" occupied by a divinity is a topos in Greek literature: generally, cf. Ἰλ. 5.360; specifically, θρόνος is used of Apollo's oracular seat at Delphi (Eur. ΤΤ 1254, 1282). Theocritus' encomium to Ptolemy uses language similar to that here: τὴνον καὶ μακάρεσσαι πατήρ ὑμήτων ἐθέκεν ἀθανάτοις, καὶ οἱ χρύσεος θρόνος ἐν Δίδ οἶκος δέδημται (Id. 17.16f). The NT concern with Jesus' accession to the royal "Throne of David" (Lk 1:32, Heb 12:2, etc.), however, is paramount. In Peter's speech at Pentecost (Acts 2:30f) the possession of Christ's θρόνος is said to have been "foreseen" (προειδοῦν) by King David, a prophetic singer of αἴσθασι, viz. Pss 132:11, 89:4, 16:10), and his foresight is interpreted as referring to the resurrection (ἀνα­στάσις; cf. ἡγέρθη below) of Christ. Here the Sibyl foresees Christ's kingship from the pagan quarter—test David cum Sibylla, as it were.

ὄψιστος γενέτης: The word ὄψιστος, theological Gemeingut in the Greco-Roman world, is very common in the Orac. Sib. In VisDo the favorite appellation for God (lines 100, 134, 231). In the "Magnificat" the Holy Spirit is the δύναμις ὄψιστου descending upon Mary.
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(a NT prose hymn at Lk 1:35); in the “Benedictus” John the Baptist is lauded as the προφήτης ὑψίστου (Lk 1:76; cf. Pind. Nem. 1.90–93 of Teiresias; also Nem. 11.2; Aesch. Eum. 28). In Aristonous, Apollo, the son of Zeus, is praised as σέμνων ἄγαλμα ... ὑψίστου (Kappel 385 no. 42 line 7). The noun γενέτης (“father”) is largely post-classical and relatively rare: only here and at Orac. Sib. fr. 5.3. Nonnus (Dion. 7.80) uses γενέτης to express the father-son relationship between Zeus and Dionysus (7.80) in an oracle about his son, not yet born, that Zeus utters in/to primordial time (Aion), wherein he prophesies Dionysus’ future exploits, beginning at his nativity. Zeus’ promise to his son—Ζηνὶ συναστράπτοντα δεδέξεται αὐτόλος αἰθήρ (99)—recalls the closing scene of our hymn (see ad line 28).

3. οὕτω γεννηθέντι: A fine paradox/oxymoron with γενέτης probably referring to the pre-existence of Christ, a theology best known from the prologue to the Gospel of John. Nonnus’ paraphrase of John’s first verse is a poetic elaboration that also picks up the pre-existence, sonship, and enthronement of Christ in one stroke: the Logos is γενετήρος ὁμήλικος ὕως ἀμήτωρ and ἀτέρμονι σύνθρονος ἐδριη.

ἐπεὶ κατὰ σῶρκα ... κτλ.: Beginning with ἐπεὶ and continuing to line 7 these lines describing the baptism of Jesus (Mk 1:9–11 pars.) present problems of interpretation on a number of levels. The language shows considerable (perhaps considered) ambiguity, and the text may be corrupt. An “embodiment” of Christ’s pre-existent spirit at baptism seems to be envisioned. ἀπολουσμένος and ἐκφεύξας continue the temporal clause introduced by ἐπεὶ, which answers to ὠθετάι in line 6. The aorist after ἐπεὶ, however, is unusual with a main clause in the future. Ἰορδάνου in line 5 may have been originally a marginal gloss on ποταμοῖο later filled out into a hexameter line (without caesura), and the ἐκ of Mss. Ψ and Φ corrupted to Ω’s ὦς to accommodate it. For a similar explanatory interpolation involving a river note Il. 21.157ff: ἔξ Ἀξιοῦ εὐρὺ ἱέρων· Ἀξιοῦ, ὦς κάλλιστον ὑπὸ τοῦ γαίαν ἱέραν. ἐγέρον (in the passive) is the preferred NT verb for Christ’s resurrection (e.g. Mt 28:6; Mk 16:6; 1 Cor. 15:12f), but is not used of his birth as it seems to be used here. κατὰ σῶρκα is a NT idiom used by Paul (in a neutral sense) for Christ’s human lineage (e.g. Rom. 1:3; 4:1; 9:3, 5). The first begetting that this second one (τὸ διοσσῶν) presupposes must be the heavenly, non-corporeal one implied at lines 2f.

4–5. προχοσίς ... σώρων: The personification of the Jordan River, in fact the hyperbole of the whole description, is strangely but pleasantly pastoral. The reading γλαυκόπιδι κύματι of Ω is possibly correct (cf. Hes. Th. 587). γλαυκῶν ποδί is a bold metaphor making the Jordan a divinity (cf. pede, Verg. Aen. 9.125, of the Tiber). Although (as the text now stands) the first reference in this relative clause is to the river Jordan, the context and vocabulary here suggest that the foot in question may also be Christ’s. A god’s gait is especially
important in epiphanies. At the epiphany of Apollo in Callimachus the god "raps upon the doors with beautiful foot": τὰ θύρετρα καλῷ ποδὶ ... ἀράσσει (Ap. 3), καλῷ ποδὶ occupying the same sedes as γλαυκῷ ποδὶ in bucolic diaeresis. Plutarch preserves an anapestic hymn to Dionysus in which the god is invoked to come βοήρῳ ποδὶ (see W. R. Halliday, The Greek Questions of Plutarch [Oxford 1928] 128). Nonnus (Dion. 1.104f) also puts ποδὶ in the same sedes but as here with the aquatic metaphor: the goddess Demeter θυρόπορῷ δὲ γλαυκά διασχίζει βοήρῳ ποδὶ νώτα θαλάσσης. Note Nonnus' conflation of two images in our hymn: the personified water, here with "sea-green back" (cf. the Homeric εὐφεξά νώτα θαλάσσης), and a divinity (Demeter) "who parts the waves with cow foot leaving a watery trail." With reference to Jesus καλῷ ποδὶ is brilliant hypallage for the color of the water and a superb word play on γλαυκός, which can also mean "bright" or "gleaming" (for the ordinary meaning of "sea-green" cf. Nonnus Dion. 20.353; 2.14). For σφραγελ used personally cf. Limenius' Paean to Apollo, where it describes that god's "tracing" or "spreading" the foundations of his oracular shrine "with immortal hand" (ἀπ[λέτους θεμελίως τ'] ἀμβρότα χείρι σφραγελ, Köppel 390 no. 46 line 24). Note also a hymn from Epidaurus in which the Mother of the Gods moves σφραγελα ῥυτα[v] κόμαν (M. L. West, "The Epidaurian Hymn to the Mother of the Gods," CQ N.S. 20 [1970] 21f).

If, in similar fashion, σφραγελ describes the motion (or its effect) of Jesus stepping into or out of the river, it may be meant to suggest his walking on water (Mk 6:45-52 pars.)—an intimation at baptism of that mark of his divine character described in line 13.

6-7. ἐκ πυρὸς ἐκφεύξας ... πελείης. Note the similarities in Orac. Sib. 7.66f: οὐκ ἐγνως τῶν σὸν θεόν, ὅν ποτ' ἠλουσέν' ίορθόνος ἐν προγονησι καὶ ἐπτατο πνεῦμα πελείη (see further Part II infra). ἡδῷ is printed by Kurffess and Alexandre, but it should be noted that this line has many variants in the MSS., most of them attempts to make the ἡδῷ masculine or put the Spirit in the dative. If ἡδῷ is correct, then it modifies πνεῦμα; the phrase πνεῦμα ... ἐπιγνώμενον is in apposition to θεόν: thus "God, a sweet spirit alighting," etc.

λευκαῖς πτερόγεσσι πελείης. The color of the baptismal dove is not specified in the Gospels. It is probable that Lactantius (Div. Inst. 4.15) gets the color white from Orac. Sib. 6.7, for three other quotations of Book 6 (not this verse) occur in his same chapter.

πελείη: At Orac. Sib. 1.247 πέλεια is used of Noah's dove, but otherwise only here and at 7.67. The NT uses περιστερά at the baptism, the same for Noah's dove in the LXX (Gen. 8:8). πελείη may be simply metri gratia, for περιστερά is not well suited to the hexameter (though metrical correction is frequent in this poem). Πέλειαι at Paus. 7.21.2, 10.12.10 are the doves or dove-priestesses of the oracular shrine of Zeus at Dodona. Pausanias' excursus on Sibylline prophecy highlights these Peleiai (also "Peleiades") who
“though not called Sibyls by men give prophecies from God.” To them, Pausanias reports, is ascribed the venerable oracle Zd)~ ~v. Z£u~ EO'tlV, Z£u~ Eoo£'tav C1 ~qaA£ Z£u-a theology consonant with Christian beliefs about deity (cf. Rev. 1:4, 8: 0 Kat 0 EpXO~£VO~). The appearance of an oracular bird adds a nice touch to the poem.

8. ἄνθησε δ' ἄνθος καθαρόν, βρύσουσι δὲ πηγαί: Cf. line 20: γαία χαρῆσται ἑλπίδι παιδός and also 8.475 (of Christ’s nativity). Such sympathy of nature with the events recounted in the narrative, what Keyssner calls “the hyperbolic style,” abounds in Greek hymns, and often accompanies the epiphany of the god (Keyssner 30–34), as at Apollo’s nativity in the Hymn. Hom. Ap.—μείδησε δὲ γαῖ’ υπε- νερθέν (116f; cf. also 135, 139)—or Limenius’ paean (Kăppel 390 no. 46 lines 7–10), where at the same event Πᾶς[ς δὲ γ]έναθε πόλος οὐράνιος. For the collocation οὐρανός-γαῖα-θάλασσα cf. Hom. Hymn. Cer. 13f. βρύω, “a word belonging to the language of poetry and religion ... [for] ritual cries or the natural expression of religious exaltation” (Dodds ad Eur. Bacch. 107), occurs frequently in compound epithets in the Hymn. Orph. As an expression of hope and happiness, or of a return of a Golden Age—primal restoration is hinted at in lines 18f (Adam and Eve’s glimpse of Christ in the Garden of Paradise)—the sentiment is not unlike the cosmic sympathy attending the birth of the child in Vergil’s fourth Eclogue, (esp. lines 19f, 23; cf. E. Norden, Die Geburt des Kindes [Leipzig 1924] 46–50, 58).

ἄνθος: Cf. φοῦτον below (16). In the Hymn. Hom. Merc. Apollo is described as having ἄνθος ... φιλοκυδός ἠβης and in paeans Apollo is often an ἔρνος (e.g. Macedonius [Kăppel 383 no. 41 line 4). In Hymn. Orph. 50.6 to Lysios/Lenaeus (=Dionysus) the god is praised as ἤρων ἄνθον (i.e., wine). For Lactantius the floral imagery of the hymn stemmed from Isaiah 11:1, which he quotes in Latin: Exiet virga de radice Jesse et flos de radice ascendit (where flos=LXX ἄνθος). Lactantius explains that Jesse autem fuit pater David ex cuius radice accensusum esse florem praelocutus est, and quotes line 8 of Book 6 as Sibylline support for his interpretation (Div. Inst. 4.13= Migne, PL XXXVII 485f, with the variant βριθώσει δὲ πάντα unreported by Geffcken and Thierry. For βριθὼ in an epiphanic context cf. Hom. Hymn. Cer. 473). Isaiah was probably foremost in the hymnist’s mind as well.

9–14. δεξεὶ δ' ἄνθρόποισιν οὸδοὺς ... ἄλγεα πολλά: These lines are the hymnist’s efficient epitome of Jesus’ ministry. The whole section is akin to an aretalogy, and the healing mentioned at 13f is the stuff for a paean to Asclepius—like Isyllus’ where the god is τὸν νόσον παύστορα, δωτήρα ύγείας (Kăppel 382 no. 40E lines 56f). In the same author’s hexametrical aretalogy the Spartans αὐδήσο- αντος ἄκουσαν, σώτειραν φήμαν, Ἀσκλαπίε, καὶ σφε σάωσας

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(Käppel 383 no. 40f lines 79f; for αὐδῆσαντος cf. line 1 above). Lactantius cites lines 13ff as caelestis indicia virtutis. Interestingly L. buttresses his argument with an oracle from "Milesian Apollo," which Parke regarded "as an authentic attempt of the prophets of Apollo to define their position with regard to the claims of Christianity" (OracAp 104). Apollo too acknowledges Jesus' miracles and crucifixion, going so far as to use the Christian phrase κατὰ σάρκα (see line 3) in his exposition (PL XXXVII 484):

θνητός ἐν κατὰ σάρκα, σοφὸς, τερατόδεσιν ἔργων ἀλλʼ ὑπό χαλδαίων κριτῶν δόλων συναλωθεὶς
gόμοιος καὶ σκολόπεσι πικρὴν ἀνέτλησε τελευτήν.

10. δείξει ... σοφανίας: Note the anaphoric repetition of δείξει and the assonance σοφανίας here in enjambement emphasizes the quality of Christ's teaching. For "heavenly paths" cf. Clement's Paedagogus hymn: ἔξων Χριστοῦ/ὁδὸς σοφανίας [sc. ἐστίν] (Thierry 10 no. 7.34f). Cf. also Christ's words in the Gnostic (anapestic) "Psalm of the Naasenes": μορφὰς δὲ θεὸν ἐπιδείξιον τὰ κεκρυμμένα τῆς ἀγίας ὀδὸς (Thierry 13 no.8.21f).

11. πείσει λαὸν ἀπειθῆ ... κτλ.: Presumably the Jews are the "unpersuadable" or "disobedient people" (same collocation, same sedes at Orac. Sib. 1.204, 3.668; cf. Is. 30:9). λαός is the usual, positive term for "Israelites" in LXX as opposed to ἔθνῳ who are "Gentiles."

12. αἰετὸν ... σοφανίδαο: Christ here boasts of his "praiseworthy descent from his father, son of Ouranos." The rare patronymic σοφανίδαο is very peculiar. It occurs only here in Orac. Sib. and in Greek epic only once in the singular in Hesiod (never in Homer or Nonnus) of Cronos (Th. 486; imitated by Oppian, Cyneg. 3.12). The word belongs to the language of theogonic myth—an idea very popular in the Orac. Sib. (Collins 334; Kurfess, "Homer and Hesiod in 1. Buch der Oracula Sibyllina," Philologus 100 [1956] 147-53). In a related passage, Orac. Sib. 7.69ff (see Part II infra), "Ouranos has built three towers" for Christ who, as Logos, "dorned flesh and swiftly flew to his father's home" (σάρκα τε δυσόμενος ταχὺς ὑπέπεσε πατρὸς ἐς οὐκος τρεῖς δ' αὐτῷ πόργος μέγας οὐρανός ἀποκρήτετον). Ouranos-Hyperion is a mythological figure known from the Gnosticism of Valentinus whom Epiphanius accuses of plagiarizing the theogonies of Hesiod and Stesichorus, "changing only the names" in his elaborate system of thirty aeons and spiritual pleroma (Adv. Haer. 31.2.4, 3.2). Thus, perhaps, σοφανίδαο=Helios, the son of Hyperion (Th. 374, 1011; Hom. Hymn. 31.4f)=Yahweh. This would explain the sun imagery at lines 26ff (q.v.). Though the language of Hesiod is

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evident, identifying a Gnostic source for οὐρανιόθης is impossible. Unfortunately nothing in the only Valentinian hymn extant (Heitsch 155 no. 43) helps here.

Alternatively γένος may=Christians, a “praised race [belonging to] the father, son of Ουρανός” of whom, out of the larger stock of λαός ἀπειθεῖς who reject him, Christ has “boasted.” This use of γένος originates in 1 Peter 2:9, where the author accommodates the phrase γένος ἐλεκτὸν from 1s 43:20 (of Israel). Thus, in apologetic literature Christians call themselves a τρίτον γένος, a third people alongside both Jews and pagans (Keryg. Petr. 2) or elsewhere a κατὸν ... γένος (Ep. Diog. 1).

15. ἢκ δὲ μητῆς πῆρης ... κτλ.: This must be an allusion to the feeding miracles of Jesus (e.g. Mk 6:35-44 pars.), for which Lactantius reports “the disciples said they had five loaves and two fishes in pera” (Div. Inst. 4.15.16). The πῆρα was a characteristic feature of Cynic costume (D.L. 6.22, 33). Thus the “one wallet” from which will come “surfeit of bread for men” (cf. Orac. Sib. 1.357) also evokes the disciples’ vagabond lifestyle during Jesus’ three-year ministry, for which period they are said to have shared a common purse (Jo.12:6, 13:29; cf. also Acts 4:34f).

17. κόσμος ὀλος ... κτλ.: A characteristic example of the hyperbolic style (see above line 8). For the sentiment cf. Hymn. Orph. 34.14-17 to Apollo.

18f. ᾠστράπτει.... “He will hurl lightning to earth.” For the image note esp. Lk 17:24: ὡσπερ γὰρ ἡ ᾠστραπὴ ᾠστράπτουσα ἐκ τῆς ὑπὸ τὸν οὐρανὸν εἰς τὴν ὑπ’ οὐρανὸν λάμπει, οὕτως ἔσται ὁ υἱὸς ἀνθρώπου ἐν τῇ ἡμέρᾳ αὐτοῦ. In this hymn the verb is used absolutely and personally. I find no OT or NT precedent for such vividness. Even Satan gets a smile when he “falls like lightning from the sky” (Lk 10:18). The lightning image is often associated with Yahweh, e.g. the theophany at Sinai (Ex 19:16), in a military prayer (Ps 143:6 LXX), an apocalyptic vision (Ezk 1:13; cf. Ap 4:5) and, of course, with Zeus, too: Orph. Hymn. 20, a hymn specifically to Astrapios Zeus. Lightning is associated with Dionysus in P. Ross. Georg. 16ff (Sutton), a hymn about king Lycurgus’ reluctant recognition of that god and his subsequent punishment. Thunder and lightning are signs attending him, given by his father Zeus because Zeus “honors him greatly”: 

εὖγος ἱδὼν [sc. Lycurgus] ἐλθόντα μετ’ ἀστεροπαίδις Διόνυσον αἱ τυχαὶ σελαγίζουν ὑπὸ β[ροντήσι θαμείας 

υἱὸς ἔργ’ ἀἰδήλια Δίῳς μέγα κυδαίνοντος.

So too with Jesus’ lightning (see line 28 below). Nonnus uses ἀστράπτω in his paraphrase of that definitive NT indictment of disbelief, Jo. 3:19 (=par. Jo. 3:97-103). “The judgment upon an irreligious world is this: From heaven came the light (φέγγος) to earth,
but the race of unstable men, though the light it up the sky (φέγγεος ᾧστράπτωντος), loved more gloom.

οἶον ποτε πρῶτα φανέντα ... ἀπ᾽ ἀλλήλων πλευρῶν δύο 

gεννηθέντες: “The two born from each other’s sides” is an unparal-

leled circumlocution for Adam and Eve, who, the text implies, saw 

Christ in the Garden of Eden. The Christian apologist Justin Martyr 

explains the anthropomorphism of the Jewish God in the OT, in-

cluding the one in Eden (Dial. 131), as Christophanies, i.e., appear-

ances of a philosophic Logos personified. Though not called “Logos” 

in this poem, we find that term predicated of him in the related 

passage in at 7.83 (Part II, infra). In powerful hexameters Gregory 

Nazianzus hymns “the celebrated spark and aerial torch of the Logos 

(σπίνθηρ δὲ Λόγου καὶ πυρὸς ἄερβεις ... ὀὐίδιμος [cf. line 1 above]), 

which pervaded the whole world” at Adam’s fall from paradise (PG 

XXXVII 1231). The words ἐμπυρον and ὀπαστράτω juxtaposed have 

an astrological significance in a fantastic passage from Orac. Chald. (fr. 

146.7 Des Places).

21. σοι δὲ μόνη, Σοδομίτες γαϊή ... κτλ.: A city may be 

“spiritually” (πνευματικῶς) stylized a “Sodom” (Rev 11:8). The 

reference here as in Rev 11:8 is Judaea or Jerusalem. The Hebrew 

prophets speak of Judah in its worst days as Sodom (e.g. Is 1:9f; cf. 

Ezk 16:46, 55). For πήματα κεῖται cf. an oracle from Hdt. 1.67: πήμ’ 

eπὶ πήματι κεῖται (same sedes).

22. δύσφρον ... τὸν σῶν θεῶν σῶκ ἐνόησας: A heavily spondaic 

line for emphasis. Recognition of Christ is also important in the 

hymn-like piece to the Daughter of Sion (Orac. Sib. 8.335), recog-

nition that the song fosters. At 7.53 the inhabitants of Ilias θεῶν σῶκ 

ἐνόησαν (same sedes, as also at VisDor 74).

23. παίζοντα ὑπητοίσι νοήμασιν: This is the oldest reading ap. 

Lactantius, probably followed by Augustine. Of all editors only 

Thierry prints it. Geffcken rejected the reading on no certain grounds 

(OS xxviii n.1), though he accepted Lactantius’ πῆρης in line 15 over 

σπείρης in Ω and ρίζης in Φ and Ψ (OS xxix). The vividness of the 

image is the stuff we have come to expect of this poet. Thierry 
adroitly compares Ps. 2:4: ὁ κατοικών ἐν οὐρανοῖς ἐκκελάστεται 

αὐτοῦ καὶ ὁ κύριος ἐκμυκτηρεῖ αὐτοῦ—that in response to the 

previous verse where “kings and rulers have allied themselves against 

the Lord and His Anointed (χριστότος).” Christ’s “playing with 

mortal perceptions” is also much in the Dionysiac tradition, e.g., the 

hallucinations of Pentheus and Agave in Eur. Bacch. At P. Ross. 

Georg. (lines 296) the god “pours an illusion” (ίνδαμον ἐχεν) over 

Lycurgus such that he, mistaking his children’s consoling arms for 


7.14f, where bonds fall miraculously from Dionysus’ hands and the 

god “smiles” (μειδώο). There, unlike here, a lone helmsman “recog-
nized" or "understood" (νοησος, 15) Dionysus’ godhead. At Bacch. 497–518 Dionysus faces danger with sweet abandon. Christ displays the same attitude in the Acts of John 94ff, where, before going off to die, he sings a lengthy hymn and dances with his disciples. A Dionysiac recognition motif is crucial for the Acts of John hymn: cf. esp. 67–70: ο χορευων νοει ο πρασσω, οτι σον έστιν το το ανθρωπου παθος ο μελεω πασχειν (Thierry 36).

23ff. ἀπ’ ἀκάνθης ... στεφάνῳ ... χολήν ... κτλ.: A drastic change of mood from “playing” to the vile elements and mockery of the Passion. Is it in the vein of mock-pastoral that we are to read the odd use of the singular ἀκάνθη (Vergil’s acantho? Ecl. 4.20)? The NT and early Christian fathers use the plural for the crown of thorns. The detail of the poison/gall, found also at Orac. Sib. 8.303, 1.367; Mk 15:18, 23 (pars.), is ultimately dependent on LXX Ps. 69:21 (as in Kurfess’ emendation βρόσιν for ὑβρίν): ἔδωκαν εἰς τὸ βρῶμα μου χολήν καὶ εἰς τὴν δίψαν μου ἐπότισάν με δέος. For the Synoptic writers the sop given Jesus on the Cross was the fulfillment of prophecy; here it is that, but it also fills out the pathos of the scene. For Lactantius, line 24 (which he cites) brought Jer. 11:19 to mind, where that prophet describes himself as “slaughtered like a lamb without blemish” whose enemies propose to put “wood in his bread” (lignum [=ξύλον LXX] in panem [=ἄρτον LXX] eius) and “eradicate” him from the earth. Lactantius’ allegorization of the Jeremiah passage is indicative of the metaphorical potential of bread (15) and Cross (26) in our hymn: Lignum autem crucem significa, et panis corpus eius [sc. Jesus], quia ipse est cibus, et vita omnium qui credunt in carnem quam portavit, et in crucem qua pependit (Div. Inst. 4.18.28).

26. ὁ ξύλον, ὁ μακαριστὸν ... κτλ.: The word ξύλον ("Cross") is a favorite in kerygmatic passages in Acts (5:30, 10:39, 13:29). According to the apostle Paul (Gal. 3:13, quoting LXX Dt. 21:33) Christ’s “hanging on the Cross” made him a “curse,” but a beneficial one, for the Cross was believed to release Gentiles and Jews from the commands of Mosaic law, making them fellow sons of God, and “setting them free” to “serve each other in love.” Some such paradoxical view of the Crucifixion informs our author’s qualification μακαριστὸν of what otherwise was an instrument of torture and not an object of Christian veneration until the early Byzantine period (G. Snyder, Ante Pacem: Archaeological Evidence of Church Life before Constantine [Macon (Ga.) 1985] 27). The ξύλον is apostrophized here metonymically for Christ. Most commentators have taken the hymnist to mean that the Cross literally will ascend to heaven. This literalist reading is based largely on a later vague tradition to this effect: examples in A. Rzach, “Sibyllinische Orakel,” RE 2A.2 (1923) 2141. The legend, however, does not seem to antedate our hymn and was demonstrably influenced by it. Sozomen certainly was (HE 1.1.6, 2.1.10). We do best not to foist their literalism upon the hymnist.
ξύλον is perfectly understandable by metonymy as Christ—a view supported by the vast majority of Mss., in which at 8.31 τὸ ξύλον as Christ in the famous Sibylline acrostic takes a masculine participle (φωτίζων). In the Wisdom of Solomon 14.7 ξύλον rounds off a brilliant literary conceit in a sententia where, initially used for a pagan’s “crooked” idol (ξύλον σκολιόν, 13.13), it becomes, by catachresis, metonymy, and synecdoche, the saving agent of Noah’s ark: εὐλόγηται γὰρ ξύλον δι’ ѵ’ γίνεται δικαιοσύνη. Similarly, an interpolation at Orac. Sib. 5.261 plays on ξύλον used in a periphasis for Jesus’ profession as a carpenter, but certainly also used ironically for crucifixion (see line 26 below; cf. also Orac. Sib. 1.291, 7.49). The hymnist, under the spell of theological paradox and poetic conceit, has abruptly reversed the lurid details of the Passion with this unexpected benediction to the device of death.

28. ἀπαστράψει ... ἐμπυρον δόμα: ἀπαστράπτω = “flash like lightning forth” (cf. line 18). Although at Rev. 1:14 the heavenly Christ has fiery eyes (cf. 19:12) and could be represented as a Helios figure with horse and chariot, as he was in a mausoleum under St Peter’s (Snyder 62 pl. 31), “God the Father” seems to be the recipient of this second apostrophe. Cf. Synes. Hymn. 1.368: σὸν δ’ ὄμω, πάτερ. θεός here is nominative for vocative as often. The indefinite temporal clause states when the action of the main verb (ἐσοφεῖ) will be fulfilled: Jesus (=ξύλον) will see his “home in heaven” (objective or appositive genitive; Smyth §1322, 1332–33) when God, as it were, gives the signal. For lightning as a divine sign cf. Il. 9.237f: Zeus ... ὑματία φαίον ἀπαστράπτει. Cf. the prophecy in Nonnus Dion. 7.99 (cited ad line 2), where father Zeus and son Dionysus are to be reunited in heaven amidst flashes of lightning. At par. Jo. 3:69f the Son of Man inhabits a “starry home (ἐστερέοντι μελαύρῳ) in the ethereal land of his Father (πάτρων ὀὐδας ... αἰθέρας). Justin Martyr describes Christ’s relation to the Father as that of light emanating from the sun (Dial. 128), a metaphor that finds its muse in Synesius (Hymn 5; Thierry 23 no. 13): αὐτός φῶς εἰ παγαίον συλλάμψας ἀκτίς πατρί.

As for δόμα, Helios is πομφως αἰθέρος δόμα in an Orphic-style hymn embedded at Nonnus Dion. 40.379 (see F. Braun, Hymnen bei Nonnus von Panopolis [Konigsberg 1915] 8f). In hymns from the Magical Papyri, Helios is in fact identified with “Iao” (i.e., Yahweh; Heitsch 183 no. 5=PGM III 198–228 line 14). The Orphic Hymns laud the δόμα Δίκης (62.1, 69.15; cf. Procl. Hymn 1.38) and the Δίος δόμα τέλειον (59.13). An oracle at Macrobr. Sat. 1.20.13 calls Serapis δόα τεπτλαυγες λαμπρὸν φῶς ἥλιοιο, and Apollo Didymus extols his “swift eye” (OracAp 78). Gregory Nazianzus, in hymning Christ’s cosmic rule, describes the sun as the κύκλον ... ἐμπυρον and the moon as the δόμα τὸ νυκτὸς. Perhaps due to the solar religion of the Severans and, later, the emperor Julian, δόμα was a popular word.
in late antique oracles. The Christian editor of the *Tübingen Theosophy* shows a special interest in oracles mentioning the ὄμων of Zeus, notably Ζηνὸς πανθερκός ἀφθατον ὄμων (Wolff no. 7 239; see also *Oraç.Ap* 207). These astrological, apocalyptic, and majestic connotations of the author's choice of words in this last verse create a grand pyrotechnic finale.

II

The hymnic structure of Book 6 may be outlined as follows:8

I. Invocation in the er-Stil (1)

II. Pars Epica/Narrative and argument (2–20)

A. Heavenly preparations for Christ's birth and kingship (2–3a)

B. Epiphany at baptism (3b–7)

C. Career of Jesus (8–17)

D. Christophany in Eden and Christ's advent compared (18ff)

III. Apostrophe I: Rejection/failed recognition of Christ by mortals (21–25)

IV. Apostrophe II: Makarismos on the Cross and Ascension (26ff)

As outlined, this formal structure, unique among pre-Constantinian Christian hymns, doxologies, and prayers,9 resembles the shorter Homeric *Hymns*. Some peculiar features, however, notably the double apostrophe—one of admonition (21–25), one of blessing (26ff)—bring the hymn to a close. A similar juxtapositioning of admonition and blessing (in that order) occurs at *Hom. Hymn. Cer.* 480ff, referring to initiation into the mysteries at Eleusis. The first apostrophe of our hymn entails the condemnation of a city. Although this is not characteristic of the hymn, the condemnation of cities is very Sibylline and gives the hymn its distinctively oracular quality. The second apostrophe, the macarism of lines 26ff, is a common feature, usually


9 The most comprehensive collection of early Christian material is still W. Christ and M. Paranikas, edd., *Anthologia Graeca Carminum Christianorum* (Leipzig 1871); note also C. Del Grande, *Liturgiae preces hymni Christianorum e papyris collecti* (=Biblioteca Filologica Loffredo 3 [Naples 1934]).
found near the end of the Greek hymn. "O happy the race of those mortals ... which builds a temple to lord Apollo" sings Philodamus, for example, in his Paean to Dionysus. The final element in a hymn, however, is most often a request or some expression of χάρις, addressed to the god directly in the imperative or optative mood. The request is based on an argument consisting in the accumulation of divine attributes and epithets (e.g. in the Orphic Hymns) or, as in this hymn, implied in the pars epica (a narrative of the past glories of the deity). In our hymn the fictive futurity of the events described and the oracular persona assumed by the hymnist render the argument a priori: Christ merits praise because the Sibyl has prophetically intuited his divine paternity, career, death, and ascension. Accordingly, the notion of χάρις, in addition to coming earlier than usual in our hymn (before both apostrophes in line 20), is presented as a fact, not couched as a request. Thus, though clearly working within the traditions of classical and Hellenistic hymnody, the author seems to have adapted the genre.

The Hymn as an Oracle—The Sibyl as a Hymnist. Lactantius cites this poem four times, each as if it were a Sibylline prophecy. Why was this hymn read in antiquity as a Sibylline oracle? The intrusion of prayers and hymns into other collections of ‘popular’ religious literature such as the Greek Magical Papyri and the Corpus Hermeticum is well known. Thus the early identification of the poem as a Sibylline prophecy and its inclusion in the collection are most easily explained as accidents of manuscript transmission or the caprice of ancient editors. As I have tried to show in the commentary, however, the oracular quality of Book 6 is also a literary affectation of its author. We

12 For the papyri see E. Heitsch, “Zu den Zauberhymnen,” Philologus 103 (1959) 216–20, 223f; for the Hermetic corpus see G. Fowden, The Egyptian Hermes (Princeton 1993) 84ff. In the Sibylline corpus the didactic poetry of [Phocylides] is inserted between 2.55 and 149 (Mss. ψ only). See further P. W. van der Horst, The Sentences of Pseudo-Phocylides (= Studia in Veteris Testamenti Pseudepigrapha [Leiden 1978]). The longer narrative poems about Christ at Orac Sib. 1.323–86, 8.251–336, which may also be intrusions, are closer generically to paraphrases of biblical passages, on which see in general M. Roberts, Biblical Epic and Rhetorical Paraphrase in Late Antiquity (Liverpool 1985).
find precisely this type of affect at Vit. Plot. 128, where Porphyry (or his source) passes off a hymn in praise of Plotinus as an oracle of Apollo. He likens the hymn to the Delphic oracle about the wisdom of Socrates. As Harder notes, "es ist hier auf sehr besondere Weise platonischen Philosophie in den Formen einer zeitgenössischen Kunstepik oder besser Kunsthymnik (und nicht im üblichen Orakelstil) ausgesprochen." Porphyry’s ‘oracle’ begins, in true hymnic fashion, with an invocation of the Muses and ends with the apotheosis of Plotinus. Our author has done much the same for Jesus with the Sibyl as his authority.

The Sibyl did in fact have a reputation for hymnody in antiquity. Plutarch for example can, without special emphasis, use the verb ὑμνεῖν to cite the Sibyl (Mor. 388F). Pausanius, who prided himself on a firsthand acquaintance with oracular literature (10.12.11), believed her to be an authoress of hymns as well (10.12.2; cf. SibProph 40; 49 n.31). Pausanias reports that the Delians in his time claimed that a hymn to Apollo used at Delos was written by a Sibyl named Herophile, whom he places in the Troad and the local historian Apollodorus of Erythrae identifies as Erythraean. That Herophile’s alleged hymn is none other than the famous “Hymn to Delian Apollo (SibProph 44) can be seen from what is agreed to be a genuine fragment of this Erythraean Sibyl, in which she ‘predicts’ the literary career of Homer, alluding to his blindness and calling him the Chian (Orac. Sib. 3.419–22; cf. Thuc. 3.104) —details of Homer’s identity that stem ultimately, perhaps exclusively, from the Hymn to Delian Apollo (172). The Ery-

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14 FGrHist 422; cf. Paus. 10.12.7. Parke, I think confusedly, says Pausanias co-identifies Herophile of Erythrae with a Delphic Sibyl (SibProph 38). But Pausanias speaks (10.12.5) only of her occasional ὑμνεῖν δὲ ἀφικόντο presence at Delphi in order to chant her oracles from a rock. She is nowhere said to be resident at Delphi and was apparently itinerant, having spent time in Samos, Claros, and Delos as well as the Troad (viz. Marpessus) where, as a temple attendant (νεωκρός) to Apollo Smintheus, she died.
15 Collins 359, following Geffcken, TU 13; also Parke, SibProph 44. The correspondence of the subject matter in Orac. Sib. 3.401–88, corroborated by a report from Apollodorus of Erythrae in Varro (ap. Lact. Div. Inst. 1.6= FGrHist 422), is the basis for identifying this section as ultimately Erythraean.
16 Semonides of Amorgos (fr. 29 Diehl) places him in Chios without mentioning his blindness.
thraean Sibyl’s implicit indictment of Homer for plagiarism is very telling if she is in fact Pausanias’ Herophile, reputed composer of the Homeric Hymn, which that blind man from Chios in the poem itself claims as his own. It is less pertinent here whether an historical Sibyl named Herophile actually composed the *Hymn to Delian Apollo*, nor even if she ever was in fact Erythraean. Rather, the allusion of *Orac. Sib.* 3 to the Delian hymn she is thought to have composed shows that readers in Pausanias’ time did not distinguish sharply between authors of oracles and authors of hymns. After all, ‘Orpheus’ bridged the two genres. Of course the hexameter and epic diction used in both oracles and hymns encouraged intertextuality, even verbatim borrowing.

**Date and Provenance.** The date and provenance of this hymn depend upon the relationship of Book 6 to Book 7. The close connection of fire, water, and the dove at Christ’s baptism (*Orac. Sib.* 6.3–7) has a puzzling parallel in the ritual prescription at *Orac. Sib.* 7.76–86, where a fire is sprinkled with water and a white dove (πελείη) is released to heaven. The rite, apparently Christian, seems to involve the commemoration of the participant’s baptism, a re-enactment of Jesus’ own, and is accompanied by a ritual cry (βοήσας):

ός σε λόγον γέννησε πατήρ, ἀτάρ δρόμιν ἄνεθα
dείξην ἀπαγγελτὴρ λόγον λόγον, ὕδασιν ἄγνοις ἡμῖν σών βάπτισμα, δι’ οὗ πορὸς εξεφανίσθης.

It is clear from 7.76–86 that “the begetting of Christ is closely associated, if not identified, with his baptism” but to interpret it

17 *Orac. Sib.* 3.423ff: ἐπέσων γὰρ ἐμὸν μέτρων κρατήσει. πρῶτος γὰρ κεραυνίων ἐμὸς βιβλίος ἀναπλώσει.

18 As Alexandre (Excursus 12) notes, however, the charge of plagiarism against Homer was common: cf. Diod. 4.66.

19 E.g. the famous Homeric line (from the description of Achilles’ shield) on the “tireless sun and the moon waxing into her fullness” (ἡλιον τάκαμών τα ελλήνης τε πλήθουσαν, II. 18.484), which turns up once at *Orac. Sib.* 3.21 and in the entirely unrelated *Hymn to all the Gods* from Epidaurus (line 9).

20 Geffcken emended 7.79 to ἀπόλταν rather questionable grounds: “die wilde Taube fliegt schneller davon, in alle Welt, man kann sie nicht verfolgen, gerade so wie der Λόγος sich zum Himmel aufschwingt” (TU 34 n.4). Wilamowitz’s ἀργύττα (“white”) dove is better and reflects the connection of this passage with Bk 6.

21 “Just as the Father begat the Logos, I have released a bird, the Logos, a swift messenger of words, sprinkling your baptism with holy waters, through which you appeared from fire.”
as a "theophany by fire," as do Collins and Geffcken, is, strictly speaking, inaccurate. The participant in this ritual is said to have "emerged" from fire much as Christ "escaped" in Book 6. I suggest rather that Christ's "flight from fire" in Book 6 is best understood as his descent from the empyrean realm of the γενέτης ζωιστός at line 2 to become "embodied" at baptism in accordance with the cosmology of Middle and Neoplatonism, a cosmology promulgated in the (hexametrical) Chaldaean Oracles, through which (we might imagine) these ideas reached our author. In the Neoplatonic universe fire was the dwelling place of the supreme, transcendent 'father'—an empyrean region created by a second god, the father's "intellectual power" who was identified as his son. This cosmology permeated popular culture. It underlies a theological oracle of Clarian Apollo (3rd c.) in Lact. Div. Inst. 1.71.1, 8 and is found in hymns from the Magical Papyri.

Proponents of Middle and Neoplatonism, the more prominent of whom hailed from Syria-Palestine, made much of the "rational man passing through the ... sublunary universe (γένετις) and returning to his celestial home." In particular, Nu-

22 Collins 409. Geffcken overemphasized the epiphanic nature of the fire at baptism in Book 6 because he saw in it an echo of the (non-extant) Gospel of the Ebionites, which supposedly began with the baptism and included a Feuererscheinung: εὕθες περιέλαμψε τὸν τόπον φως μέγα (ap. Epiph. Haer. 30.13.7). J. G. Gager, "Some Attempts to Label the Oracula Sibyllina, Book 7," HTR 65 (1972) 94, however, has rightly pointed out that light, not fire, is mentioned and the description in Bk 6 is actually closer to Justin Martyr's report of the event: πῦρ ἀνήρθη ἐν τῷ ἱορδάνῳ (Dial. 88.3).


24 Fr. 5.36: νῦν γὰρ νόσος ἐστίν ὁ κόσμῳ τεχνίτης τυρίον (Des Places 124).

25 A.-J. Festugière, La révélation d'Hermes Trismégiste (Paris 1949-54) III 54 n.2.

26 G. Wolff, Porphyrii de philosophia ex oraculis haurienda librorum reliquiae (Berlin 1856) 234 no. 2; ἐνθ' ὑπὲρ οὐρανοῦ πυρὸς ἀνθρώπων αἰθημένη φλόγα; a shorter version in the Tübingen Theosophy (Wolff no. 1 line 15) speaks of God ἐν περὶ ναών. A. S. Hall, ZPE 32 (1978) 263, cited in Parke, OracAp 66, has shown that yet another version of the Clarian oracle, found inscribed in the city wall of Oenoanda and datable to the late third century, actually formed part of a shrine to the "Most High God" ("γενέτης θεός").

27 One of four versions of a hymn to the sun from PGM reads: "Ἡλι ... δίσπον ὁμοιότατον πῦρ (Heitsch 181 no. 4 line 2).

28 R. LAMBERTON, Homer the Theologian (Berkeley 1986: hereafter 'Lamberton') 53.
menius of Apamea developed his allegorization of the Odyssean Cave of the Nymphs along these lines, in which reference to water and wave in Homer and Plato’s myths were interpreted as symbols for the world of γένεσις (cf. Lamberton 71). Numenius loosely cites “the prophet” of Gen. 1:2 (“the Spirit of God hovered over the waters”) as additional ancient support that “souls settle upon God-inspired water.” The resonances with our hymn are striking: a pre-existent Christ (as the πνεῦμα ... ἐπτυγνόμενον in line 7) descends from the empyrean world of the Most High God (1-4), is materialized upon the water (5-8) as the human Jesus, and returns to his fiery home (οἶκον ... ἐμπύρον ὃμμα, lines 27f). It is worth noting that when the author of Orac. Sib. 7 speaks of a “baptism through which you appeared from fire,” he uses the verb ἐξεφώνηθης at line end, the same metrical position as at Od. 12.441—the book of sea adventures culminating in that ‘rational man’s’ escape from Charybdis (i.e., the world of γένεσις). Numenius may well have been familiar with the life of Jesus. Origen reports that he “published a story about Jesus, not mentioning his name, which he allegorized” (Fr. 10a Des Places=Orig. c. Cel. 4.51). Numenius, if not our anonymous hymnist, is thus the model from which to sketch a profile: a Syrian religious philosopher conversant in pagan, Jewish, and Christian literatures. Celsus, a perceptive critic of early Christianity, actually mentions a Christian group called the Sibyllistae. But who these Sibyllistae were, whence they came, and whether Sibyllistae was their own label or Celsus’ is unclear.

The relationship of the ritual passage in Book 7 to Book 6 is closer than Geffcken and Collins have allowed. Alexandre and Kurfess rightly insist that much else in Book 7 stems from Book 6, especially lines 64-95, which are introduced by a woe pronounced upon Coele-Syria for “not recognizing your God when the Jordan washed him in its streams and the Spirit soared in (the form of) a dove” (Οὐκ ἡγνοὶ τὸν σὸν θεόν, ὃν ποτ’ ἠλούσεν Ἰώρδανος προχόρησε καὶ ἔπτατο πνεῦμα πελείη). Book 6 and 7.64-95 also show especially strong (non-formulaic)

20 Od. 13.110ff; Numenius frs. 30f, 33 Des Places.
21 Same position at Il. 4.468, 13.278; Sutton line 4.
verbal affinities.\textsuperscript{32} To the arguments of Kurfess and Alexandre in favor of the relationship between the two books, I would add two further observations: (1) the \textit{Orac. Sib.}'s only two references to the Jordan River by name occur in Books 6 and 7, and (2) the mythological figure Οὐρανός at 7.71 parallels the odd use of the rare patronymic οὐρανίδας at 6.12. In both passages Ουράνος is linked contextually to each book's description of the baptism of Jesus, which involves the unusual (non-NT) manifestation of fire. Furthermore, in the Ω Mss. Books 6 and 7 often form one continuous book; this suggests that ancient editors, among whose ranks may well be our hymnist, felt the similarities. Alexandre thought that the same author did in fact have a hand in both books;\textsuperscript{33} if so, the verses against Tyre, Coele-Syria, and Berytus (7.64ff), coupled with warnings of the time "when another warlike tribe of Persians will come to rule" (7.40ff), referring to the establishment of the Sassanid dynasty in 224, point to a Syro-Palestinian provenance\textsuperscript{34} and a date roughly in the Severan period.\textsuperscript{35} Alexandre's suggestion (Excursus 384ff) of 233–235, compensating for the \textit{ex eventu} nature of Sibylline prophecy, is eminently sound.

In further support of a Syro-Palestinian provenance I offer the case of the Christian apologist Justin Martyr, a Greek from Samaria and one of only two other authors to refer to fire at

\textsuperscript{32} Alexandre persuasively demonstrated this point but subsequent commentators have neglected his discussion: \textit{Excursus} 382f; cf. esp. \textit{Orac. Sib.} 6.11 with 7.24ff, 6.16 with 7.31.


\textsuperscript{34} Geffcken (\textit{TU} 31, following Mendelsohn) speculated a Syrian provenance, seeing an Ebionite influence in the conjunction of fire and baptism. Collins and Kurfess (\textit{SW} 313) rightly object that nothing in Bk 6 necessarily indicates a sectarian much less Ebionite origin. Collins (406), however, who like Geffcken minimizes the relationship of Books 6 and 7, dismisses the hypothesis of a Syrian locale.

\textsuperscript{35} In 194 Septimius Severus divided Roman Syria into two provinces, "Syria Coele" stretching north and east of Mount Lebanon, and "Syria Phœnice" to the south, including Palestine. But, as F. Millar notes (\textit{The Roman Near East: 31 BC–AD 337} [Cambridge (Mass.) 1993] 21, 423f), Septimius' designation of the northern reaches as "Syria Coele" was "against all previous usage," for epigraphic and numismatic evidence shows that Greek cities of the Decapolis (trans-Jordan) described themselves as belonging to Coele Syria decades before and after Septimius officially divided the province.
Jesus' baptism (Dial. Tryph. 88.3)—a detail for which he is probably dependent upon local Levantine traditions. The details of the hymnic argument too are remarkably close to Justin's, who in a compressed passage (Apol. 1.30) cites Christ's fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy and his miracles as evidence for his divinity and the truth of Christian teaching—a teaching that he believed was also adumbrated by Greek philosophers and poets including the Sibyl. With Justin our author shares an interest in pre-existence, miracles, and Christophany (see ad 1ff, 13ff, 18f). With a deft touch, an apologist's criteria have been carefully interwoven to form the fabric of our hymn. Justin also anticipates our author's developed symbolic, metaphorical interest in the Cross (lines 26ff), seeing visual reminders of it in the shape of the human body, a ship's mast, even the standards of the Roman army (Apol. 1.55).37

Two Parallels. Finally and briefly, the relation of this poem to other ancient literature. We have seen how in Book 6 the author's use of prosopopoeia evokes the authenticating power of the Sibyl for early Christian apologetic: the hymnist sings as a Sibyl and by so doing wields the great authority of pagan antiquity. This prophetic impersonation has an intriguing prototype in Lycophron's Alexandra, which Parke aptly called "a Sibyline oracle transmuted into high literature." The first-person persona and the predominant use of the future tense for narrative action in Lycophron's iambic poem certainly anticipate the technique employed in our hymn, also characterized by the future tense, which in the pars epica is a feature virtually unknown in other hymns.

It will be more readily observed that Book 6 shares many stylistic and thematic features with Verg. Ecl. 4. Kurfess has discussed the possible influence of Sibylline oracles on Ecl. 4 and (more persuasively) the influence of Ecl. 4 on the Orac. Sib. (notably at 7.146–49), though he does not mention Book 6 in

36 Apol. 1.30, alluding to Orac. Sib. 3.42f. The Sibyl is proffered as pagan testimony to a final eschatological conflagration for which Justin also cites the Stoic doctrine of ekpyrosis.


either study. Nonetheless, Vergil's Sibylline posture,39 his use of
the future tense to describe narrative action,40 the nativity/
epiphany of an ominous child,41 his cosmic destiny42—all of it
clothed in natural imagery, rooted in agricultural metaphors—is
present in our hymn as well.43 It is unlikely that our author read
Lycophron. As for influence from Vergil, as Norden says of in-
fluence in the opposite direction, this is "schwer zu antwor-
ten."44 Greek translations of Vergil did exist in the second and
third centuries,45 and a Greek translation of virtually the entire
Ecl. 4 is cited by the Emperor Constantine in his speech Ad
sanctorum coetum (delivered at Antioch in 325), where he
offers the earliest surviving Messianic interpretation of the
poem and cites the Sibyl to support it.46 I leave open whether or
not we have in Book 6 a rare case of Greek dependence on
Latin poetry. If nothing else, clearly the Ecl. 4 illustrates how
hymnic (or encomiastic) and Sibylline elements may co-exist in
the same poem.

Whatever its classical and Hellenistic prototypes, Book 6 is
surely a welcome exception to Norden's claim that "Die
Sibyllistik war künstlerisch so wertlos, dass sie kaum Poesie
heissen darf." This oracular hymn, probably written by a
Christian Middle Platonist in Syria-Palestine in the Severan
period, is also without question the first bloom of a poetic
tradition of late antiquity that will reach full flower in an author
like Nonnus of Panopolis, whose hexameter paraphrase of
John's Gospel is a bold attempt to lift the Gospel story to the
level of epic drama. In Nonnus, Jesus virtually carries the

39 Cumaei ... carminis (4); non me carminibus vincet nec Thracius Orpheus
(55).
40 solvent (14), accipiet ... videbit (15), videbitur (16), reget (17), fundet (20),
etc.
41 nova progenies caelo demittitur alto (7); cara deum suboles, magnum Iovis
incrementum (49).
42 pacatumque reget patriis virtutibus orbem (17).
43 For pastoral description in Orac. Sib. 6, cf. lines 5, 8, 16–20, (23f), and
comm. ad. locc.
44 Die Geburt des Kindes (Leipzig 1924) 145.
45 B. Baldwin, "Vergilius Graecus," AJP 97 (1976) 361–68; E. A. Fischer,
"Greek Translations of Latin Literature in the Fourth Century A.D.,” YCS 27
46 R. Lane Fox, Pagans and Christians (New York 1986) 647–52, attributes
the translation and Messianic interpretation to Lactantius—an intriguing
suggestion given Lactantius' interest in Bk 6; see above comm. ad 9–14, 23ff.
thyrsus,\textsuperscript{47} and the depiction of Christ as a Dionysus is no less bold, or perhaps intentional in our hymn. The apostrophe to the Cross in particular, found first (so far as I know) in this hymn, has had a long literary life. Fortunatus develops this motif into a conceit in his famous hymn \textit{Pange lingua} (Misc. 2.2), to which Robert Herrick adds an Alexandrian touch, rounding off his \textit{Hesperides} with \textit{His Anthem, to Christ on the Crosse}, a cross-shaped poem to “the sacred tree.”\textsuperscript{48}

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\textsuperscript{47} \textit{E.g. Par. Jo. 7.185=Jo. 7:49. Conversely in Nonnus’ \textit{Dion}. a Christic Dionysus appears now and again, displaying behavior inconceivable without a literary/theological influence from Christianity. For this view of Nonnus see G. W. Bowersock, \textit{Hellenism in Late Antiquity} (Ann Arbor 1990) 41–54. For the syncretism of Christ and Dionysus on late antique sarcophagi see E. C. Olsen, \textit{Dionysiac Sarcophagi in Baltimore} (Baltimore 1941).}

\textsuperscript{48} I would like to thank C. A. Faraone and Peter White for carefully reading earlier drafts of this paper and making excellent suggestions for its improvement.