The Oracular εἰ

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I N PLUTARCH's *De E apud Delphos*, the priest Nicander offers this
explanation of the E inscribed on the Delphic temple:

ἔστι γάρ, ὡς ὑπολαμβάνουσι Δελφοί ... σχῆμα καὶ μορφὴ τῆς
πρὸς τὸν θεὸν ἐντεύξεως, καὶ τάξιν ἡγεμονικὴν ἐν τοῖς ἐρω-
τήμασιν ἔχει τῶν χρωμένων ἑκάστοτε καὶ διαπυνθανομένων εἰ
νικήσουσιν, εἰ γαμήσουσιν, εἰ συμφέρει πλεῖν, εἰ γεωργεῖν, εἰ
ἀποδημεῖν (*Mor.* 386B–c).

For it is, as the Delphians assume ... the figure and form of the
consultation of the god, and it holds the first place in every ques-
tion of those who consult the oracle and inquire IF they shall be
victorious, IF they shall marry, IF it is to their advantage to sail the
sea, IF to take to farming, IF to go abroad.[1]

It is surprising that Nicander would have seen an explanation for the
unknown and mysterious E in something so commonplace as the
relational particle which, in normal usage, subordinates a question to
a verb of inquiry—a particle used not only at Delphi but in everyday
speaking and writing as well; his interlocutors dismiss the suggestion
immediately. But it is a significant indication of the verbal structure
of at least one kind of petition made to the oracle, in which εἰ was
indeed the first word of independent questions. Examples of this kind
of petition are uncommon because the emphasis everywhere is on
the responses rather than the questions; moreover, when our sources
include the question, they almost invariably cast it in indirect form,
thereby tending to obscure the original wording.

An Eleusinian inscription of 352 B.C. offers an interesting exception
(*IG* II² 204 [*Syll.*³ 204]). This lengthy text explains how the Athe-
nians are to ask at Delphi whether they should leave uncultivated a
particular plot of land at Eleusis. The portion relevant to our discus-
sion reads as follows (23–30):

γρά[ψαι δὲ τὸν] γραμματέα τῆς βουλῆς εἰς δύο κα-
[ττ]ιτέρω ἴσω καὶ [ὁμοίω, εἰς μὲν] τὸν ἕτερον· εἰ λῶιον καὶ ἄμει-
[νό]ν ἐστι τῶι δήμ[ωι τῶι Ἀθηναίων μισ]θοῦν τὸμ βασιλέα τὰ νῦ-

[ν ἐ]νειργασμ[έ]να [τῆς ἱερᾶς ὀργάδος τὰ ἐν]τὸς τῶν ὅρων εἰς οἰ-
[κ]οδομίαν τοῦ προ[στώιου καὶ ἐπισκευὴν το]ῦ ἱεροῦ τοῖν θεο-
ῖν· εἰς δὲ τὸν ἕτερον κ[α]ττίτ[ερον· εἰ λῷον καὶ ἄμει]νόν ἐστι
τῶι δήμωι τῶι Ἀθηναίων τὰ ν[ῦν ἐντὸς τῶ]ν ὅ[ρων ἐ]νειργ[α]σμέν-
α τῆς ἱερᾶς ὀργάδος ἐᾶν ἄνετα [τοῖν θ]εοῖν.

The inscription then explains that after the two pieces of tin have
been wrapped in wool so as to render them indistinguishable from
each other, one is to be placed in a silver jar, the other in a gold jar.
These jars are to be sealed and left in Athens while a specially se-
lected embassy journeys to Delphi to ask the Pythia which inscription
should dictate the Athenians' course of action, that in the silver or
that in the gold jar.

H. W. Parke correctly points out that "the very fact that the whole
procedure was described in such detail in a public decree, instead of
merely stating the questions to be asked, certainly implies that it was
a highly exceptional method."[2] But in view of Nicander's inter-
pretation of the symbolic E, and the fact that the phrase λῷον καὶ
ἄμεινον is so common in oracular petitions as to be formulaic,[3] it
seems that the inscriptions on the tin plates preserve the verbal
structure of one of the standard forms of oracular inquiry, however
exceptional the use of sealed jars and alternative questions may have
been. Apparently this standard form was simply subsumed into the
system the Athenians had devised to obviate the possibility of fraud.[4]
Were this not the case—were, that is, the entire system a nov-
elty—one would expect statements rather than questions on the tin
plates, since one of them was to serve, in effect, as the answer of the
Pythia.

Many of the small lead tablets excavated at Dodona preserve orac-
ular petitions in their original form, with the structure εἰ + interroga-
tive:

αἰ τυχαίχα μοι ἀ ἐπι-
τροπεία τὰν ἔχω
γαμῶν Λυκκίδας;[5]

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[2] H. W. Parke, *The Oracles of Zeus* (Cambridge 1967) 104.

[3] In addition to Joseph Fontenrose's discussion (with references) of the phrase in
The Delphic Oracle (Berkeley 1978) 221f, see Parke (*supra* n.2) 261f no. 5, 263 no. 1,
268 nos. 15–16, 269 nos. 18 and 21, 270 no. 22, 271 no. 25.

[4] Parke (*supra* n.2) 104 suggests that strong feelings on the question in Athens
and/or uncertainty about the reliability of the Phocian occupiers of the sanctuary may
have given rise to the precautions. Alfred Körte expressed virtually the same hypothe-
sis in "Zum Orakel über die ἱερὰ ὀργάς," *Klio* 5 (1905–06) 280–82.

[5] Parke (*supra* n.2) 266 no. 10. D. Evangelides, Ἠπειρωτικὰ χρονικά 10 (1935) 252
no. 36, dates the tablet to the fifth or fourth century B.C.

τύχα ἀγαθά. ἦ τυγχάνοιμι κα ἐμπορευόμενος
ὅπυς κα δοκῆι σύμφορον ἔμειν, καὶ ἄγων, τῆι κα δοκῆι
ἀμάται τέχναι χρεόμενος;[6]

This construction seems to be an abbreviated form of the structure
exhibited on other tablets where the inquiry is introduced by the
name of the petitioner and a verb of asking in the third person:

θεός. τύχη. ἐπικοινῆται Ἀλκίνοος τῶι
Διὶ τῶι Ναίωι καὶ τᾶι Διώναι εἰ λ[ώιον]
καὶ] ἄμεινον Νικέαι κατασκευάζ[ειν]
τὸ ἐργαστήριον.[7]

ἐρωτῆι Λυσα-
νίας Δία Νάϊον
καὶ Δηώναν ἦ οὐ-
κ ἔστι ἐξ αὐτοῦ
τὸ παιδάριον
ὃ Ἀννύλα κύει.[8]

ἐρουτᾶι Κλεούται τὸν Δία καὶ τὰν
Διώναν, αἰ ἔστι αὐτοῖ προβατεύοντι
ὄναιον καὶ ὠφέλιμον.[9]

In accounting for the presence of the interrogative particle εἰ in
both the abbreviated and the full texts, Pomtow asserts that ἦ can
follow ἐρωτᾷ because "der schreiber alles vorhergehende als formelle
überschrift faszte und die eigentliche frage erst mit ἦ beginnend
ansah."[10] Albert Thumb more correctly observed that in both kinds
of text the indirect interrogative (Attic εἰ) is to be understood.[11] This
view is substantiated by the use of αἰ in some of the petitions, for
while η and ει can interchange on the phonological level, αι is mor-
phologically equivalent to εἰ, not to ἦ.[12]

The book of fate known today as the *Sortes Astrampsychi*[13] also
contains queries in the form of εἰ + seemingly direct question, such

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[6] Parke (*supra* n.2) 269 no. 19; *cf.* H. R. Pomtow, "Die Orakelinschriften von Do-
dona," *Jahrb.f.cl.Phil.* 29 (1883) 327f no. 17.

[7] Parke (*supra* n.2) 269f no. 21; Evangelides, *Praktika* (1932) 59 no. 5, dates the text
to the fourth century B.C.

[8] Parke (*supra* n.2) 266 no. 11; *Syll.*³ 1163 dates the text to the second century B.C.

[9] Parke (*supra* n.2) 268 no. 17.

[10] Pomtow (*supra* n.6) 321f.

[11] *Handbuch der griechischen Dialekte* I (Heidelberg 1932) 315.

[12] See Thumb (*supra* n.11) I 74, 101; II 47; C. D. Buck, *Greek Dialects* (Chicago
1955) 105 §134.1.

[13] The *editio princeps* of Rudolph Hercher, *Astrampsychi oraculorum decades CIII,
Jahresbericht über das Königliche Joachimsthalsche Gymnasium* (Berlin 1863), is super-
seded by G. M. Browne and R. Stewart, edd., *Sortes Astrampsychi* I: *Ecdosis Prior* (Leip-
zig 1983) and II: *Ecdosis altera* (Leipzig, forthcoming).

as εἰ πλεύσω ἀκινδύνως; (12), εἰ ἀποδημῶ; (17), εἰ γαμῶ καὶ συμ-φέρει μοι; (21), εἰ εὑρίσκω δανείσασθαι ἄρτι; (25), εἰ ἐργαστήριον ἀνοίγω; (43). The similarity of these questions to those asked at Delphi and Dodona places the *Sortes* firmly in the oracular tradition.[14]

Just as in the case of the Dodona tablets Pomtow felt obliged to exclude the possibility of direct questions introduced by εἰ, so various explanations have been offered for the appearance of εἰ at the head of independent questions in the *Sortes*. Grenfell and Hunt (*P.Oxy.* XII 1477) suggested emending εἰ to ἦ. G. M. Browne, citing oracular petitions from Egypt, interpreted the questions as protases of condi-tional sentences, the apodoses of which were suppressed.[15] Bjӧrck called them direct questions,[16] while Hoogendijk and Clarysse view them as indirect interrogatives.[17]

None of these attempts to deal with the construction is altogether satisfactory. The parallels from Dodona and Delphi count against the emendation suggested by Grenfell and Hunt. It is also unlikely that the questions in the *Sortes* are derived from the system of oracular consultation employed in Egypt, since the salient features of that system (*i.e.*, the apodosis of the conditional sentence, the negative formulation of the query, and the submission of the question on papyri or ostraca) are not to be found in the *Sortes*. Bjӧrck presents no support for his view except the bald assertion that "der Gebrauch kommt von alters her vor und ist im NT kein Semitismus."[18] But while the use of εἰ in oracular petitions might be invoked as evidence against the supposed Semitic origin of εἰ as a direct interrogative in biblical texts, it is begging the question to argue in reverse fashion, *i.e.*, that biblical examples of εἰ in direct questions allow one to justify the use of εἰ as a direct interrogative in the oracular texts: for the biblical usage is considered on good grounds by virtually every mod-ern commentator to be a Semiticism.[19] Finally, in labeling the ques-

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[14] Questions 12, 17, and 21 are paralleled, among other places, in Plut. *Mor.* 386B–C (cited above), question 25 in *Mor.* 408C (cited below), and question 43 in the third of the texts from Dodona cited above.

[15] G. M. Browne, "The Origin and Date of the Sortes Astrampsychi," *ICS* 1 (1976) 56–58.

[16] G. Bjӧrck, "Heidnische und christliche Orakel mit fertigen Antworten," *SymbOslo* 19 (1939) 94 n.2.

[17] F. A. J. Hoogendijk and W. Clarysse, "De Sortes van Astrampsychus: Een orakel-boek uit de Oudheid bewerkt voor het middelbaar onderwijs," *Kleio* 11 (1981) 81 n.1.

[18] Bjӧrck (*supra* n.16) 94 n.2.

[19] See, for instance, F. Blass, A. Debrunner, and F. Rehkopf, *Grammatik des neutesta-mentlichen Griechischen* (Gӧttingen 1976) 440.3 n.5; Nigel Turner, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek* (Edinburgh 1963) III 333, IV (1976) 54, 92; A. D. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Nashville 1934) 916. In these sources it is ar-

tions of the *Sortes* as indirect, Hoogendijk and Clarysse fail to account for the omission of a verb of inquiry. However, they cite in their discussion another passage from Plutarch which, when pursued further, proves useful in explaining the anomalous εἰ used to introduce a direct question.

At *De Pythiae oraculis* 408c, Theon remarks that at Delphi the inquiries of private citizens usually concern slight and commonplace matters: ἐπὶ πράγμασι μικροῖς καὶ δημοτικοῖς ἐρωτήσεις οἷον ἐν σχολῇ προτάσεις, εἰ γαμητέον, εἰ πλευστέον, εἰ δανειστέον. The form of these questions and the allusion to school exercises show that Plutarch discerned a similarity between questions asked at Delphi and the rhetorical theses and hypotheses used in schools to sharpen students' skill in deliberation. Both the thesis and the hypothesis are questions that can be answered yes or no; but the thesis is abstract in nature (that is, it does not concern a specific individual or circumstance), while the hypothesis deals with a concrete situation. The rhetor Theon offers this analysis:

οὐδὲν γὰρ ἄλλο τῆς ὑποθέσεως διαφέρει [*scil.* ἡ θέσις], πλὴν ὅτι προσώπων ὡρισμένων καὶ τόπου καὶ χρόνου καὶ τρόπου καὶ αἰτίας ἐστὶν ἀπαρέμφατον, οἷον θέσις μὲν εἰ προσήκει πολιορκουμένοις στράτευμα πέμπειν εἰς τὴν ὑπερορίαν, ὑπόθεσις δὲ εἰ Ἀθηναίοις πολιορκουμένοις ὑπὸ Πελοποννησίων εἰς Σικελίαν στράτευμα πέμπειν (Spengel, *Rhet.* II 61.6ff).

According to this scheme, the questions given as examples in *Mor.* 408c would be theses, since they are not person-relative, while most of the questions in the *Sortes*, as well as the oracular petitions cited above, would be hypotheses, because they deal with the case of a particular person, namely the individual consulting the book or the oracle.

In the rhetorical treatises, theses and hypotheses are often dependent on a verb such as ζητέω, *e.g.* ἔστω δ᾽ οὖν ἡμᾶς ζητεῖν, εἰ προ-

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gued that the form originated as a translation of the Hebrew interrogatives *ha-* and *'im* in books translated from or dependent on Hebrew or Aramaic texts (*e.g.* Gen. 17.17, Joel 1.2, Matt. 12.10) and then, having become familiar, was employed in the 'free' biblical Greek of such works as 2 Macc. (7.7), Clem. *Hom.* (15.9, 16.16, 17.19), *Ev.Thom.* (B8.3 =Tischendorf p.153), *T.Abr.* (recension *A* 8.3, 15.13, 18.3), and the sections of Acts that are independent of Semitic sources (19.2, 21.37, 22.25). Though not completely beyond criticism, this theory seems to be the easiest explanation of the facts, in view of the absence of the form in secular Greek apart from the constructions discussed in this article. One must therefore view as products of a separate tradition the oracular petitions in the Septuagint that would otherwise seem to be syntactical parallels to the petitions from Greek oracles (*e.g.* 1 Ki. 30.8 καὶ ἐπηρώτησεν Δαυιδ διὰ τοῦ κυρίου λέγων Εἰ καταδιώξω ὀπίσω τοῦ γεδδουρ τούτου; εἰ καταλήμψομαι αὐτούς;).

νοοῦσι θεοὶ τοῦ κόσμου (Theon, in Spengel, *Rhet.* II 1126.2ff); but they are also commonly encountered in constructions where no such verb is present, as the following examples illustrate:

> τῶν δὲ θέσεων αἱ μὲν ἁπλαῖ, αἱ δὲ κατὰ τὸ πρός τι λαμβάνονται, αἱ δὲ διπλαῖ νομίζονται. ἐὰν γὰρ λέγωμεν "εἰ γαμητέον," ἁπλῆ· ἐὰν δὲ "εἰ βασιλεῖ γαμητέον," πρός τι· ἐὰν δὲ λέγωμεν "εἰ ἀθλητέον μᾶλλον ἢ γεωργητέον," διπλῆ (Hermogenes: Rabe, *Rh.Gr.* VI 25.16ff).

> οὐδὲν μέντοι διαφέρει, ἐάν τε οὕτω λέγῃ τις, εἰ γαμητέον ἢ οὔ, καὶ πάλιν, εἰ αἱρετέος ὁ γάμος ἢ φευκτέος· ἐν γὰρ καὶ ταυτοῦ ἔστι διὰ πάντων τούτων τὸ δηλούμενον (Theon: Spengel, *Rhet.* II 121.14ff).

> *sed tamen, ne me totum aegritudini dedam, sumpsi mihi quasdam tamquam* θέσεις, *quae et* πολιτικαὶ *sunt et temporum horum, ut et abducam animum a querelis et in eo ipso de quo agitur exercear. eae sunt huius modi:* εἰ μενετέον ἐν τῇ πατρίδι τυραννουμένης αὐτῆς· εἰ παντὶ τρόπῳ τυραννίδος κατάλυσιν πραγματευτέον, κἂν μέλλῃ διὰ τοῦτο περὶ τῶν ὅλων ἡ πόλις κινδυνεύσειν. εἰ εὐλαβητέον τὸν καταλύοντα μὴ αὐτὸς αἱρῆται (Cicero: *Att.* 9.4).

This independent use is also evident in the titles of several rhetorical works of Plutarch: εἰ διδακτὸν ἡ ἀρετή; (439A), εἰ αὐτάρκης ἡ κακία πρὸς κακοδαιμονίαν; (498A), εἰ πρεσβυτέρῳ πολιτευτέον; (783A), εἰ καλῶς εἴρηται τὸ λάθε βιώσας; (1128A).[20]

There is a striking similarity between the rhetorical form as it appears in these passages and the questions of the *Sortes* and petitions with εἰ made to Greek oracles. As the passage from *De Pythiae oraculis* demonstrates, Plutarch was aware of this similarity; and it appears that the compiler (or a redactor) of the *Sortes* identified the questions in the work as hypotheses. In manuscripts **ELM**, we find as an *incipit* to the list of questions the heading ἀρχὴ τῶν ζητημάτων (κλήρων in all other witnesses), and in the introductory epistle (missing in **M**) an explanation of the use of the book begins κείσθω ζητεῖν τινὰ εἰ προκόπτει ἐν τιμῇ. In the rhetorical treatises, ζήτημα often serves as a generic label for theses and hypotheses and, as noted above, one is said to investigate (ζητεῖν) these questions. Furthermore, some petitions in the *Sortes*—e.g. εἰ εὕρω δανείσασθαι ἄρτι; (25), and εἰ εἴπω τὴν δίκην; (51)—are clearly of a deliberative na-

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[20] In addition to these surviving works, the so-called Lamprias catalogue lists the following titles: εἰ ἀρετὴ ἡ ῥητορική; (86), εἰ λόγον ἔχει τὰ ζῷα; (135), εἰ πᾶσι συνηγορητέον; (156), εἰ δώσει γνώμην ὁ πολίτης προειδὼς ὅτι οὐ πονήσει, οὐ πείσει; (164), περὶ τοῦ γνῶθι σαυτὸν καὶ εἰ ἀθάνατος ἡ ψυχή; (177), περὶ ἀρετῆς εἰ διδακτὸν ἡ ἀρετή; (180), εἰ ἄπρακτος ὁ περὶ πάντων ἐπέχων; (210).

ture, suggesting that the author made no distinction between hypotheses and oracular questions.

The structural likeness and the witness of Astrampsychus or his redactor notwithstanding, the oracular petitions and most of the questions in the *Sortes* are not, in the technical sense, hypotheses: their intent is to obtain from a supernatural force information about what fate ordains in regard to some event or person, while the hypothesis is intended to elicit discussion about what is or what should be the case. Nonetheless, the thesis/hypothesis form is instructive as a syntactical parallel to the questions of the *Sortes* and the Greek oracles, for it shows that a question with εἰ can stand independently of a leading verb.

In these rhetorical forms, the deep structure is a dependent interrogative, since the εἰ is generated by ζητέω or some verbal equivalent, the force of which is felt even when the verb is omitted. However, in its surface structure the question is direct, because of the suppression of this governing verb. The evidence presented by these forms suggests that in the questions of the *Sortes* and in the direct questions with εἰ at Delphi and Dodona, we also have to do with an elliptical construction resulting from suppression of an element so closely associated with the form that it did not need to be expressed. The fact that some of the petitions on the Dodona tablets are in the form of indirect questions introduced by a verb of asking, with the name of the enquirer as subject, argues that the omitted element is a verb such as ἐρωτῶ. Thus, in a sense, both the views of Hoogendijk and Björck are partially correct: the questions in the *Sortes*, as well as their parallels from Delphi and Dodona, are indirect from a diachronic perspective, because in their deep structure they depend on a verb such as ἐρωτῶ; but synchronically they are direct, in that this verb has been omitted.

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