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*Lecture and Responses*

**An Interdisciplinary Conversation on the Sibyl, Gender, and Hellenistic Judaism**

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## An Interdisciplinary Conversation on the Sibyl, Gender, and Hellenistic Judaism

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### The 5<sup>th</sup> Borsch-Rast Lecture, 2022 Graduate Theological Union

The Borsch-Rast Book Prize and Lectureship is named after Frederick H. Borsch and Harold W. Rast. Borsch was Dean and President of the Church Divinity School of the Pacific until 1981, and Rast was founding director and editor of Trinity Press International. The Prize honors a book written by a GTU alumnus/a or faculty member that exemplifies excellent scholarship and presents a new perspective on religious or theological texts or issues, and the laureate is invited to deliver a lecture at the GTU. Dr. Ashley L. Bacchi, Assistant Professor of Jewish History and Ancient Mediterranean Religions at Starr King School for the Ministry in Oakland, CA, was awarded the fifth annual Borsch-Rast Book Prize and Lectureship for her 2020 work, *Uncovering Jewish Creativity in Book III of the Sibylline Oracles: Gender, Intertextuality, and Politics* (Brill). In her award-winning book, Dr. Bacchi reclaims the importance of the Sibyl as a female voice of prophecy and reveals new layers of intertextual references that address political, cultural, and religious dialogue in second-century Ptolemaic Egypt. The book has been praised for its scholarship and innovative challenges to long-held beliefs about gender roles in the ancient world, reorienting the discussion around the desirability of the pseudonym to an issue of gender.

I am so honored to have received this award.<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Interim Dean Elizabeth Peña and Sabrina Kennedy for all the logistics that went into planning this lecture. I am so excited and grateful for Erich Gruen and Annette Yoshiko Reed to be my conversation partners this evening. I will make some opening remarks and then Erich and Annette will share their insights, I will respond to them, and then we will open Q&A. I do not know what they are going to say, so I am going to be as enraptured as the rest of you and I am shaking in anticipation. I would like to take a moment to thank John Endres of the GTU, Patricia Bulman and Rex Stem of the UC Davis Classics program, I learned so much from each of them, they are sadly no longer with us, but their mentorship lives on in me and their other students.

I feel that my book represents me as a scholar and when I look at it in my hands, I see my whole journey. I remember my junior year in high school when I visited Hartwick College and spent the day shadowing my future advisor Peter Wallace who listened to me and heard that I wanted to be a History professor one day and write books. Nobody else took me seriously, but he did and was supportive through my whole journey. I see Emily Albu, my mentor at UC Davis in Classics, who always gave me great advice and helped me navigate what fields I should pursue to fulfill my interests, which ultimately brought me to the GTU. Once there, I found an amazing Masters advisor in Gabriella Lettini, who is my current Dean of Faculty, and who I continue to learn from every day. I was so lucky to be able to work with Holger Zellentin who encouraged me to reach out to John J. Collins during my Masters when I first started diving into the *Sibylline Oracles*. I am so grateful that John joined my thesis committee and later continued to work with me on my dissertation committee. I sent my Masters thesis to Erich S. Gruen, who I had been reading since I was an undergraduate pursuing Roman history, and he would become my mentor through my doctoral work as I pursued Hellenistic Jewish literature. I remember when I was reading his books *Diaspora and Heritage and Hellenism*, feeling validated that the elements and connections that I was

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<sup>1</sup> The following is a slightly revised edit of the transcript for the 2022 Borsch-Rast lecture. Due to the format restrictions of this journal, the Q&A portion has not been included and some responses have been incorporated into the final remarks. The lecture video recording can be viewed at <https://gtux.gtu.edu>.

seeing in the *Sibylline Oracles* made sense in this wider Hellenistic context and knowing there was so much more to explore. I see all of that when I look at this book. Namely I see mentorship, I see my friends that supported me, and I see the libraries that I worked in, in particular this GTU library we are in today.

When I thought about the award talks that I've attended like this one, I realized that I wanted to dedicate this lecture to those that have had an untraditional academic path. I am the first in my family to get a Bachelors and before, during, and even after my journey for my doctorate, the people that I would see behind the podium receiving awards had tenure or tenure track jobs, they were established, rooted. I would sit as a student and think "wow, maybe one day that will be me" but the academic world has changed. I am grateful I have a home at Starr King School for the Ministry, but it is not full time. I teach at four different schools and I often do not know what I'm teaching until a couple months before the start of the term, most often teaching a course that I need to create from scratch. Creating new syllabi is exciting, but it is also tiring. I've learned so much and it has strengthened my interdisciplinary intersectional approach, stretching me in more directions than I thought possible. There are so many of us that are in this position now as Humanities departments downsize, and fulltime jobs become scarce. If you are in the same position, I want to encourage you not to give up. Do not give up hope, and do not think that your work doesn't matter, keep trying the best you can. I know that it is hard to have the time to research and write while being stretched in so many directions. But this is forging us into an interdisciplinary force, even if that is not what you intended or wanted. I believe interdisciplinary and intersectional approaches are the future of all of our disciplines, they are the future of the humanities. I believe they are the only way in which the humanities remain relevant because everyone is coming to realize that we live in an intersectional and interdisciplinary world. We are not bound by those *Wissenschaft* boxes that are our departments were originally created from and it is those jobs that are disappearing. Even though right now it seems like jobs might never come back, I believe they will because ultimately when I look at this book and the journey it represents, I know this wouldn't have happened without mentorship. You cannot have true mentorship in

an adjunct system. Our students deserve mentorship, and we deserve the opportunity to live into being the mentors that we got to have. So, I know that it is tough now, but I trust that things will change because this current shift is unsustainable. It is unsustainable to have higher education and innovative research if the adjunctification of education continues this way. So, keep going, don't give up, and support your libraries! Our libraries are so important to the research process. Not everything can be done online. Sometimes you need to be able to hold a book to grasp its journey, to look at its place in the stacks and see its neighbors to understand the extent of some of its conversation partners, as well as to have a space to collaborate. Thank you again for this award. I'm so excited and I plan to continue working with the Sibyl in the future, I think she has the potential to become an interdisciplinary intersectional feminist icon and I am going to help!

### **Response from Erich Gruen**

What a gift it is, and a joy, for me to be here to honor Ashley Bacchi, my former student and dear friend. We have known each other for a good many years now, from the first day she walked into my office, bedraggled and soaked to the skin from a heavy rain. (We used to have them in those days). She was embarrassed, flustered, insecure, and apologetic about inadequate preparation, as well as her appearance. I wasn't quite sure what to make of her then. But I could already see the determination, commitment, and drive that she possessed and would carry her through to success.

Ashley had already begun an impressive self-fashioning as a scholar. After undergraduate years at a small college with limited resources, she worked out her own path in the studying of languages and other training at UC Davis, and piecing together her wide ranging interests in Classics and Jewish Studies. At the GTU she gained a deep grounding in the religions and history of the ancient Greeks, Romans, Jews, and Christians. I had the good fortune of teaching Ashley in a small seminar on Hellenistic Judaism, where her enthusiasm and her assiduousness were on display. Her scope, her versatility, and her ever-expanding self-assurance marked those graduate years. I am beginning to sound like a letter of recommendation here. But I could not be prouder of Ashley. She wrote a fine PhD

dissertation and, even more memorably, she ran circles around her faculty examiners at the dissertation defense.

That dissertation, much expanded, rewritten, and infused with considerable erudition, became the outstanding book that we are honoring today with the Borsch-Rast prize. And, for me, this has an unusual and unexpected double meaningfulness. For I knew Fred Borsch, after whom this prize is named, now sadly deceased, a man of many parts and a man of immense humanity. Long before he reached the exalted position of Episcopal bishop of Los Angeles, I knew Fred back when. We were students together at Oxford many, many years ago and became good friends. And I cannot forbear from mentioning an amusing anecdote, in which the joke is on me. Fred's path and mine diverged after leaving Oxford, we went our different ways, communicating occasionally for a while, but life goes on and we lost touch for years. When Fred was appointed as Dean of CDSP, Church Divinity School of the Pacific, here in Berkeley, I was completely unaware of it. Then one day I attended a lecture at the GTU, and was invited to join a reception being held at the home of the Dean of CDSP. I did not inquire as to who the Dean was; I was just happy to look forward to drinks at a reception. When I knocked on the door, it was opened by Fred, and, in a state of shock, I stupidly said, "Fred, what are you doing here?" And he quite properly replied, "What am I doing here? I live here. What are *you* doing here?" Well, after that embarrassing encounter, we renewed friendship, and I saw a bit of him before he went on to higher elevation and a bishopric. So, I am doubly pleased to be here to honor his memory and to bask in the reflected glory of Ashley Bacchi.

The title of her book, *Uncovering Jewish Creativity in Book III of the Sibylline Oracles*, is not exactly an attention-grabber. It is unlikely to be featured on the book stalls at airports. What are the Sibylline Oracles and why choose that topic? For most people, the only image that they conjure up, of course, is that of the Sistine Chapel because Michelangelo painted five Sibyls on the ceiling. In fact, however, the subject is quite fascinating, and, in Ashley's hands, quite far-reaching. The Sibyl in origin was a Greek prophetess, renowned for her divinely inspired forecasts, often portrayed as a raving seer, expressing dire forebodings of an apocalyptic future. At first, she was a solitary figure, a lonely voice of foreboding. In subsequent

portrayals, the number of Sibyls multiplied, in different locations, with individual shrines, like the Delphic Sibyl and the Cumaean Sibyl, serving local needs but uttering prophecies with wide-ranging implications. Their stories varied and the tales of their origins took diverse forms, including claims to be a daughter of Zeus or even to be a divinity herself. The utterances of the Sibyls, reckoned as delivering pronouncements from the deities, were eventually assembled in Rome and consulted frequently by Roman priests in times of crisis, danger, or natural calamities. But the secrets contained within them were carefully hoarded by the Roman elite and never made available to the public. Whatever precious prognostications they possessed have long since been lost.

The extant collection of Sibylline Books is a purely literary creation, in Greek, composed for the most part in Homeric hexameters, and compiled over a period of centuries by Jewish and Christian writers with their own agendas, but adhering to the conceit that they were replicating the words of ancient Hellenic seers.

Why choose this medium to deliver their messages? A long standing puzzle. That is a principal objective of Ashley's impressive study. It focuses on the Third Book of the Sibyllines, largely a Jewish composition, the earliest of the Sibylline Oracles, the longest of them, and the one fraught with the most problems, but also with the broadest implications for the cultural, religious, intellectual, and even political encounter between ancient Jews and pagan society. This is no small subject.

Of course, Ashley is not the first to tackle this subject. The long course of scholarly literature dates back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, with learned disquisitions quarreling about how much of the text is Jewish, how much is Christian, is it a feature of Jewish propaganda or a fabrication and forgery by Christian writers, each of whom finding within it a forecast of the coming of a Messiah. Is it a uniform composition or a ragged compilation containing elements from various periods and various sources? These issues were taken up in 19<sup>th</sup> century deeply researched scholarship, mostly, but not exclusively, German *Wissenschaft*, with close examination of tangled textual traditions and creation of critical editions. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century more attention was paid to the origins and the resonance of the Sibylline Oracles, especially the Third Sibyl, and its meaning for the

construction of Jewish identity in the Hellenistic era. Debates sprang up about the date or dates of the Third Sibyl, about the audience to which it was directed, and the attitudes expressed toward Greek culture and Roman power. This is a rich text that has prompted numerous studies and a plethora of interpretations.

So, was there anything left to say? Indeed there was. And Ashley's book provides a wholly new angle, largely overlooked by previous scholarship, and sets the subject on a very different level, with much more stimulating and productive analysis. Ashley asks a critical question which few have even bothered to address: why did the Jewish authors of this text choose a *female* prophetess, and a Greek one at that, to deliver their visions of doom, destruction, and salvation. The gender of the Sibyl, though obvious and taken for granted largely without comment, here takes center stage. Ashley calls upon her extensive research in gender studies and feminist literature to provide a much deeper understanding of the Sibyl's role and meaning. She is no mere Greek seer, but rises above ethnic and cultural divisions. She is represented as the daughter-in-law of Noah, thus in the dawn of history that antedates both the Hebrew patriarchs and the Hellenic bards that spun the songs of Homer. As Ashley shows, the Sibyl embodies in her person the ancient lore of the Hellenes, as well as the hoary traditions of the Bible, while transcending them both as the voice of divine justice. And the fact that she is a female forecaster of both doom and redemption gives her special authority in delivering divine pronouncements. Why?

Ashley does not settle for abstract theorizing about gender roles and implications. Her close analysis is grounded in a thorough study of the historical context of women's experience in the Hellenistic period, including powerful queens in Macedon, Ptolemaic Egypt, and Seleucid Syria, as well as female divinities that peopled the landscape of the Near East. Beyond the historical context, Ashley probes into the literary background: not only the notable female figures of Hellenistic Judaism, like Esther, Judith, and Susanna, but the intertextuality that links the Sibyl's pronouncements to the writings of Homer and the Homeric hymns and to Greek literati in the court of Alexandria.



Now, Ashley and I do not agree on everything. I have long made a practice of encouraging students to follow their own star, to take wing away from the nest, to challenge their mentors, to take issue with them, and to stand fast in their own views. Ashley certainly exemplifies this. I remember vividly her dissertation defense when she held her ground with vigor—and politeness—against the challenges of John Collins, and you can't have a more formidable challenger than that. And indeed she does not buy everything that I say. I am less confident than she that the Third Sibyl arises out of the political circumstances and rivalries for the crown in Ptolemaic Egypt of the mid-2nd century. I tend to put more emphasis on the genre of the oracles and the apocalyptic predictions that have a more sweeping resonance and are not tied to specific historical events or characters. And I dissent also from her stress on monotheism as the Sibyl's prime marker of Jewish identity and the source of Jewish superiority. Were Jews really monotheists? They were sure that their god surpassed all others, but there were others out there, indeed rival deities who needed to be combatted. The Sibyl denounces idolatry and idol worship, but that is not the same as monotheism. Jews acknowledged and lived with pagan gods and could even include them among watchful and protective divinities. Some pagans indeed were better monotheists than Jews.

But my disagreements with Ashley are few, my admiration for her work is large. Her constructive deconstruction of the Sibyl demonstrates how the author or authors of the Third Sibylline Oracle has transformed and enlarged her. The prophetess echoes the thunderous pronouncements of Hebrew prophets, but also engages directly with the myths of Greek poetry and traditions as conveyed by Homer and Hesiod and recounted by Hellenistic writers among whom the author could count himself—or herself. The author was not looking from the outside in but was an integral part of a wider cultural scene that blended Jewish ethical and religious concerns with Greek ideas conveyed by an oracular voice that stemmed from Hellenic tradition but delivered Jewish aspirations with the authority of a divinely-inspired seer who antedated both societies. What Ashley has demonstrated above all is the creativity of Jewish writers, of which this is a prime example, in the recasting and rewriting of ancient legends, both Hebrew and Greek, through an ingenious medium that transforms them

into apocalyptic visions forecasting the fateful end of the Roman empire. This is a very rich and rewarding work.

The book stimulates so many thoughts and offers numerous paths to pursue. I mention just one that Ashley's study prompts me to pursue. Her work puts me in mind of another prophetess who supplies a striking parallel to the Sibyl and constitutes a most interestingly analogous figure. I refer to the notorious and unforgettable clairvoyant Cassandra. Hellenic myth has her as the priestess daughter of the Trojan ruler Priam, then taken captive by Agamemnon after the fall of Troy. According to the legend, she had offended the god Apollo who gave her the gift of truthful prophecy but also gave her the curse of no one ever believing her. Cassandra, a far-famed figure in literature and art, often depicted as a raving mantic, always trustworthy but never trusted. She appears frequently in classical poetry from Homer and Aeschylus to Vergil. But, more to the point, she is given voice in a long and maddeningly obscure poem, the *Alexandra* of Lycophron, composed almost certainly in the same era in which much of the Third Sibyl found expression. There Cassandra (or Alexandra) delivers prophecies that encompass the disasters of the Trojan War, the trials and tribulations of the homeward journeys of the Greeks after the war, including the murder of Agamemnon by Clytemnestra, and the forecasts of Cassandra's own death at the hands of Clytemnestra, the recounting of several myths like that of Jason and Medea and historical events like Xerxes' failed invasion of Greece, and alluding even to the emergence of Rome as heir to the Trojan lineage through the voyage of Aeneas. And, most strikingly, Cassandra concludes with the lament that her unfailingly accurate oracular skills are scorned by everyone as false prognostications. And the Third Sibyl's concluding lines affirm that she, although the prophetess of the great god, is reckoned as nothing more than a crazy liar. The parallel is quite powerful.

So, I am grateful to Ashley for countless reasons, not the least of which is that she has provoked me to think about writing a paper that links the Greek Cassandra with the Jewish Sibyl. And this is a telling instance of the general thesis that Ashley has argued so compellingly and so importantly: that Jewish intellectual creativity was part and parcel of a larger Hellenic cultural world.

*Erich S. Gruen is the Gladys Rehard Wood Professor of History and Classics, Emeritus at the University of California, Berkeley. Among other works, he is the author of The Last Generation of the Roman Republic, The Hellenistic World and the Coming of Rome, Heritage and Hellenism: The Reinvention of Jewish Tradition, Diaspora: Jews Amidst Greeks and Romans, and Ethnicity in the Ancient World: Did it Matter?*

## **Response from Annette Yoshiko Reed**

There are many fine dissertations, but there are very few that already hold the potential to shift a field. When I first read Professor Bacchi's 2015 GTU dissertation, I felt precisely such a shift—the sense of a door opened, a path made possible, a perspective reoriented, with new questions asked and inspired. And this feeling only deepened and grew upon my reading of the substantially reworked version that is the book now honored with the Fifth Annual Borsch-Rast Book Prize: *Uncovering Jewish Creativity in Book III of the Sibylline Oracles*.

The specificity of the title belies the significance of its findings, which ripple outward from specialist research on the *Sibylline Oracles*, to the study of Jews in Ptolemaic Egypt, to the historiography of ancient Judaism, to the theorization of gender and the positionality of knowledge in the Humanities more broadly. Book III of the *Sibylline Oracles* has long been identified as Jewish in origin and largely dating to the second century BCE, and it has long been discussed in relation to the encounter of Greek-speaking Diaspora Jews with the so-called “pagan” religiosity of the Hellenistic world and the culture-politics of Ptolemaic Egypt in particular. But Bacchi here shows how these ancient Jewish materials also speak to other issues too—if only we might learn to listen.

Foremost in this regard is Bacchi's corrective with respect to the gendering of its oracular voice. Rather than dismissing the choice of a female figure as simply epiphenomenal to the Jewish appropriation of the “pagan” prophetic model of the Sibyl or secondary to some lost Archaic expressions, Bacchi demonstrates how the Sibyl's gender is inextricable from other elements of her identity and their effects on the meaning and authority of these ostensibly ancient prophesies. In the process, Bacchi

redresses the traditional tendency in modern scholarship largely to dismiss (if not ignore) the meanings made by the Sibyl's gender.

My own training and research center on the Jewish literature of the Second Temple period—the centuries after the Babylonian Exile, when Jews in the Land of Israel were under Persian, Hellenistic, Hasmonean, and Roman rule. To those who work in this area, the *Sibylline Oracles* are in one sense well-known. An English translation was included, for instance, in one of the major non-canonical anthologies of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, James Charlesworth's *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, and it was by none other than John J. Collins, whose name is practically synonymous with the study of Second Temple Judaism and whose dissertation and first book focused precisely on the Sibyllines. All this is true. And yet, nevertheless, Bacchi is quite correct to note that the *Sibylline Oracles* remain on the “periphery” *even* in the study of pseudepigrapha—which is itself on the periphery of the study of Second Temple Judaism, which in turn is on the periphery on the study of Judaism.

This peripheralizing is puzzling. And what makes it all the more striking is the degree to which it has remained the case, even as both “pseudepigrapha” and Second Temple Judaism have attracted more and more scholarly attention. These areas have seen a renaissance in the last 50 years, particularly as a result of the new data and perspectives opened up in the wake of the discovery and publication of the Dead Sea Scrolls. And this new attention has come precisely in those very areas to which Book III of the *Sibylline Oracles* most speak. The Aramaic Enoch fragments and other Aramaic materials from the Dead Sea Scrolls, for instance, have brought intense new attention to the Hellenistic period, the period of Ptolemaic rule over Egypt and the period in which the Jewish Sibylline tradition appears to be inaugurated, precisely as we see in Book III.

And not just that: much of the fresh interest in Second Temple Judaism in the past 50 years has been focused on the transformations of prophecy! With the discovery of Aramaic fragments of *1 Enoch* among the Dead Sea Scrolls came renewed debates about the “origins” of apocalyptic literature and the precise character of its relationship to biblical prophecy. From the 1970s to this day, these have been topics of intense discussion, cutting across the traditional divides of research on the Hebrew Bible,

Second Temple Judaism, and the New Testament. For this, texts studied under the rubric of “pseudepigrapha” have been central—from *1 Enoch* and *2 Enoch* to *4 Ezra* and *2 Baruch*—and attention has also turned anew to the third and second centuries BCE—increasingly in conversation with Classicists studying Ptolemaic and Seleucid empires in particular. In other words: research has intensified around nearly every major rubric related to Book III of the *Sibylline Oracles*. Yet this source *still* remains peripheral in practice. It is not just understudied in general but even marginalized from the very discussions of the Hellenistic-era transformations to which it might seem most powerfully to speak.

What I describe above is a scholarly conversation, for instance, in which I myself have been engaged since my own dissertation, which was on the *Book of the Watchers* in *1 Enoch* and which I completed 20 years ago (i.e., 2002). And my most recent book (published in 2020) focused on Jewish apocalyptic epistemologies in the early Hellenistic period. But as much as I assign the *Sibylline Oracles* for classes and comprehensive exams on Second Temple Judaism, it actually never occurred to me to integrate the *Sibylline Oracles* into my own work on the remaking of Jewish revelatory knowledge in the early Hellenistic age.

And I don’t think I’m alone. Like many silences, this silence went unnoticed, in part perhaps because it has hinged on what theorists like Pierre Bourdieu and Michel-Rolph Trouillot call “the Unthinkable”—those possibilities that our social and cultural construction of knowledge structurally omit, as that which is not suppressed *per se* but nonetheless subtly and significantly sidelined. My experience reading Bacchi’s dissertation and book was thus akin to the surprise of noticing a blind spot, but also—and especially in the book version—the delight of reflecting upon *why* this was the case. The Sibyl, after all, was relegated to research on women and gender. This is an area that has also flourished in the past 50 years in the study of Second Temple Judaism. But too often, as Bacchi so powerfully shows, this renewed attention has ironically come at the cost of its habitual compartmentalization as well.

It is perhaps not surprising, thus, that those past studies that have sought to integrate these sources into our understanding of Second Temple Judaism have tended to downplay the Sibyl’s womanhood. In past studies

of the *Sibylline Oracles*, as Bacchi notes, “gender [becomes] a non-category”:

When the gender of the Sibyl is briefly discussed in secondary scholarship, it is minimized or dismissed by [1] referring to the Sibyl as a disembodied voice, or [2] by presenting her as though there were no other feasible options that would fulfill the desired type of prophecy, thus making the Sibyl a necessity as the chosen Greek oracular vehicle (10)

What this tendency underlines, then, is how—even *for us*, in our modern context (or perhaps especially *for us*, in our modern context)—the choice of a “pagan” prophetic voice by an ancient Jewish author simply remains legible in a manner that the choice of the voice of a woman is not. And as such, it points us to the possibility that the Sibyl’s gender may be part of what has naturalized the pushing of these sources to the “periphery” even of those modern scholarly discussions to which they are most central.

This is part of what makes Bacchi’s work so powerful, in my view. To focus on the Sibyl’s gender, in her view, does not mean only focusing on her gender. In fact, quite the contrary: Bacchi shows how we actually cannot understand the Jewish choice of a figure also popular among “pagans” without understanding her female voice and female body as well.

What she does here, in other words, is precisely the opposite of how gender is habitually treated in the study of Second Temple Judaism. Even today, it still remains common to reduce the analysis of gender to simply searching for women and judging their textual representation as either good or bad—too often assuming a stable binary system against which the gender politics of a text can be judged, cross-culturally and trans-historically, misogynistic or proto-feminist. Bacchi, however, shows how attention to more recent theorists of gender, such as Judith Butler, can help historians to avoid falling into anachronism and the trap of gender essentialism. To approach gender as “mutable” rather than “monolithic,” Bacchi notes, is also to be pushed “to question assumptions of what constitutes the sex/gender system in any given community and time” (p. 5), attending to our specific sources in relation to their own specific historical

and cultural contexts—not just retrojecting our own. And thus we must attend to these contexts, and the embodiment and performance of gender therein.

This is the approach from which Bacchi is able to recover the Sibyl of Book III of the *Sibylline Oracles* as "a female voice of prophecy that filled a gap in the male-dominated Jewish prophetic tradition which was desirable within the larger context of women and power in the Hellenistic Mediterranean" (p. 2). And as much as this proves important for the inauguration of the Jewish Sibylline tradition, her approach also means that we should be pushed to ask how the female voicing of *Sibylline Oracles* makes meaning in different ways in different settings thereafter too. What we see in Book III is not necessarily the same as what we see in later books, whose gendered dynamics have been recently explored by Olivia Lester-Stewart. And perhaps so too with respect to the reception of Book III. One of our Harvard doctoral students, Oana Capatina, is currently working on revisiting their Christian reception, including with an eye to Material Philology and the treatment of quotations and manuscripts as more than simply witnesses to the text's earliest recoverable forms. And this, too, becomes far more interesting when we open it up to the different ways in which the meanings of Book III might shift with different understandings of gender, from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance—far from limited to what we might take for granted today.

In my view, Bacchi's book is *not just* a great book about Ancient Jews. It is also a powerful example how theorizing on gender—far from distracting us from the past—can actually help us to be better historians, evading anachronism and flagging the cultural assumptions that we ourselves bring to our sources. In the process, moreover, she also points us to the converse—how the conversation with ancient sources can sometimes help to highlight our own habitual assumptions, including about knowledge and the gendering of knowledge and peripheries of positioning as well.

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## Concluding Remarks from Ashley Bacchi

I am excited that this book has generated more questions and inquiries, that was my goal. When I have discussed my work with my students I use the visual art historian, Suzanne M. Spencer-Wood, describes as peeling the androcentric onion.<sup>2</sup> There were times when I was working on the revisions to the book that I wanted to go in another direction to explore other nuanced ideas, but I realized I had to spend the time peeling this first onion, that to be honest I was bored of sometimes. I felt like there were rationales that I just wanted to say “it’s obvious that we should be looking at this a little differently, why spend time unpacking and exposing the circular reasoning.” But I’m glad that I had to really spend time with it because the deeper I got into this smelly onion of androcentrism the more ideas I ultimately had that extend beyond the *Sibylline Oracles*, many of which I hope to pursue in my next book. I’m so glad my intention of opening a dialogue and new questions has come across. Erich is absolutely right, that text is such a fruitful piece to include in this dialogue and I can’t wait to read your article when it comes out. As I mentioned Erich’s influential role as a mentor in my opening and Erich has discussed more about our connection to one another, before I speak to Annette’s wonderful questions, I want to share insight into why I invited these two people in particular to share this special occasion with me. Prior to the book being published, Annette emailed me to make sure that my dissertation had a publisher. I had already been in conversations with Brill soon after graduating, but life happened, I was initially working administrative jobs and then shifted to lecturing at several schools so it took longer to get the revisions I wanted to make done. Annette was the first scholar to read my work unsolicited and I was honored that a notable scholar such as herself felt it was important and needed to be published. To have somebody outside of my dissertation committee offering to help me was a stunning example of collegiality and mentorship that inspired me to work even harder to make the manuscript better than the dissertation that she had read. I’m so grateful to Annette because she gave me a push, even

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<sup>2</sup> Suzanne M. Spencer-Wood, “Feminist Gender Research in Classical Archaeology,” in *Women in Antiquity: Theoretical Approaches to Gender and Archaeology*, ed. Sarah Milledge Nelson (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2007), 265.



though she didn't know it. She was an outside voice that I wasn't expecting that gave me validation and fuel when I needed it most. It got me excited to think about getting to read how she would engage with my work, what new angles her perspective would open up to me, wondering how she would integrate my questions and expand on things that I just touched on but that she would be able to flesh out more fully, such as the connection with Enochic material for instance.

Looking back, I'm glad I ended up having that time because it created distance from my work. When you spend so much time on a dissertation it is so hard to cut things out, to edit, and see the openings to make additions, because you are still so tied to this original vision you had for the work. Having the distance was ultimately a gift because I was able to incorporate new ideas that came out of teaching, new questions focused on intersectionality, social justice issues, and sexuality, I saw new angles to verses I previously looked at based on teaching courses like my "Sex and Sin in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity" course and others. I had the distance to see where things could be shrunk down or put in a footnote, to see where new insights could fit, and where I needed to be more assertive with my voice.

Relating to the integration piece Annette asked about, I was fortunate enough to give public talks to test out a wholistic integrated approach to different audiences. Emily Albu and Rex Stem invited me to speak to the Classics students at UC Davis which I entitled "Epic Hellenistic Poetry Battles: The Sibyl Versus Homer." Soon after I was invited to speak on Hellenistic Jewish Myths and Oracles at the Magnes Collection of Jewish Art and Culture in Berkeley CA. In both talks, I was working with the same material in my view, but emphasizing different points for the audiences. At the Magnus I emphasized Jewish prophetic precedent and how the sibyllist of Book 3 was engaging with them as well as Greek myth in a way that I felt would be welcoming to that audience. The questions I received were interested in learning more about the Greek features. For the Classics department students, I first centered on the Greek mythic elements and then introduced the Jewish prophetic models, and the questions I received were about the Jewish materials that they didn't know as well. This had been my goal, because I knew if I didn't adequately present the integration

of the dialogue, both audiences would most likely focus questions on the material they felt more comfortable with, but if I did it right, they would be curious about learning more about what is typically seen as outside of their initial point of interest. I think this is a great example of why we shouldn't continue to silo ourselves into the standard material that is usually taught within the traditional bounds of departments. I think in some ways, as Annette was discussing the unthinkable, the pandemic has made some unthinkable things thinkable. I'm hoping that will help with changing our structures around what our departments look like and what our students are studying. I'm so excited that Annette has a student that is looking at the *Sibylline Oracles* in their Christian context. I've started research for my next book on the *Sibylline Oracles* and it will actually address what Annette was mentioning about taking a diachronic approach and questioning how what I've established about the Jewish Sibyl in Book 3 changes in the different contexts represented in the other books of the *Sibylline Oracles*. Identity is not comprised of just one thing, just as we are complex intersectional beings today the ancient world was full of equally complex intersectional beings that were writing and trying to express themselves and doing so in really amazing ways. Art and literature has so many layers of meaning and I think that the more students we can get from different backgrounds to look at these texts that might initially think "but this is in Jewish studies" or "this is for Classics" the more we can break down those boundaries and look at these texts and images holistically and gain new insights into ancient intersectionality.

Annette asked about the opportunities and challenges of examining gender performances, for instance if what I found in the Sibyl is particular to the Sibyl or indicative of wider trends. I've been looking at the other Sibylline books and it has been exciting partly because one of the reasons that I'm so excited Annette is here is because she is doing groundbreaking work on challenging traditional views on when we move from Christianity as an early Jesus movement that is a Jewish sectarian movement into being something separate from Judaism. She has been challenging those boundaries and inspired me to look for ways in which the classification of what is the "Christian" Sibyl and what is the "Jewish" Sibyl can be questioned just as I questioned the classification of remnants of the

“Pagan” Sibyl and the “Jewish” Sibyl. In researching for my next book, I’m seeing that there is conversation happening between sibyllists that are inside and outside of the Jesus movement, that indicates they are viewed as siblings quarreling over who has right to use the Sibyl as a pseudonym. They are in conversation with each other and there is a tension around identity that I believe plays out through different views on the gender performance of the Sibyl. Each community has different aims and goals for how the Sibyl is going to function as their prophetic voice that I find exciting to explore further.

To clarify, I am not asserting that the Hellenistic Mediterranean was a feminist utopia, the past is complicated and the more that you get into the context the more it resonates with people today. Right now, you could say wo/men<sup>3</sup> have so many more rights than we did at another point in history, but that is relative to location and changing. At this point in US history, hard fought for rights are being challenged, we have legislation that is being passed in states seemingly every other day that tries to limit wo/men’s rights and there is a constant struggle to maintain let alone expand rights, we experience the tension and back and forth pull of different stances on who can do what and where. When I read the *Sibylline Oracles* closely and contextually, I see insight into a similar struggle over gender performance. The fact that the Sibyl as a figure still retains a space of authority, even if it is displayed in different forms and to different extents in different contexts, I find inspiring. It makes me not want to be done exploring her many iterations. I don’t want to be the only person working on the Sibyl, I want everyone to. It warms my heart that there are more people that are approaching the Sibyl from different angles, and I can’t wait to read them and think about the new questions they are going to raise for me.

As far as bridging the past and present piece, I am teaching an undergraduate art history class for Cal Poly Humboldt this semester on Ancient Mediterranean Art and Myth. The first week I assigned readings

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<sup>3</sup> Spelling of wo/men is meant in an inclusive sense as described by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Reaffirming Feminist/Womanist Biblical Scholarship,” *Encounter* 67, no. 4 (2006), 366.

like “How to Teach Ancient Art in the Age of #MeToo”<sup>4</sup> and other blog posts that are amazing and relevant to current social issues and I told the students this is not going to be a milk and cookies story time type of class. I told them that we are going to be looking at images that have been weaponized to support white supremacy and rape culture and we are going to delve into their original context and question how they functioned then and now. I let them know that if that’s not what they’re looking for then drop the class, and I still ended up at capacity with 45 students. I think bridging the past and the present in this way, addressing head on the ways in which the past has continued to be present but decontextualized and reshaped to support current debates and ideologies gets students excited about learning ancient contexts they originally thought might be boring or irrelevant to them. That context challenges their assumption that the past is simple, that it fits this easy narrative that women are shut away, hidden behind closed doors, never to see the light of day. Yeah, there was some of that, there is some of that today, but that’s not the whole story. It’s complex, people were asking questions and were struggling with things. For instance, we just did a week on the iconography of Medea compared to her representation in plays. It’s initially pretty horrific when you explore depictions of her killing her children, but the viewers and listeners were asking questions about what pushed her to do this, and their stances impacted the iconography. This was not initially part of her mythic cycle so how does that shift elicit reactions and start conversations? The images we see aren’t just to be appreciated aesthetically, they were supposed to start philosophical and ethical conversations, they were the start of the conversation not the end. That is what I think scholarship ultimately should be, and what mentorship should be. I learned this by example from Erich, he encourages his students to push back and go deeper, and I did.

I love the Hellenistic world, I think that the Hellenistic Mediterranean is by far like the best period of study. The Game of Thrones has nothing on the Hellenistic Mediterranean. And it’s so much wider than most people think, it’s not just Greece and Italy, it’s northern Africa and the Near East.

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<sup>4</sup> Cynthia Colburn and Ella Gonzalez, “How to Teach Ancient Art in the Age of #MeToo,” *Hyperallergic* (New York), September 5, 2018: <https://hyperallergic.com/456269/how-to-teach-ancient-art-in-the-age-of-metoo/>. Syllabus is available at <https://sksm.academia.edu/AshleyBacchiPhD>.

There are all of these connections between places in which these stories and identities are being intertwined, reacting to one another, and yet these different locations with all these connections also had their own views on gender roles so there is a constant question about gender construction and identity. It wasn't simple, they were working with an understanding that masculinity was something that had to be maintained, you couldn't just rest into being in a male body you had to support it through actions. It created a consciousness around gender roles and gender construction that was traditionally suppressed in modern discourse and that's been coming out in so many gender dialogues now as we acknowledge that the two-sex system is a construct. As we break these binaries, I think the ancient world can help us. Not that it was perfect, but it shows that it wasn't always taken for granted that having a female voice would be a detriment, there were times in the ancient world when the female voice was seen as the most powerful voice to bring to the table. I think that's why the Sibyl was chosen by the Jewish pseudepigraphal writers of Book 3, because there was a desire for a female voice of prophecy. They felt that there was something lacking and needed to be addressed and there was power in having a female voice.

There has been a question regarding the necessity and preparation of language skills that often does not get mentioned when discussing the generation of new ideas.<sup>5</sup> I absolutely agree and I am so grateful for the training I received at UC Davis. Language is one of the primary spaces that inspiration comes from, looking at the nuances and finding connections to other works. It does take a lot of work. I mean it has been years from when I first started immersing myself in the *Sibylline Oracles* during my masters, and this book represents eleven years of really diving into the text. So, you're right it is a commitment and requires preparation which is part of the interdisciplinary piece. But I also don't want to discourage people that may not have the language skills from exploring them. For example, I do not know Aramaic so when it comes to some relevant texts, such as Enoch, I have to go to the to the experts that I know and trust. So, I think yes if it is something that you want to do an in-depth analysis in then you have to

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<sup>5</sup> Due to the format restrictions of this journal the Q&A portion has not been included and responses have been incorporated into the final remarks.

fully explore it in its original language. But that does not mean language should be seen as a hindrance to exploring the *Sibylline Oracles* from different perspectives to widen its engagement with other fields and contexts.

I have also been asked if there is a relationship between doom and apocalypse and a woman's voice: Does this have resonance for us and our own apocalyptic moment in which a 16-year-old girl is trying to shake up the world about climate change? One of the things that I argue against in the book is the traditional arguments for why the Sibyl was chosen as a Jewish pseudepigraphal voice was that she was the only persona offering this hexameter verse doom and gloom model so she was the only option. I deconstruct the argument and demonstrate that was not the case. There were other options that could have been chosen—Bakis, for example, who was often paired with the Sibyl in Greek texts so there was a male option if that was the only purpose. So I would say that I don't think the Sibyl was initially chosen by the Jewish pseudepigraphal writers because she had a doom and gloom persona, but I think she was viewed as having the capacity to hold that as well as the equal capacity to hold hope and change. I think she was seen as strong enough to deliver a message to the whole world from the highest of the high to the lowest of the low, to say "we all need to get on a better path" and to offer some guidance. I would say that rather than it being an association with the feminine and this kind of apocalyptic doom piece, that it is about being able to hold the disparate aspects of the fact that life is unjust and we might not see justice in our life and that you can't give up hope. So being able to have the power to hold those as truths and then say "listen up, it doesn't have to be this bad, get up and do something" I think that type of strength is one that we can connect with feminine resilience. That resonates today because that resilience has been so important for women's liberation movements around the world as well as so many other justice movements. So, I would say it is that potential for holding all of it at once and saying you can do something to create change.

So what do I want to see next? I want to see the Sibyl approached from so many different directions, I can't wait to read about her from perspectives I haven't thought of and in dialogue with more Hellenistic

sources in general. It has taken too long for Josephus and Philo to be integrated within classics curriculum as historians and philosophers and I would like to fast track that so the Sibyl could be integrated within curriculum in classics as well as Jewish studies and be taken seriously. I think that it's remained within certain conversations for too long and that the corpus needs to be looked at with fresh eyes and different sets of background as well as other texts, just as Erich did in his talk. There's still so much more that it can be put in dialogue with that it hasn't been yet. I hope that doctoral students read them and feel the way I did and see an opening for themselves to add to the conversation. I think that there's so much to be done from a lot of different disciplines and a lot of different mythological and political angles. Thank you again for this evening.

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