

## ART. V.—ORACLES IN THE OLDEN TIME.

IN the early days of Greek civilization, it was a universally received belief that the gods of heaven held conversation with certain individuals, who were endowed with extraordinary powers, and to whom the gods communicated their will and knowledge of the future. The means of this communication was by oracles, but they were very often obscure and ambiguous, for Horace tells us truly that

Prudens futuri temporis exitum  
Caliginosa nocte premit deus,  
Ridetque si mortalis ultra  
Fas trepidat.

Od. III., xxix. 29.

On all important occasions, both in public and private life, it was considered necessary to consult the gods. By this act men showed that they wished to pay due obedience to the commands of heaven; and when favoured with an answer, they acted with greater spirit and energy, conscious that their undertaking met the pleasure and received the sanction of the gods: but it shows also that men wished to know the issue before the commencement of their undertaking.

The manner of delivering oracles was hardly alike in any two places. In some (*χρησμοὶ ἀυτοφῶνοί*) the gods were supposed to answer *vivā voce*, by lots or by dreams; in others (*χρησμοὶ ὑποφητικῶν*) the answers were revealed by means of interpreters, as at Delphi.

The principal god was Zeus, who was the cause and origin of all kinds of divination—hence his name *πανομφαίος*—and out of the rolls of fate he revealed to inferior gods only what he thought proper. Next below Zeus was Apollo, who, acting only in subordination to his father, was the seer of the most high Zeus and the mediator between him and man. From Apollo sprang the observation of lightning, of birds, the prophecy from victims slain at the altar, and the interpretation of the will of Zeus by the use of the lot.

On the principle of *Ex uno disce omnes*, we shall treat the one at Delphi as the representative of all, because it was the most celebrated, and claimed the first place on account of its antiquity, the magnificence of its buildings and structure, the veracity and trustworthiness of its answers, the quantity and quality of its treasures, and the numbers who repaired thither for counsel and advice.

The city of Delphi was supposed to be situate in the middle of the earth. Zeus, wishing to know where the centre of the earth lay, sent forth two eagles, one from either of its extremities. The two eagles pursued their flight in entirely opposite directions, one flying due east, the other due west.

They met at Delphi, which Zeus concluded to be the central spot.

Parnassus geminos fertur junxisse volatus :  
Contulit alternas Pythius axis aves.

Claudii, Prol. in Theodor. Cons. 11.

Delphi was often called the *ὀμφαλός* (navel, or centre) of Greece, as well as of the whole earth, either as a development of the former idea, not unnatural to a Greek, or from the fact of there being in the centre of the temple itself a white hemispherical stone, with a ribbon hanging from it, which was adorned with two eagles, supposed to be the representatives of Zeus. (Cf. *οὐδ' εἰ θέλουσ', οἱ Ζητὸς ἀετοῖ.* Sophocles, "Antigone," 1040.)

Let us now see how the early Greeks supposed the oracle to have been discovered. On the rocks of Mount Parnassus some goats were straying, and when they approached a certain fissure in the earth that gave forth an intoxicating smoke, they were suddenly seized with unusual and convulsive motions. The shepherds and inhabitants of the neighbourhood came, but only to experience the same sensations on approaching this *χάσμα*, or rent in the earth, and in their delirium they uttered broken and unconnected phrases, which were taken for predictions or prophecies. Over the mouth of this fissure was placed a tripod, upon which sat a virgin, who was called Pythia, Pythonisia, or Melissa, and who delivered the answer of the god. The fumes rising from beneath the tripod so affected her brain that she sank into a state of delirious intoxication, and her utterances were considered as the revelation of Apollo. Some say the tripod was a large cauldron into which the Pythia flung herself when she expected to be inspired. The same tripod seems not to have been used continually, for we hear of three; the first was placed there by the surrounding inhabitants; the second was wrought of bronze by Hepceustus, and was an offering of Pelops on his marriage with Hippodamia; the third was of gold, and was dedicated to Apollo by some fishermen of Miletus.

The god himself chooses the medium of his revelation, and, to show that the divine will is not revealed by any human wisdom or art, Apollo employs the tongues of feeble girls and women. No extraordinary powers come in this state of inspiration, but the human being's own powers are nullified even to unconsciousness, to render the voice of the god more awful and audible. The seer herself is not capable of revelation; she understands her utterances about as much as her hearers do; so men require an interpretation, if they wish to avail themselves of her response.

Previous to the Pythia ascending the tripod, she fasted for a

certain time, washed her hair and bathed her body in the Castalian spring, and sometimes drank of its waters. As soon as she sat down upon the tripod she shook the sacred laurel tree, wreathed herself and the tripod with its leaves, and made her responses to those who, having bound their brows with laurel, entered the temple in silence. The altar, which was also crowned with laurel, stood before them at the entrance, and upon it all who were desirous of consulting Apollo must lay their tribute. "Here the priests took of their offering and burnt it upon the slab. If the day were one of consultation lots were then drawn for the precedence, and he whom Fortune favoured moved on, past the Omphalos where Apollo had reposed in early days, past the tomb of Neoptolemus, past the image of Pallas, to the steps of the shrine itself. At the foot he left his train of servants and mounted all alone, wondering at the marvels round—the open colonnades, the wondrous sculptures filling the noble tympana, each commemorating the life and labours of a god. His soul burned within him as he saw the battle of the dragon and the son of Zeus; he shuddered at the Gorgon shield of Minerva, the giants flung from heaven, the slaughtered hydra. And now the jubilant trumpets of the priests pealed out with notes that rang round the valley and up among the windings of the Hyampeian cliff. Awed into silence by the sound, he crossed the garlanded threshold: he sprinkled on his head the holy water from the fountains of gold, and entered the outer court. New statues, fresh fountains, craters and goblets, the gift of many an Eastern king, met his eye: walls emblazoned with dark sayings rose about him as he crossed towards the inner adytum. Then the music grew more loud; the interest deepened: his heart beat faster. With a sound as of many thunders, that penetrated to the crowd without, the subterranean door rolled back; the earth trembled, the laurels nodded, smoke and vapour broke commingled forth; and, railed below within a hollow of the rock, perchance he caught one glimpse of the marble effigies of Zeus and the dread sisters, one gleam of sacred arms; for one moment saw a steaming chasm, a shaking tripod—above all, a figure with fever on her cheek and foam upon her lips, who, fixing a wild eye upon space, tossed her arms aloft in the agony of her soul, and, with a shriek that never left his ear for days, chanted high and quick the dark utterances of the will of heaven."<sup>1</sup>

But Apollo did not sell his advice and knowledge of the future to every impatient inquirer. The "pure and holy" god demanded and would have a pure and holy heart in every-

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<sup>1</sup> Arnold Prize Essay, 1859.

one before he should be permitted to receive his counsel and advice. The ceremony of sprinkling the person with water from Castalia's spring was meant for a sign of inward purification. But the Pythia bade them not to deceive themselves; for the "pure and holy" one drop of the sacred spring is sufficient, but upon the wicked no quantity of water will wash away the taint of sin. Neither shall any man tempt the god in vain, for none but the "pure and holy" man is blessed by the god, whose replies the ungodly and sinful man cannot comprehend, for guile is in his soul, and his misconception of the oracle's meaning hastens him faster and faster to his ruin and downfall. In this particular respect of giving advice to private individuals Apollo was very serviceable, inasmuch as after a long and anxious time of doubt many were driven to a fixed resolve, which they cheerfully executed, trusting to the divine sanction.

Besides this great utility of giving advice, we must mention that the Delphic Apollo looked all over the world from its central position, and kept up a connection between itself and the older cities on the one hand, and the lately-founded settlements on the other. This world-wide influence of the oracle gave it a position of authority that was ever increasing. Now the feeling of a Hellenic communion was the mainspring of Delphi's independence and importance; and when this communion was dissolved, then Delphi's importance waned. On this account, if on no other, the Delphic priesthood did its utmost to keep up the idea of unity; and as it was connected with the Amphictyony, the oracle was expected to avert disputes between the tribes.

Hence we find an ancient law enacting that neither Hellene nor Hellenic state should consult the oracle when engaged in hostilities. If we accept the opinion of Curtius, we must believe that the agency of the oracle was not confined to preserving the communion between the existing sanctuaries, for there prevailed in the religion of Apollo an increasing desire to widen its circle. Accordingly, the fact that few colonies were sent out without the approval of the god is not to be accounted for merely by the reflection that the Hellenes never began an undertaking of importance without the sanction of the gods. But the whole matter of colonization was under Apollo's own peculiar guidance to such an extent that to found a colony beyond the sea without his advice and sanction involved grave impiety, and one so founded would never succeed. And Müller, followed by Curtius, explains this interest taken by Delphi in Greek colonization not only by its religious zeal, but also, and this pre-eminently, by the increase in power, glory, and profit which was added to it by

every step of colonization, it being one of its most important tasks to collect all possible information about countries; thus finding the means of showing the right courses to the colonizing impulse of the Hellenes, and by wise and timely guidance preventing a useless waste of power and an injurious tendency towards dissipating the vigour of the nation. If this be so, it was the greatest and most lasting service rendered by Delphi.

As everything relating to the gods and their worship came under the control of Delphi, so also the festivals were in some respects under its management, and, that a general harmony might prevail, it had the superintendence of the calendar also.

Further, the gods were the leading bankers, and their temples were the principal financial institutions; so the establishment of the temple served the purposes of mercantile societies and of public banks.

But this strength, importance and influence of Delphi was not to last for ever. Single states came to claim for themselves entire freedom from all sacerdotal guidance, and would have a full political sovereignty of their own. When states thus asserted their independence, Delphi had not the same command and authority as formerly, and it then began a course of wily and cautious policy; and that very priesthood which had originated and infused into its devotees the purest ideas of morality now wavered, leaning now to this side, now to that, and resorted to every kind of intrigue and disreputable means to keep its position. It was the opinion of the ancient writers that the more the gold of the East had its power acknowledged at Delphi, as elsewhere (and we cannot but notice the danger of such donations as those of Croesus), the more generally it became known (firstly through the Almæonidæ, and secondly through Cleomenes, who wished to employ the oracle to get quit of his colleague Demaratus) that the god's answers were purchasable, the lower Apollo's authority fell among the Greeks, the less became the respect for him from all sides, and the faster his glory waned.

Later on we find the oracle acting the part of an irresolute coward, even forbidding states to act with determination, as in the cases of the Cnidians, Cretans, and others.

After the thin end of the wedge had been inserted, faith and confidence in the oracle waned, and the world was soon filled with stories about the venality of the sacred chamber. It would interfere and meddle in disputes where common-sense forbade it. Even the Lacedæmonians said something about Apollo's frailty when he was tempted with Almæonid gold; but perhaps this gossip originated in the great interest which that

family took in the restoration of the temple. And sometimes Apollo issued such unjust and unreasonable commands, that even Athens did not shrink from refusing obedience.

Again, the opposite civilizing influences of the East and West had been long gathering strength, and began to calculate their forces for an engagement that appeared fatal to the Greek, as well as to the Persian. Under such circumstances what course must Delphi take? Was the god, or was he not, to animate the minds and raise the drooping spirits of his children? Must he, or must he not, fall with them if they fell, unconquered in spirit to the last? Surely yes! But Delphi pursued an utterly different and more ruinous course. We have many reasons to believe that the attention and care of the crafty Delphi had been attracted by the influential magnet of Persia, and the oracle must have been devoid of all heart, feeling and courage to have damped the struggling efforts of a city like Miletus—which was peculiarly devoted to Apollo, and which of all other cities looked up to him as its friend and patron, as we see from his title of Didymæus—by such a message as this :

καὶ τότε δὴ Μίλητε, κακῶν ἐπιμήχανε ἔργων  
πολλοῖσι δειπνὸν τε καὶ ἀγλαὰ δῶρα γένησιν.  
σοὶ δ' ἄλοχοι πολλοῖσι πῶδας νύμφουσι κομήταις  
νηῦσ' ἡμετέρου Διδύμουσ' ἄλλοισι μελήσει.

which may be translated as follows: "And at that day, Miletus, thou worker of evil deeds, thou shalt be made a banquet and a rich booty for many people. Then shall thy brides within thee bathe the feet of many a long-haired master, and other priests shall tend this holy fane."

That infallible god who says, "Thou wilt not win liberty," smother hope and crushes action, just as much as if he said, "Thou shalt not win liberty"; and he whose words *per se* decide a contest ought not to let slip the least remark that may damp and dishearten the righteous cause.

Another point is, that nothing contributed more to the fall of the oracle than the appearance and increase of a class which traded in divination, and which used a feigned *divinus afflatus* for other than honest or honourable ends. The greater part of these religious quacks hailed from Elis and Acarnania. Wandering from place to place, they were ready at any time to hire themselves out to political factions or military expeditions. Several went from house to house abusing the hospitality of the sacred farmers; and so prevalent did this practice become that to be a prophet was synonymous with being an impostor, custom having named these mendicant seers with the applicable title of "door-knockers" (*θυρόκοποι*). We learn from Plato that they professed to absolve from sin, and about many

of them we might echo Chaucer's sentiments as expressed in these lines :

Full swetely herde he confession,  
 And pleasant was his absolution.  
 He was an esy man to give penaunce.  
 He was the best beggar in all his hous,  
 For tho' a widdow hadde but a shoo,  
 Yet wold he have a farthing ere he goe.

It can hardly be said, however, that Delphi sanctioned this religious quackery, for every abuse of the mantic art wounded Delphi.

About the fourth century before the Christian era philosophy grew more controversial, and after the beginning of the next the scorn of the Cynic, the logic of the Peripatetic, and the mental tranquillity of the Epicurean, bore down upon such an illogical, dishonest, and ridiculous creed. Delphi had no longer to solve the difficulties which engrossed its attention of old. They had not to decide upon points of statesmanship, speculative religion, and casuistry. It was the winner of the coming race, success in marriage, and such points that Apollo had to foretell. He was no longer an utterer of oracles; he had become a fortune-teller. We may subscribe to the words of Plutarch, who said that when the inquiries degenerated, the morality of the answers degenerated in the same ratio.

To Philip, King of Macedon (one of whose ancestors had to prove that he came of other than Macedonian blood that he might contend in Hellenic games), the unpatriotic and cowed oracle gave the feeble support of its name, and the indignation of Hellas at its infidelity found expression in the sarcasm of Demosthenes: *ἡ Πυθία Φιλιππίζει* ("The Pythia leans to Philip"). When Delphi lost the respect of Greece it did not gain that of Macedonia. It is true that Philip did once go through the ceremony of asking its counsel and benediction. It soon discovered that the ostentation of external dependence was rather a dangerous farce to play in its dealings with the leader of a rough and intrepid soldiery. Alexander was once refused admission to the shrine, as the day was not one set apart for consultation; but he rushed in, broke through the attendants of the temple, and took the adytum by storm. The venerable Pythia merely accosted him with the words, *ὦ τέκνον ἄμαχος εἶ* ("My son, I cannot check thee").

There was none to rouse the drooping spirit, none to stand up for and uphold the dignity of Apollo. Its religion was no longer catholic, no longer worthy, and its glory had departed. Only once again did a spark of the ancient fire seem to light upon the altar. This was when the Delphians stood to arms and met a second Brennus front to front, who had led his

marauding hosts across the mountains. Victory was on the side of Delphi and the shrine was saved. When Rome extended her conquests, Delphi held its peace on all national subjects. She did entertain private inquiries, as we see from the shrewd counsel she gave to Cicero. She was obsequious in the time of the Emperors; in the reign of Domitian was silent.

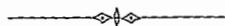
Siluit postquam reges timuere futura  
Et superos vetuere loqui.

Sacrilegious hands began to violate her holy place; her statues had gone, together with her articles of value and curiosity. Delphi was ransacked at the hands of Nero, and it had suffered the same fate nearly a dozen times before. The last blow inflicted on it was when its sacred tripod was taken to adorn the hippodrome of the new Eastern metropolis. Thenceforth Apollo spake no more.

The oracles are dumb;  
No voice or hideous hum  
Runs thro' the arched roof, in words deceiving:  
Apollo from his shrine  
Can no more divine  
With hollow shriek the steep of Delphos leaving:  
No nightly trance or breathèd spell  
Inspires the pale-eyed priest from the prophetic cell.

MILTON, "Ode to the Nativity."

J. H. WHITEHEAD.



#### ART. VI.—JEWS AND CHRISTIANS.

WHAT a wonderful race it is which is called by the name of Jew! Scattered, yet united; dispersed from their own country, yet unalterable in their patriotism; speaking different languages in the divers lands which for centuries they have inhabited, and taking from each varying manners, customs, and complexions, yet united in principle and in faith. In Russia they have 3,000,000, in Austria 1,644,000, in Germany 562,000, in Roumania 263,000, in Turkey 105,000, in Holland 82,000, in France 63,000, in Great Britain 92,000, in Italy 40,000, in Switzerland 7,000, in Scandinavia 7,000, in Servia 3,500, in Greece 2,600, in Spain 2,000. Among the different peoples of Europe they count 5,400,000. Asia probably contains 300,000, Africa 350,000, America 250,000, Australia 15,000. At the present time it is probable that of the 1,479,000,000 who inhabit the world, their race comprises some 8,000,000—about  $\frac{1}{187}$  part of the whole. Dis-