CONSULTING THE ORACLE: *SORTES BIBLICAE* IN EVANGELICALISM TO 1900

LAURA BARTLETT

MARQUETTE UNIVERSITY, THEOLOGY DEPARTMENT, 607 N. 13TH ST.
MILWAUKEE, WI, U.S.A. 53201
Laura.1.Bartlett@marquette.edu

Those who read first-hand narratives by early evangelicals will eventually come across an account by an earnest soul who opens their Bible at random to seek guidance. In fact, this practice (*sortes biblicae*) can still be found today at a popular level, making it a topic of ecclesial interest as well as a historical curiosity. *Sortes biblicae* has roots in and beyond the middle ages and saw a resurgence in the first 170 years of evangelicalism. This paper will take a closer look at the practice by examining its background and the several purposes for which it was commonly employed.[1] It will then consider why the practice flourished in early evangelicalism by tracing its development through Methodism, well-known practitioners, and cultural influences.

Sortes biblicae, or 'Bible lots' is the practice of opening the Bible at random and applying the first passage encountered to a specific question or situation of the inquirer. This is also referred to as *bibliomancy* (use of books in divination) or *sortes sanctorum* (use of sacred texts in divination). *Sortes biblicae* is a subset of both of these practices. It can be practiced either formally or informally, by placing a Bible on an altar as part of a ceremony, or the inquirer can simply open the Bible in the privacy of home. The New Testament or Psalter were in some cases used instead of the complete Bible. The Bible was sometimes opened once and sometimes several times, taking each passage as a serial part of the whole message for the inquirer. *Sortes biblicae* has ancient pagan roots, and was most commonly practiced in the middle ages, but experienced a revived interest in Evangelicalism from 1730 to 1900 and is still practiced to some degree today.

---

[1] The footnotes will indicate, when known, the denominational affiliation of the practitioner and the year in which the experience was recorded for the readers who are interested in the chronological and denomination clusters of the accounts.

ORIGINS OF USAGE

Sortes biblicae originated as an adaptation of other types of sortilege, such as *sortes homerica* and *sortes virgiliane*, in which the inquirer would draw a random line from the works of Homer or Virgil to predict the future or answer a question. Though usage of *bibliomancy* predates the New Testament, *sortes biblicae* was in its height of popularity in the middle ages, especially the early middle ages.

The most well-known instance of *sortes biblicae* was by St. Augustine of Hippo. In the year 386, he heard the now-famed words of the child in the garden, 'tolle lege, tolle lege' and recalled that Saint Anthony was converted upon a random reading of Matthew 6:21. Augustine opened a Bible at random to Romans 13:13-14 ('Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and impurities, not in strife and envying; but put you on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh in its concupiscences.'),[2] and later wrote that 'as if before a peaceful light streaming into my heart, all the dark shadows of doubt fled away'. Augustine was converted, calling the experience a direct work of God: 'you had converted me to yourself.'[3]

Church councils forbade the usage of *sortes biblicae*, beginning with the council of Vannes in 461.[4] *Sortes biblicae* and other types of divination were so popular and persistent that many councils after Vannes also condemned it and attached punitive measures to it, including excommunication. Ironically, Augustine himself writes that he disapproves of *sortes biblicae*, but allows it as a concession, suggesting, 'As to those who read futurity by taking at random a text from the pages of the Gospels, it could be wished that they would do this rather than run around consulting demons.'[5]

In antiquity, the practice may at times have been believed to be effective because of the holiness of Scripture itself. The book is hagiography, holy writing, a physical representation of Christ; so, turning to the Bible for guidance was effective in itself, without need to appeal to God to

---

2 King James Version

3 Augustine and J.K. Ryan, *The Confessions of St. Augustine* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1960), Bk. VIII, 29-30.

4 Rulings in other councils: 314 Council of Ancyra (can. 24) forbade divination; 461/91 Council of Vannes condemned *sortes sanctorum* and *sortes biblicae* (can. 16); 506 Council of Agde condemned *sortes sanctorum* and *sortes biblicae* (can. 42); 511 Council of Orleans condemned *sortes sanctorum*, but allowed *sortes biblicae*.

5 B.M. Metzger, 'Sortes Biblicae,' in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, ed. by Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 713.

guide the *sortes*. However, many examples in evangelicalism of *sortes biblicae* include an appeal to God for guidance so it can be assumed that, in theory, most evangelical inquirers did not see the act of opening the holy book as effective by itself for divination. In practice, many evangelicals recorded an ethereal experience with the text in which the words of Scripture seemed to glow upon the page. Although these inquirers record a supernatural experience with the text, they likely still understood this as the providence of God rather than magic or fate outside of the providence of God. John Quincy Adams addresses this in a letter in reference to usage of *sortes biblicae*, which he uses himself: 'If there was any Faith in the sortes Virgilianae, or sortes Homerica, or especially the Sortes biblicae, it would be thought providential.'[6]

It is not difficult to see why early evangelicals would have understood their practice of *sortes biblicae* to be biblical and that the outcome would be guided by God. In the Old Testament law, the priest was commanded to cast lots to determine which goat should be sacrificed. Proverbs 16:33 specifically teaches that God determines the result of lots: 'The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the LORD.' In the story of Jonah, the sailors use lots to discern that Jonah was the one who had caused the tempest to endanger their ship. Also, the disciples chose Matthias, the disciple who replaced Judas, by casting lots. These passages all indicate that God makes his will known through lots, and evangelicals who took these examples as instructive had strong basis for defending *sortes biblicae*. This seems to be the attitude of Wesley, who borrowed phrasing from Scripture to support *sortes biblicae*: 'Hereby I am come to know assuredly that if "in all our ways we acknowledge" God, He will, where reason fails, "direct our paths" by lot or by the other means which he knoweth.'[7]

INSTANCES OF *SORTES BIBLICAE* IN EVANGELICALISM

In Evangelicalism from the First Great Awakening until 1900, there are many examples of people recording their experiences with using *sortes biblicae*. Men and women, clergy, evangelists, and laity alike write that they received direction in this way. The set of instances found for this study fall into several categories of situations and questions that the inquirers were turning to *sortes biblicae* to address: theological questions;

---

6 J.Q. Adams, *John Quincy Adams to Arthur Tappan*. Letter 1845. <http://www.yale.edu/glc/archive/1051.htm> [accessed 27 October 2011].

7 J. Wesley, *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M., Sometime Fellow of Lincoln College*, Oxford (London: J. Kershaw, 1827), p. 79.

assurance of salvation; choice of Scripture passage on which to preach; need for encouragement; a word of knowledge; and direction for action.

One reason that evangelicals chose to consult *sortes biblicae* was to find the answer to a theological question. For example, Joan Webb wanted to know whether people could have assurance of their salvation. She opened her Bible at random to 'a chapter in the epistles of John', and found confirmation.[8] In another case, a young sailor was troubled about the problem of the existence of evil occasioned by the cruelty of an officer. This sailor opened his Bible at random to Psalm 37 and was reassured by the words, 'Fret not thyself by evil-doers, neither be thou envious against the workers of iniquity: for they shall soon be cut down like the grass.' The sailor believed 'it must be the doing of God himself that my eye lighted just on the very passage of all the thousands of verses in the Bible which exactly rebukes my doubt'. This was a pivotal experience in the sailor's life, whereby he ceased to doubt, and gave his life up to God's service.[9]

Another common reason that people used *sortes biblicae* was to seek assurance of salvation.[10] Sarah Osborn, for instance, was concerned that 'her hope would surely perish'. In fear, she opened her Bible and read the first lines she saw. She read from Isaiah 54 and was comforted, observing 'These great promises were so adapted to every particular of my circumstances, and applied by the Spirit of God, with such great power, that they strengthened me exceedingly.'[11] Osborn thus took the words she read as a particular word of God to her addressing her situation and specific concern. Mary Porteus propositioned God even more directly, pleading

> Lord, if thou has not given me up to a reprobate mind, and canst have mercy on such a wretch, let me open thy book on a promise; but if thou hast, let me have a threatening.

She opened her Bible at random (to Hosea 14:4) and reports

---

8 J. Webb [letter], *Early Methodist Volume* located at Manchester, John Rylands Library, Methodist Archives. Webb was a Methodist and had this experience in 1742.

9 Rev A. M. W. Christopher, 'The Power of the Word,' *The Monthly Reporter of the British and Foreign Bible Society* 13, no. 3 (1884), 48.

10 This is distinct from Joan Webb's experience, who wanted to know whether assurance was possible, rather than find assurance for herself personally.

11 S. Hopkins and S. Osborn, *Memoirs of the Life of Mrs. Sarah Osborn: Who Died at Newport, Rhode Island*, 2nd edn (Catskill: N. Elliot, 1814), p. 39. Osborn was a Congregationalist and had this experience c. 1737.

> Mercy at once presented to my eye that most encouraging of all passages to a person in my condition--'I will heal thy backslidings, and will love thee freely.' This was enough. I at once believed, and was blessed with glorious liberty. The work was done.

Porteus took this passage as authoritative, binding, and effective. Still, the editors of the volume note here that 'her example here is, we think, not safe for general imitation'.[12]

Evangelical teachers sometimes chose to use *sortes biblicae* for guidance on which passage to preach about. Getting up to preach, Harriet Burnett Hastings 'concluded to let the Lord guide [her], and to frankly tell [the congregation] the truth about the matter'. She

> opened [her] Bible, thinking to take the first text which met [her] eyes. It was this: 'Thou shalt be visited of the Lord of hosts with thunder and with earthquake and great noise; with storm and tempest, and the *flame of devouring fire*.'

She did preach on this passage, and later learned that the delivery of this sermon coincided with a great fire in Boston.[13] Revd David Marks likewise desired to preach a sermon against those in his neighbourhood who were given up to the doctrine of predestination. He opened his Bible and preached on the first verse that met his eyes. Marks' passage was Psalm 94:20—'Shall the throne of iniquity have fellowship with thee?' Marks taught (apparently convincingly for his audience) that Satan's 'throne of iniquity' was that of fatality without free will. Marks understood this as divine guidance and believed that 'the Lord filled [his] mouth with arguments'.[14]

Further, people used the *sortes biblicae* as a way of finding encouragement from God in their specific situation. Revd Charles Sage wrote that he prayed regarding dark days in his ministry, 'Lord, if you desire me to go on with the work, you will have to encourage me.' He opened his Bible at

---

[12] J. Lightfoot and M. Porteus, *The Power of Faith and Prayer Exemplified in the Life and Labours of Mrs. Mary Porteus, Late of Durham, Who for Fourteen Years was a Local Preacher in the Primitive Methodist Connexion* (Leeds: R. Davies, 1862), p. 28. Porteus was a Primitive Methodist and had this experience c. 1803.

[13] H.B. Hastings, *Pebbles from the Path of a Pilgrim* (London: H.L. Hastings, 1882), p. 269 (emphasis in original). Hastings' denomination is unclear. She had this experience in 1872.

[14] D. Marks and M. Marks, *Memoirs of the Life of David Marks, Minister of the Gospel* (Dover, NH: Free-will Baptist Printing Establishment, 1846), p. 107. Marks was a Free-Will Baptist. He had this experience in 1823.

random to 2 Samuel 18, in which David was in danger and his army came to his aid. Sage took courage from this and went forward with his ministry.[15] Mary Winslow also used the *sortes biblicae* for encouragement: one night, she was struggling with care, anxiety, unbelief, and spiritual strife. She 'went to the Lord and asked for the help which only he could give'. The answer came when she randomly opened her Bible to Isaiah 53:4 ('Surely he hath borne our grief...') and was immediately comforted, assured, and delighted with God's love.[16]

Another reason that people used *sortes biblicae* was to gain a word of knowledge—to determine specific information regarding a question they had. A Mrs D. 'prayed that she might be directed to some passage of scripture which would indicate [Elder Jacob Knapp's] real character'. She opened to Psalm 91:15-16 and was assured to read: 'He shall call upon me, and I will answer him: I will be with him in trouble; I will deliver him, and honor him.' Both Mrs D. and Elder Knapp drew conviction from this that God was on his side.[17]

A final category of guidance people sought from *sortes biblicae* was for direction in action. The evangelist John Berridge, associate of Wesley, turned to *sortes biblicae* to determine whether he should marry or not ('I truly had thoughts of looking out for a Jezebel myself'). He reported in a letter to Selina Hastings, Countess of Huntingdon, that the passage that he alighted on was unfavourable to matrimony, so he decided to remain a single man (fortunately for the women of his acquaintance).[18] Revd Joseph Badger, likewise, was lonely and in grief and wished to know what his duty was. He opened his Bible at random to the passage, 'The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved.' This caused him not to doubt his salvation, but to feel called to preach salvation to others while there was still time. Badger recognized this as a specific direction for his

---

15 C. H. Sage, *Autobiography of Rev. Charles H. Sage: Embracing an Account of His Pioneer Work in Michigan, of the Formation of the Canada Conference and of His Labors in various States* (Chicago: Free Methodist Publishing House, 1903). Sage was a Free Methodist. He had this experience in 1879.

16 O. Winslow, *Life in Jesus: A Memoir of Mrs. Mary Winslow Arranged from Her Correspondance, Diary, and Thoughts* (New York: Robert Carter & Bros., 1860), p. 208.

17 J. Knapp, *Autobiography of Elder Jacob Knapp* (Boston: Sheldon, 1868). Knapp was a Baptist and a Revivalist.

18 A. C. H. Seymour. *The Life and Times of Selina, Countess of Huntingdon. Volume 1.* (London: William Edward Painter, 1840), pp. 388-90. Berridge was an Anglican.

life from God as he was 'much satisfied that God was drawing [him] into ministry by these impressions'.[19]

There are several striking aspects that these narratives of usage of *sortes biblicae* have in common. First, in each instance, the inquirer finds an answer to the question he or she is asking. The inquirer does not determine that the passage is unclear or fails to address their issue. Second, the answer that is found is viewed as authoritative. The inquirer attends to and follows or believes the guidance that is found. Third, these evangelicals are unashamed and unapologetic about their usage of *sortes biblicae.* However, at times the amanuensis, biographer, or editor is apologetic. The pratitioners' boldness is striking, especially in the later instances, given that it was a controversial practice, as will be discussed in the next section. And finally, the instances of *sortes biblicae* often lead to a pivotal decision in the life of the inquirer.

It should be noted well that the examples of *sortes biblicae* in evangelical literature are not wholly representative of the actual practice. The very fact that these instances were recorded means that the subjects likely found these experiences especially notable and often the subjects were knowingly publicizing their experience, so the subjects were unlikely to be ashamed of the practice and probably self-selected the 'best' examples of *sortes biblicae.*

NOTABLE PRACTITIONERS OF *SORTES BIBLICAE*

John Humphrey Noyes, founder of the Oneida community, relied on *sortes biblicae* to determine a course of action and to gain spiritual direction. In 1832, Noyes used *sortes biblicae* to decide to enrol in school at New Haven.[20] Two years later, when Noyes became convinced that Wesley's ideal of Christian perfection was a biblical idea, he was struggling with his difficulties at attaining perfection. He opened his Bible at random three times to hear from God on the matter. First to Luke 1:35 ('The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee...'). Noyes says of this, 'The words seemed to glow upon the page, and my spirit heard a voice from heaven through them promising me the baptism of the Holy Spirit and the second birth.' Noyes opened his Bible again, expecting the Lord would speak to him again. The

[19] E.G. Holland, *Memoir of Rev. Joseph Badger* (Boston: C. S. Francis and Co., 1854), p. 66. Badger was a Congregationalist.

[20] J.H. Noyes and G.W. Noyes, *Religious Experience of John Humphrey Noyes, Founder of the Oneida Community* (New York: Macmillan, 1923), p. 57. Noyes was a Perfectionist evangelical at the time of these experiences in 1832 and 1834.

passage was 2 Timothy 4:16-18 ('The Lord stood with me, and strengthened me; that by me the preaching might be fully known, and that all the Gentiles might hear; and I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion. And the Lord shall deliver me from every evil work, and will preserve me unto his heavenly kingdom...'). Oneida says 'again my soul drank in a spiritual promise appropriate to my situation, an assurance of everlasting victory'. A third time Noyes opened his Bible at random, upon Acts 5:20 ('Go, stand and speak in the temple to the people all the words of this life.'). Noyes says of this experience that he 'had conversed with God, that [his] course was marked out,' and that he was on the verge of attaining holiness.[21] Noyes thus felt his experience to be very spiritual, impactful, and was confident that God was speaking to him directly. Both of these incidents occurred while Noyes was still an evangelical, before forming the Oneida community.

Carry Nation, evangelical temperance crusader, used *sortes biblicae* to find encouragement. In the year 1900, after being thrown into prison for smashing up a bar in Kansas, Nation was in agony one day and told God that he must come to her aid. She opened her Bible at random ('as I often do') to Psalm 144 and found encouragement and affirmation of her work. She says that

> God told me in this chapter that he led me to 'fight with my fingers and war with my hands;' that he would be my refuge and deliverer; that he would use me to bring the people to him.[22]

The Moravian founder Count Zinzendorf employed *sortes sanctorum*, and at times *sortes biblicae* specifically, for decision making and made the practice normative for the Moravians. Moravian historian Joseph Levering reports that Zinzendorf personally used lots very often, and this practice was made a part of the official church government decision-making process and applied in many ways from the governing of the church as a whole to individual church members.[23] *Sortes biblicae* was then used by a wider group of Moravians in decision making.[24] Sortilege was used, for example, in the cases of marriage or ordination of ministers or missionaries. The intent was that the Moravian church should be governed by Christ, like a theocracy. By the General Synod in 1782, though, opposi-

---

21 Noyes and Noyes, *Religious Experience*, p. 57.

22 C. A. Nation, *The Use and Need of Carry A. Nation* (Topeka, KS: F.M. Steves & Sons, 1908), p. 148.

23 J. M. Levering, *A History of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, 1741-1892* (Bethlehem, PA: Times Publishing Company, 1903), pp. 102-3 n. 7.

24 C. T. Winchester, *The Life of John Wesley* (London: Macmillan, 1906), p. 69.

tion to this method of governing was so strong that the Moravian church began to reduce its usage of the practice over time until it was completely abolished.[25]

THE WESLEYS AND *SORTES BIBLICAE*

John Wesley was the most famous and one of the most prolific of the evangelical users of *sortes biblicae*. After the year and a half Wesley spent allied with Zinzendorf and the Moravians he parted ways with them, but his attitude toward *sortes biblicae* demonstrates some of the lasting effects of the experience with the Moravians on his theology. He specifically mentions learning *sortes biblicae* from the Herrnhut Brethren.[26] The attitude that God can and will reliably make his direction known to earnest users of sortilege was the basis of the Moravian practice which Wesley did not cast off when he left the Moravians.

Furthermore, though Wesley intentionally distanced himself in many ways from the mysticism popular with the Moravians, he retained some of the values of mysticism. The mystic quietist view of spirituality emphasizes a direct, personal relationship with God.[27] The practice of *sortes biblicae* is a direct personal experience with God, like the mystics valued, but, for Wesley, led beyond the experience to a practical application of direction for action or belief.

Wesley used the *sortes biblicae* from the very beginning of his Christian life, at his conversion at Aldersgate. In 1738, he was struggling with a feeling of condemnation and seeking assurance of faith. In this state, he opened his Testament at random to 1 Peter 1:4: 'There are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises; even that ye should be partakers of the divine nature.' Again he opened the Testament to a random page and read: 'Thou art not far from the kingdom of God.' It was later that day that he professed faith, saying: 'I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.'[28]

Furthermore, Wesley frequently used the *sortes biblicae* to determine a text for preaching, as did many Methodists after him, believing that 'the

---

[25] Levering, *A History of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania*, p. 102.

[26] J. Wesley, *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M., Sometime Fellow of Lincoln College, Oxford*, p. 79.

[27] J. E. T. Rattenbury, *Wesley's Legacy to the World: Six Studies in the Permanent Values of the Evangelical Revival*, p. 121.

[28] Wesley, *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley*, p. 294.

Divine Spirit would guide him infallibly in his choice'.[29] It is notable that he sought guidance from God in several pivotal points in his life—his conversion, leaving the Moravian Church, and his decision to leave his ministry at Oxford to join George Whitefield in Bristol.[30]

John's brother Charles Wesley also used *sortes biblicae*. In one instance, he was meeting with a woman and used *sortes biblicae* for spiritual direction. He sensed that she was inclined toward faith, but afraid to profess it. Wesley 'consulted the oracle for her'. They turned to a series of passages (Isa. 30:18; 2 Cor. 5:17-21; and Luke 8:39), which served to embolden the woman to profess her faith and thanksgiving.[31] In another case, Charles looked to the *sortes biblicae* for direction for action: whether he should interpose for criminals. Turning to Jeremiah 44:16-17, he interpreted that he should not do so.[32]

Devout following of the leading of the Holy Spirit was one of the legacies of John and Charles Wesley to subsequent generations of Methodists. Says J. E. Rattenbury: 'Methodist polity is an evidence that the activities of the Holy Spirit are as operative in modern as in ancient times for men who follow His guidance, as John Wesley did.'[33] Wesley's legacy of looking to *sortes biblicae* for clear, concrete direction from God[34] is evidenced in the examples of usage of *sortes biblicae* by the several Methodists[35] named in this article, as well as Revd John Berridge, who, while not a Methodist, was heavily influenced by Wesley.[36]

---

29 Lecky, *A History of England in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 561; H. Taine, *History of English Literature*, p. 96.

30 Wesley, *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley*, p. 169.

31 C. Wesley, *The Journal of the Rev. Charles Wesley, M.A.: Sometime Student of Christ Church, Oxford: The Early Journal, 1736-1739* (London: R. Culley, 1909), p. 98.

32 C. Wesley, *Journal of Charles Wesley*, p. 6.

33 J.E. Rattenbury, *Wesley's Legacy to the World: Six Studies in the Permanent Values of the Evangelical Revival* (London: Epworth Press / Nashville: Cokesbury Press, 1929), p. 139.

34 Weeter says that Wesley used *sortes Biblicae* only as a last resort, after much prayer and fasting. I believe this is not correct—while it is true that Wesley understood that he was seeking God, he seemed to use *sortes biblicae* more readily than this. M. L. Weeter, *John Wesley's View and use of Scripture.* (Eugene, Or.: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2007), p. 154.

35 'The early Methodist world was supernatural world. They expected to find traces of God's activity and communication throughout.' L. Ruth, *Early Methodist Life and Spirituality: A Reader* (Nashville, TN.: Kingswood Books, 2005), p. 161.

36 E. H. Sugden, *The Standard Sermons of John Wesley* (London: John Mason, 1829), p. 97. Sugden believed that Wesley had stopped using sortes biblicae

SORTES BIBLICAE: A PRODUCT OF ITS ERA

In addition to the influence of the Wesleys to popularize *sortes biblicae*, three cultural factors likely drove acceptance of the practice: Romanticism, emphasis on *sola scriptura*, and populism.

Romanticism was an influential movement during much of the period of this study. According to Martin Schmidt, John Wesley introduced the spiritual culture of the Romantic mystics into the eighteenth-century religious climate. Aspects of Romanticism such as individualism/ego, emotionalism, supernatural, and medievalism can all be seen as adding to the popularity of *sortes biblicae*.[37] Romanticism elevated the individual and the ego, which emboldened evangelicals to believe that God would speak to them directly in the large or minute issues of their life through *sortes biblicae*. The emotionalism and sentimentality of Romanticism played into *sortes biblicae* as a dramatic means of decision-making, imbuing the decision with all the more significance upon the belief that it was God's will for the individual. The supernatural inclination of Romanticism was satiated by divination and the principle of *sortes biblicae* that there is an active unseen world and the user can interface with a divine force at any time by simply opening the Bible. One of the longings of the Romantics was to cross over the barriers of history, and the medieval world was especially attractive because of its foreignness and otherness.[38] *Sortes biblicae* may have been especially compelling due to its historical basis in the middle ages.

The concept of *sola scriptura* probably also served as an impetus to the practice of *sortes biblicae* among evangelicals. With the elevation of Scripture as the final authority on matters of faith and practice, believers may have been inclined to accept this authority as broadly as possible. In this case, it meant not only submitting to the Bible's contextual instruction, but also using its words to guide smaller and amoral life decisions beyond the scope its authors intended.

The populist values in early evangelicalism, especially within Methodism, must have been a third factor in the wide appeal of *sortes biblicae*. Christian populism empowered a wide range of people to hear from and to speak for God. *Sortes biblicae*, likewise enabled anyone--regardless of

---

later in his life, by 1750, because of the silence about the practice in his sermons after this time.

[37] M. Schmidt, *John Wesley: A Theological Biography* (New York: Abingdon, 1962), p. 13.

[38] B. M. G. Reardon, *Religion in the Age of Romanticism: Studies in Early Nineteenth Century Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 12.

education (as long as the practitioner could read), gender, or status in the church and society –to be able to hear from God and feel that they could speak authoritatively about what they heard.

CRITICS OF *SORTES BIBLICAE*

One tactic that contemporaneous critics of evangelical usage of *sortes biblicae* employed was to point out the link and comparison to ancient methods of divination, which nearly all conservative evangelicals would have agreed were unorthodox. The minutes of the 95th meeting of the Congregational Churches disparagingly described *sortes biblicae* as 'the oft-obeyed impulse to open the Bible at random, as the ancients opened their Virgil, as a magic book to tell fortunes by'.[39] Similarly, the Westminster Review reported that

> Superstition was universal [in third century Rome]...the old methods of consulting the gods were still practised — viz., the haruspex, the auspices, the casting of lots, the taking at random of certain verses from Homer, or even Virgil, just as certain devout people, even now, open the Bible at random to find guidance in perplexity.[40]

The New American Cyclopaedia disparagingly claims that *sortes* is a relic of Bath-Kol, an ancient Jewish method of divination.[41] In a related criticism, the New Englander Journal asks, 'Do not even the Mohammedans the same with the Koran?'[42] Thus, the critics made an impactful argument by associating *sortes biblicae* with practices that all conservative evangelicals would have condemned.

Several critics admonished the disposition of the users of *sortes biblicae*, saying that they were being sentimental or unintelligent, believing in a practice that is not based on reason. Congregational minister Spencer Pearsall said: 'The Word of God must be read intelligently. The reader must avail himself of the many invaluable helps which are supplied in

---

39 *Minutes of the 95th Annual Meeting, Congregational Churches of Massachusetts* (Congregational Sunday School and Publishing Society, 1897), p. 91.

40 'The Religion of Rome during the Third Century', *The Westminster Review* 132 (1889), 260. *The Westminster Review* was a skeptical journal.

41 'Bath-Kol,' in *The New American Cyclopaedia: A Popular Dictionary of General Knowledge* (London: D. Appleton and Company, 1859), p. 736.

42 Revd C. J. H. Ropes, 'The Importance and the Method of Bible Study', *The New Englander* 41 (1882), 572.

critical works on the Bible.'[43] Similarly, an excerpt from the Bell Street Chapel Discourses contrasted *sortes biblicae* and common sense:

> common sense does not feel that in cases of difficulty and doubt it must shut its eyes and open the Bible at random, as some used to do, expecting a magical answer to a prayer for guidance. No, average men and women are to-day so wise in respect to the practical Art of the Religious Life that they deal with facts and inferences at first hand.[44]

Another criticism was that users of *sortes biblicae* were demonstrating an incorrect view of God or the Bible. Charles Vaughan made the criticism that *sortes biblicae* is a misuse of the Bible: 'The oracle itself is vocal only to the wise; only, that is, to those who daily visit it, and seek to frame life and speech, thought and action, habitually by its rule.'[45] Spencer Pearsall said that the user of *sortes biblicae* is disrespectful: 'The custom of reading the Bible at random, and always the smallest portion, or certain favourite parts, is not honouring to God.'[46] Gail Hamilson asserted that Christians who practice *sortes* misunderstand something of God's nature:

> We are ever clamoring that God should be oracular, and he never is. Sometimes we try to make the Bible oracular by opening it at random and putting a blind finger on a verse. But this, also, is vanity. God is inexorable. He will not say to us yea or nay.[47]

Lastly, Samuel Pike, an early evangelical critic of *sortes biblicae*, found several points of contention with the disposition of the inquirer:

> There are some Christians who are fond of using the Bible as if it were a Fortune-Book: When a Difficulty in Prudence or Duty occurs, they will open the Bible at Random, and observe what Text meets their Eyes first; and, according as the wild Imagination applies that Passage to the Point in Question, so they think it their Duty to act. This is a very weak and dangerous Practice, and a

---

43 J. S. Pearsall, 'The Daily Reading of the Scriptures', *Evangelical Magazine and Missionary Chronicle* 1 (1869), 699.

44 A. G. Spencer and J. Eddy, *Bell Street Chapel Discourses* (Providence, R.I.: Journal of Commerce Co., 1899), p. 71.

45 C. J. Vaughan, *Church of the First Days: Lectures on the Acts of the Apostles* (Cambridge: Macmillan and Co., 1864), p. 258.

46 J. S. Pearsall, 'The Daily Reading of the Scriptures,' *Evangelical Magazine and Missionary Chronicle* 1 (1869), 699.

47 G. Hamilson, 'The American Vedas,' *The North American Review* 144 (1887), 637.

> sad Abuse of the Word of God, applying it to a Purpose for which the Holy Ghost never intended it.[48]

This sample of pre-20th C. critiques of *sortes biblicae* confirm that the practice was common enough to require refutation, and demonstrate the controversy surrounding it. Comparing *sortes biblicae* to ancient magical practices, criticizing the attitudes of the inquirers, and arguing the theological validity of the practice emerge as common themes in much of the criticism. Nearly all of the criticisms of *sortes biblicae* found for this study were published in the latter half of the 19th century, possibly suggesting that as the influence of Romanticism began to fade, opposition to the practice grew louder.

CONCLUSION

Sortes Biblicae as practiced by evangelicals was used as a way to have a window into God's mind, on matters of belief, practice, and emotional support. Many evangelicals used it boldly, authoritatively, and routinely, although other evangelicals criticized the motives, beliefs, and history that underlie the practice. The practice appears to be especially prevalent in the Methodist tradition, as the Moravians practiced sortilege and influenced John Wesley, who was an avid user of *sortes biblicae*. Some of Wesley's associates, including Charles Wesley and evangelist John Berridge practiced *sortes biblicae* as well. The practice seems to have been embedded in Methodist tradition, as a disproportionate number of cases found in this study were from evangelicals within a Methodist tradition. *Sortes biblicae* can also be seen as, in part, a product of its era, as Romanticism, the Protestant emphasis on *sola scriptura*, and evangelical/Methodist populism held sway among evangelicals from during the time period in question. Perhaps those who encounter its use within evangelicalism today will find that many of those same motivating factors are still in effect.

[48] S. Pike and S. Hayward, *Some Important Cases of Conscience Answered* (London: J. Buckland; T. Field; E. Dilly; and J. Robinson: 1755), p. 164.