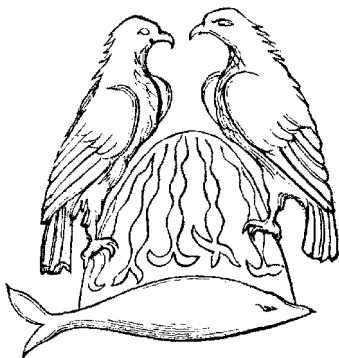


## When the gods ceased to speak

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*Abstract:* When the Christian message spread through the Greco-Roman world of the first century AD, the ancient world was facing a theological crisis of its own. The gods, so much revered in the Greek oracle religion, had ceased to speak. It wasn't the Christians or the Jews saying so, but members of the Greek philosophical and religious elite, as they discussed this matter during a meeting in Delphi, which was described by the Greek philosopher, priest and politician Plutarch. This paper provides an introduction to the Greek oracle religion in Delphi; shows how Plutarch and his learned friends treated the cessation of the oracles as a practical reality; and summarises the reasons they suggest for the failure of divine communication in their lifetime. This paper proposes that Plutarch entertained the thought that even the gods might be dying, as the ultimate cause behind the cessation of the oracles.



*Golden eagles and dolphin of Delphi, symbolising, respectively, the centre of the World and the god Apollo (Middleton 1888:295)*

### *Summary:*

1.	The Oracle in Delphi	3.5	The gods and secondary causes
		3.5.1	Daemons
2	Apollo and Delphi	3.5.2	Extinction of the daemons?
		3.5.3.	The great Pan is dead!
3.	Friends meet in Delphi	3.5.4	How daemons communicate
3.1	A practical reality: the oracles have ceased	3.5.5	How humans receive their message
3.2	No practical expectation	3.6	The secondary causes and tools wither
3.3	The silence of the gods	3.6.1	Receptiveness in humans as a factor
3.4	A crisis of faith & decrease in population	3.7	Plutarch's ultimate crisis

## 1. The Oracle in Delphi

Delphi (Δελφοί) in Greece is a beautiful place of splendid mountain scenery. For good reason it was regarded as the place of stone,<sup>1</sup> as it boasts a relatively dry and rocky environment. The word Delphi itself suggests that we are to delve even deeper for its meaning. Perhaps we should even dig in a literal way,<sup>2</sup> look into the earth itself,<sup>3</sup> where mysterious vapours from a chasm inspired the prophetess of old. Delphi certainly inspired the Greeks in ancient times, in more horizontal ways as well. The story goes<sup>4</sup> that after the Greek states joined hands and defeated the Persians in the fifth century BC, all cities extinguished their fires, which was a major thing to do as those were the days without matches and lighters. They, however, had a reason for this drastic measure. Each city should receive fresh fire from the spiritual centre of Greece, Delphi.<sup>5</sup> The site had what they called an eternal flame,<sup>6</sup> probably fed by natural gasses that flowed up from its inner hearth,<sup>7</sup> although these eternal fires could be fed by human endeavour as well (using wood, oil or other fuel).

The sacred fire of Vesta in Rome is another example of this phenomenon in the ancient world. It is not unknown to Biblical history either. In Leviticus 6:13 the Lord commanded Moses that: “The fire shall ever be burning upon the altar; it shall never go out.”<sup>8</sup> It was God himself that had lid this fire. Both the tabernacle service<sup>9</sup> and King Solomon’s temple<sup>10</sup> were dedicated in this Divine way. By keeping the fire burning Israel continued the work of God in their midst. This would show how they valued their relationship with God, but also how they served Him day and night.

## 2 Apollo and Delphi

In Greek mythology Delphi is closely linked to the prominent god Apollo.<sup>11</sup> The word Δελφοί suggests a connection to the ancient ‘wombfish,’ the dolphin. Even today, these happy fish regularly surface in Greek waters. In one of the Homeric hymns Apollo appears in the shape of a dolphin.<sup>12</sup> Delphi would be the place of the dolphin god.<sup>13</sup> Apollo’s many duties seems to have included both healing<sup>14</sup> and administering plagues, directing a choir of

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<sup>1</sup> Greek: Ομφαλός, or centre of the world. (Halsberghe 1989:192) It has also been suggested that this stone place was a miniature beehive tomb (Harrison 1899:226). According to Strabo Zeus discovered this centre of the earth by the meeting of two eagles in their respective flights from the extreme East and West. For this reason, in early days, the omphalos in Delphi displayed two golden eagles. (Middleton 1888:295) The idea that Delphi’s omphalos might have been associated with an oracle of the Earth, has met with great reservations. (Hodge 1981:83,84) In a wider sense, an association of Delphi with a cult that preceded Apollo’s, worshipping earth goddess Gaia, has also been established. (Avagianou 1998:123)

<sup>2</sup> If one makes a connection between δελφός and a womb or cave in the earth.

<sup>3</sup> About the Delphic cave, cf. Elderkin (1941:125-127).

<sup>4</sup> About the role of Delphi in Greek colonisation, cf. Pease (1917:1-20).

<sup>5</sup> For the role of Delphic oracles in Greek history, Herodotus in particular, see Nilsson (1986:123-130) and Fairbanks (1906:37-48).

<sup>6</sup> Greek: άσβεστος φλόγα

<sup>7</sup> Greek: έστία

<sup>8</sup> Leviticus 6:13 (6:6): και πῦρ δια παντός κωνθήσεται έπι τὸ θυσιαστήριον οὐ σβεσθήσεται.

<sup>9</sup> Leviticus 9:24 And there came a fire out from before the LORD, and consumed upon the altar the burnt offering and the fat: which when all the people saw, they shouted, and fell on their faces.

<sup>10</sup> 2 Chronicles 7:1 Now when Solomon had made an end of praying, the fire came down from heaven, and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices; and the glory of the LORD filled the house.

<sup>11</sup> Greek: Απόλλων or Απόλλων.

<sup>12</sup> Phoebus Apollo, cf. Hesiod (1914, Homeric hymns 11. 388-439). Cf. Dempsey (1918:183-188).

<sup>13</sup> Some object that Delphi is not presently located at the sea, but this poses no barrier to calling the place after its prominent god who was associated with dolphins. Also, it is not very far from Delphi down to the port of Itea on the Gulf of Corinth.

<sup>14</sup> His son Asclepius (Άσκληπιός) was the god of medicine.

beautiful muses, encouraging colonists and protecting herds and flocks. From classical times he was also associated with the sun<sup>15</sup> and appreciated as the god of light and truth. Apollo was the one to look up to for divine direction.<sup>16</sup> It was in this capacity that he would become associated with Delphi.

Legend has it that in very ancient days Delphi was the lair of a dragon or serpent (*δράκαινα*) from below the surface of the earth,<sup>17</sup> quite possibly hiding in one of its caves and adding to the site's natural vapours. This dragon was called Python, the name providing an easy association with the species of non-venomous constricting snakes in tropical rainforest regions. Later, Delphi would be home to the Pythian Games, which derives its name from Apollo's battle with the dragon.<sup>18</sup> As the god picked up a laurel at Tempe (in Thessaly) before he came to Delphi, winners at the games would be presented with a wreath of laurels.

Python, the magic dragon, was sent by Zeus angered wife Hera. Apollo went out to kill it. This is described in fragments<sup>19</sup> extant from the writings of Hesiod (1914, Homeric Hymns 11. 300-309):

*But near by was a sweet flowing spring, and there with his strong bow  
the lord, the son of Zeus, killed the bloated, great she-dragon,  
a fierce monster wont to do great mischief to men upon earth,  
to men themselves and to their thin-shanked sheep;  
for she was a very bloody plague.  
She it was who once received from gold-throned Hera  
and brought up fell, cruel Typhaon<sup>20</sup> to be a plague to men.  
Once on a time Hera bare him because she was angry with father Zeus,  
when the Son of Cronos bare all-glorious Athena in his head.*

In this Homeric hymn, Hera's exclusion from bringing about Athena provoked her temper. According to a later version Hera's anger had a different source,<sup>21</sup> i.e. in her husband's extramarital activities that produced the bow carrying twins, Apollo and his sister Artemis.<sup>22</sup>

Hesiod (1914)<sup>23</sup> describes how Apollo founded the oracle and temple in Delphi by settling there.<sup>24</sup> Delphi became one of the most successful oracles of all time,<sup>25</sup> and may have inspired the establishing of other oracular sites dedicated to Apollo.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. Plutarch (1888) De Defectu Oraculorum, XLII: "Most of the ancients supposed Apollo to be the same with the Sun, and they that understood and admired the beautiful and ingenious comparison, guessed that what body is to soul, sight to mind, light to truth – the same is the Sun to the nature of Apollo." Fontenrose establishes the identification of Apollo with the Sun in the first century AD (1939:439-455; cf. 1940:429-444).

<sup>16</sup> Wherever Apollo appeared he was associated with prophecy, Parker (1967:26-32).

<sup>17</sup> Greek: *χρόνιος*

<sup>18</sup> See *πύθισθαι* (cf. Middleton 1888:286), to rot, as a reference to the dragon's demise at the hand of Apollo.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Flacelière (1965:35).

<sup>20</sup> Some have read an extra dragon into the story here. Typhaon in that case would be her son who was known to dwell with a she dragon *Drakaina* (*δράκαινα*). Typhaon, however, could be read as one of the plagues produced by the serpent.

<sup>21</sup> Artemis is Diana in the Latin, cf. Gaius Julius Hyginus (c. 64 BC - 17 AD), *Fabulae* CXL (Grant 1960).

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Ahl (1982:385).

<sup>23</sup> Cf. War (1888:196-200).

<sup>24</sup> Hesiod (1914, Homeric Hymns 11, to Pythian Apollo, 277-293):

*"Further yet you went, far-shooting Apollo, Until you came to the town of the presumptuous Phlegyae;  
who dwell on this earth in a lovely glade near the Cephisian lake, caring not for Zeus.  
And thence you went speeding swiftly to the mountain ridge, and came to Crisa beneath snowy Parnassus,*

The intermediaries for Apollo's oracles in Delphi were the so called Pythia, a priestess called after the ancient dragon.<sup>27</sup> She sat in the adyton (*ἄδυτον*),<sup>28</sup> the holy, undefiled sanctuary below surface.<sup>29</sup> This was the holy place on top of the cleft where the earth opened up and vapours from the deeper realms filled the air.<sup>30</sup> These vapours, perhaps accompanied by incense from a sacred tripod,<sup>31</sup> encouraged susceptibility to Divine directions, the gift of prophecy.<sup>32</sup> The Pythia spoke the words of the god,<sup>33</sup> and these were passed on to the consultant.<sup>34</sup> These potent vapours are likely to have been associated with the rotting of the

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*a foothill turned towards the west: a cliff hangs over it from above, and a hollow, rugged glade runs under. There the lord Phoebus Apollo resolved to make his lovely temple, and thus he said:*

*'In this place I am minded to build a glorious temple to be an oracle for men, and here they will always bring perfect hecatombs, both they who dwell in rich Peloponnesus and the men of Europe and from all the wave-washed isles, coming to question me. And I will deliver to them all counsel that cannot fail, answering them in my rich temple.'* "

<sup>25</sup> Fontenrose (1978:240-416) gives an overview of Delphic responses that have been recorded. Maurizio (1993:119-126) has criticised the criteria Fontenrose (and also H.W. Parke) used to establish the authenticity. "The results of Fontenrose's procedure are that he tends to value inscriptional evidence over literary evidence and that, like Grahay, he is suspicious of verse oracles. And yet, when one considers archaic Greece, both of these tendencies seem anachronistic." (Maurizio 1993:126)

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Milner (2000:144).

<sup>27</sup> The Pythia in Delphi were older women. Park (1967:73): "Originally the Pythia was appointed as a young virgin, but that Echecrates the Thessalian fell in love with the Pythia at a consultation and carried her off and raped her: thereafter the Delphians made a law that no maiden was to act as Pythia, but a woman over fifty who, however, would wear the dress of a maiden in memory of the previous type of prophetess."

<sup>28</sup> Adyton (*ἄδυτον*): "not to be entered" (Hollinshead 1999:190).

<sup>29</sup> "Adyton" refers to a, usually underground, "location for a mysterious religious event, such as an oracular pronouncement or a healing experience, but only in exceptional cases (e.g., at Delphi and Didyma) is the adyton described as part of a temple. The convention of calling the inner room of any temple an adyton is erroneous." (Hollinshead 1999:207)

<sup>30</sup> This was disputed early in the twentieth century (Oppe 1904: 214-240); fumes of a different nature have been suggested (Holland 1933:214; Fontenrose 1978:190, 191), but (Littleton 1986:87) argued that "the 'pneuma enthousiastikon' should not be dismissed as a figment of the imagination." This has been reconfirmed by geological findings since (Sechrist 2003:6; Broad 2006:72-75).

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Parke (1956:24-26). Chewing laurels to aid inspiration is attributed to the Pythia only in the second century AD. The sacred spring Castalia in Delphi was used for purification. There is no evidence that it aided inspiration in any more direct way (Parke 1956:26,27).

<sup>32</sup> For a discussion of the terms involved (*προφήτης & προμαντις*) and the disputable case of relating these to Christian speaking in tongues, see: Forbes (1986: 257-270) and Callan (1985:125-140). Although others may have rationally interpreted the sayings, the Pythia seemed to have united both prophetic and mantic qualities. The term *προμαντις* should not be confused with *προμαντεία*, an institution that granted precedence to certain inquirers, but "its exact purpose and value is never defined." (Parke 1943:22) Park supposes that the oracle could be approached only once a month and that in classical times those who wished to enquire were many.

<sup>33</sup> The Pythia was possessed by Apollo; this did not keep her from speaking coherently. Rather the concept of spirit possession enabled and authorized a Delphian woman to deliver her prophetic utterances orally and intelligibly to those who visited Delphi. Those utterances had varied forms, (sometimes they were in verse), and they pertained to a wide array of circumstances." (Maurizio 1995:86) According to Plutarch and his friends it was not actually Apollo, but a daemon on his behalf passing on the words to the Pythia.

<sup>34</sup> Either by the Pythia or a priest. Whittaker (1965:25,26) supposes a controlling role of the priest in putting questions and passing on answers. Male attendants were present at Delphi, but there is, however, little concrete evidence about their exact role. "After the consultation they may have tried to help the consultant *interpret* the Pythia's words. They did not reshape these words." (Maurizio 1995:86) Maurizio uses even stronger language in her dissertation (1993:14), which endeavours to connect the field of women studies to that of classical scholarship(1993:185): "I argue that the Pythia alone, *because of* (and not despite) her possession by Apollo, was authorized to speak for Apollo in the ritual context of discourse at Delphi, and that her ambiguous language, for which the Delphic oracle was renowned, represented and ensured that her responses were divinely inspired. Finally, I claim that her answers were not altered or versified by Delphic priests or bards, because such revision, in the view of the participants in the exchange, would diminish their status as the words of Apollo." As definite proof from the sources is lacking, one should perhaps allow for both possibilities. Maurizio, contrary to what Plutarch and his friends believe, supposes a literal possession of the Pythia by Apollo himself, not by a daemon

snake's body in the earth, as Apollo had buried it on the site where the temple and oracle<sup>35</sup> were built, right on top of Omphalos, the centre of the world.

### 3. Friends meet in Delphi

It was in the first century AD,<sup>36</sup> as the Christian message found its way around the Mediterranean, that several learned men met in Delphi. It was shortly before the Pythian Games. These were also named after the Python, and took place every fourth year, during the months of August and September. During this time Delphi was the scene of athletics, chariot racing, and, fully in Apollo's spirit, a contest of music and song with the lyre. The winner received a wreath of laurel from the Tempe valley.

Our learned friends meet shortly before these Pythian Games, perhaps this reference is made because they wanted to attend as well, probably during the Greek summer month of July.<sup>37</sup> Two international travellers, who are both scholars and wise men, meet with Plutarch, the philosopher,<sup>38</sup> politician<sup>39</sup> and priest<sup>40</sup> who lived in this part of Greece. These travellers were no ordinary men. Plutarch describes them as 'holy men,'<sup>41</sup> when he wrote down his account of this meeting. His first guest was Demetrius the grammarian, who, after a visit to Britain, was now on his way home to Tarsus, a home town which he shared with Paul the Apostle. While Demetrius had been wandering in Western France and perhaps even crossed the Channel, Plutarch's other guest came from the opposite direction. Cleombrotus the Lacedemonian was returning to his native Sparta after extensive travels in Egypt and Arabia.

These learned friends, meeting in the splendid setting of the first century Delphi region, were about to discuss a theological issue that was extremely pressing, the apparent silence of the gods.<sup>42</sup> Plutarch wrote it all down<sup>43</sup> in his book *De Defectu Oraculorum*,<sup>44</sup> about the cessation

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on his behalf. Archaeological findings suggests that there were two male priests in Delphi, who were appointed for life, Plutarch being one of them. "The one who delivered the response to the inquirer was for the time *προφήτης*. Otherwise the use of the terms varies with the occasion." (Parke 1940:88)

<sup>35</sup> Nilsson (1974:467ff) discusses oracle temples and methods in general.

<sup>36</sup> Both late and early dates for *De Defectu Oraculorum* have been advocated, but not conclusively, see Jones (1966:70; 1973:136). Following Barrow (1967), Jones's pupil advocated a date of 83AD, and argues a case for 79AD and 87AD as outside possibilities. (Ogilvie 1967:119) Barrow took *De Defectu Oraculorum* as the last of the Pythian dialogues and suggests a date of c. 84 AD, but according to Ziegler (1964:199), who suggests a date around 100AD this is quite arbitrary as the available data can be argued different ways. The meeting probably took place between 75 and 110 AD. Even the discovery of two bronze plates in York in 1860 (Russell 1973:12) who mention the name Demetrius, who has been identified as Plutarch's friend by some, does little to suggest a firmer date. (Barrow 1967:25,34) See also footnote 56.

<sup>37</sup> As the Pythia Games took place in August/September.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. R.M. Jones (1980:68-108)

<sup>39</sup> This is commonly assumed, but apart from one possible reference, Plutarch's works don't claim this, but his extensive writing on theological subjects and his activities in Delphi established him as a religious authority. An inscription on a statue for Emperor Hadrian reads: *ἐπιμελητεύοντος ἀπὸ Δελφῶν Μεστρίου Πλουτάρχου τοῦ ἱερέως*. Cf. Ziegler (1964:22,23)

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Ziegler (1964:24,25); C.P. Jones (1973:31,32); R.M. Jones (1980:63-83).

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Fowden (1982:33-59) and Brown (1971:80-101).

<sup>42</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea writes in his *Praeparatio Evangelica* (1903:V): "Hear therefore how Greeks themselves confess that their oracles have failed, and never so failed from the beginning until after the times when the doctrine of salvation in the Gospel caused the knowledge of the one God, the Sovereign and Creator of the universe, to dawn like light upon all mankind."

<sup>43</sup> Showing some dependence on Herakleitos in places, cf. Fairbanks (1897:84,85).

<sup>44</sup> Greek: *Περὶ τῶν ἐκλελοιπότων*.

of the oracles. The gods had ceased to speak. The relationship with the realms of the divine suffered from an eclipse, from which the Greco-Roman world would never recover.<sup>45</sup>

### 3.1 A practical reality: the oracles have ceased<sup>46</sup>

Plutarch introduced the issue by challenging one of his friends, Cleombrotus,<sup>47</sup> to tell something about the oracle. “For great was the ancient fame of the religion there, but nowadays it appears to have withered away.”<sup>48</sup>

In other words, for Plutarch<sup>49</sup> the oracle seemed to have lost its divine inspiration and life.

Demetrius, the second friend, agrees and says: “There is no need to inquire about this matter, or to discuss the decay of the oracle, but rather, as we see the extinction of them all in general, except one or two, to consider this subject – for what reason they have so decayed.”<sup>50</sup>

Demetrius is able to mention a few inspired sayings of oracles in days long bygone, but continues to say: “There have also been manifestations of the divine will at these same oracles more recent than the above named events, but now they are completely come to an end, so that it would be worth one’s while to inquire at the Pythian oracle<sup>51</sup> respecting the cause of the change.”<sup>52</sup>

### 3.2 No practical expectation

Although this suggestion to consult the oracle is made, it is most revealing about their levels of expectation that in Plutarch’s account the oracle in fact never is consulted. After Demetrius has paid his religious lip service, the friends continue to discuss the failure of the

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<sup>45</sup> Nineteen hundred years down the track, Western Christianity would suffer from symptoms similar to those of the Greek oracle religion in Plutarch’s day. During the 1980’s and 1990’s “God eclipse” would become a popular world in church circles. Cf. Dekker (2005:5-7); Dilley (1958:116-126); Klemm (1987: 443-469); Picht (1980:61-79). See also footnote 98.

<sup>46</sup> This reflects on Plutarch’s lifetime and the first century AD. Some argue that Delphi saw a revival, certainly in interest, during the reign of Hadrian (cf. Abbot 1913:418-423), as this emperor promoted oracle religion. One could argue that this revival was insignificant as it only seemed to have a folkloristic focus. Hadrian did not consult the oracle of Delphi on any matters of state, “but asked instead where Homer came from and who his parents were.” (Lloyd-Jones 1976:72) Oracles claimed attention and Pagan involvement as the struggle between Christianity and the old Greco-Roman religions became more pronounced through numerical growth of the former, during the second and third centuries. Oracles played a vital role in the persecution of Christianity under Diocletian. This emperor consulted the Apollo shrine in Didyma on the nature of Christianity. On being advised that the movement grieved the gods, Diocletian instigated the most brutal persecutions (Frend 1965:490, 514). One should be careful though, not to overestimate their popularity (Broek 1981:1,21). It has been doubted whether Delphi in particular saw any significant revival after Plutarch’s day (Barrow 1967:34,35). Nilsson seeks the start of the decline of oracles four or five centuries before Christ (1986:141). From the fourth century AD oracles disappear from the scene completely, as these were eventually outlawed by emperor Theodosius. The zeal with which the early Christian emperors condemned and destroyed oracles may be explained religiously as a symbol of national conversion, but also politically from their promotion by Julian the Apostate in his attempted restoration of paganism. See also footnote 100.

<sup>47</sup> The distinction between speech of Cleombrotus and Ammonius, who functions as a distinct person in later chapters, *De Defectu Oraculorum* XX & XXI, is not always readily recognised.

<sup>48</sup> *De Defectu Oraculorum* (DDO), V.

<sup>49</sup> Also called Lamprias, as the flow of the conversation seems to suggest; unless one supposes that the author himself does not feature and that this Lamprias was Plutarch’s brother or friend. If so, “Plutarch seldom appears in his dialogues, but Lamprias often enters as a spokesman.” (Brenk 1973:7) The names that feature in the discussion are Lamprias, Cleombrotus, Demetrius of Tarsus and Ammonius (by some seen as Plutarch’s tutor, cf. Swain 1989:297), Didymus, Philip and Heracleon. Cf. Barrow 1967:33,34. Lamprias is a name or perhaps nickname that runs through Plutarch’s family and has been claimed for his grandfather, brother and son (Barrow 1967:193,194).

<sup>50</sup> DDO,V.

<sup>51</sup> i.e. The Delphi Oracle.

<sup>52</sup> DDO,V.

oracles. For reasons of respect, the oracle at Delphi is still revered with pious words, but for all practical intents and purposes there is no use in actually taking the trouble to consult it. The friends theorise about oracles, practicing philosophy and theology as adherents of the great Greek religion, but no longer expect Apollo to relate to them in real life.

### 3.3 The silence of the gods

For Cleombrotus, the reason for the silence of the gods is clear. “For he that supposes the extinct oracles to have failed from some other reason otherwise than the will of the gods, incurs the suspicion of believing that they did not arise, nor had their being *though the agency of the gods*,<sup>53</sup> but through some third means, since there is no greater and stronger power to take away and extinguish prophecy, it being an operation of the deity.”<sup>54</sup>

Cleombrotus was a deep thinker, with an analytical brain, but using the argument of “incurring suspicion” of a society’s religious convictions, rightly or wrongly, has often been a great motivator for irrational conclusions.

### 3.4 A crisis of faith and a decrease in population

On the one hand, Cleombrotus realised that impotent gods could not have brought about authoritative oracles. Dead oracles are not much better than absent oracles. On the other hand, if there hadn’t been a deliberate decision of the gods to forsake these oracles, then the gods were not worth their salt and one should doubt whether divine revelation was ever administered through these.

For Cleombrotus this matter of the obsolescence of the oracles was a crisis of faith in the first place. He worked his way around it by blaming the decrease in population in Greece:<sup>55</sup> “That many oracles of the gods have become extinct is nothing else than a proof of the desolation of Greece.”<sup>56</sup> Although he admits that there is hardly a single prophetess left in oracular employ, “we do not grumble, for she is amply sufficient for all requirements, and sends away everyone satisfied in what they demand... . One would be surprised at the god’s suffering prophecy to run to waste.”<sup>57</sup> In other words, nothing to worry about, the gods are still doing their job amply for the handful of people that are left in Greece. Waste not, want not.

### 3.5 The gods and secondary causes

Initially, Plutarch meets this way of reasoning with silence.<sup>58</sup> Then he brings in the element of corruption: “Matter being itself a deprivation, reverts to itself, and dissolves what was made by the Better Cause; and thus obscurations and extinctions of oracular powers are brought about, inasmuch as god gives many good things to men, but not one that is everlasting, so that ‘the things of the gods do die, but not god,’ as Sophocles has it. Their essence and their operation, such as be knowing in Nature and in Matter ought to investigate, their final cause being, as is right, reserved for God.”<sup>59</sup> Even in the process of inspiration Plutarch supposes an element of corruption, denying that the god “enters into the bodies of the prophets and makes proclamation, employing their mouths and voices in the way of

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<sup>53</sup> Italics added to stress the proper meaning of original.

<sup>54</sup> DDO, VIII.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Swain (1989:297).

<sup>56</sup> DDO, VIII.

<sup>57</sup> DDO, VIII.

<sup>58</sup> DDO, IX. Cleombrotus subsequently addresses Plutarch. This shows that Plutarch was respected as their fellow and had probably reached a mature age. This is reinforced by the fact that Heracleon (DDO,XV) is specifically referred to as a young man, indicating that Plutarch as the author must have passed this stage of life at the time of writing.

<sup>59</sup> DDO, IX.

instruments; for in mixing himself up with human means, he does not respect his own majesty, neither does he maintain his dignity, nor the superiority of his being.”<sup>60</sup> In other words, it is not the spirit of the god that communicates through the prophetic, but only his message, which is subject to corruption from the very beginning.

### 3.5.1 Daemons

This leads the friends to discuss the role of Providence, how the gods work out getting their message through by other agencies, called demons or daemons.<sup>61</sup> These temporary or indefinite beings, the friends are not quite sure, hold an intermediate place between gods and men. One of their characteristics is that they are susceptible of moral vicissitudes and of involuntary changes. Daemons are quite necessary in Greek religion and philosophy, as gods and men moved in completely different spheres where shame and honour<sup>62</sup> were decisive factors.<sup>63</sup> “They who do not admit the existence of the order of daemons, necessarily make gods and men out as having no intercourse... ..by taking away the interpreting and communicating being.”<sup>64</sup>

Plutarch and his friends desired to preserve divine involvement in the inspiration of the oracles and the things of earth in an indirect way. The gods are involved, but only through agents: “Let us then neither listen to people saying that oracles are not divinely inspired, or that certain ceremonies and wild rites are unheeded by the gods; nor on the other hand, let us imagine that the deity goes up and down, and is present at, and assists in, things of the sort; but as is right and proper, let us assign these operations to agents, or as it were servants and clerks of the gods and believe in daemons, presiding over the performers in the divine rites and mysteries.”<sup>65</sup>

### 3.5.2 Extinction of the daemons?

Although Cleombrotus<sup>66</sup> had first boldly asserted that the amount of divine revelation was still quite sufficient for a happy few survivors of the once mighty populace of Greece, he now agrees with Plutarch that the times hardly offer any good signs. On the contrary, extinction seems a fair way to describe the activities of the daemons at oracular sites. “Let me be bold enough to say, as many have already done, that together with the extinction of the daemons appointed to preside over oracles and places of prophecy, this sort of thing does likewise come to an end, and lose their force when the spirits aforesaid either flee from or change the place.”<sup>67</sup>

But at the same time Cleombrotus cherishes hope that the daemons might come back again. “After a long interval, when they return, the places give out a sound like organs<sup>68</sup> when those that play thereon are present and stand over them.”<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> DDO, IX.

<sup>61</sup> For daemons in Plutarch, see Russell (1973:75-79).

<sup>62</sup> Cf. Dodds (1963: 28ff). Flacelière (1965:87) summarises the position of the Greeks: “Such, indeed, was the ambiguous position of the Greeks, torn between reason, the chosen guide that they knew to be inadequate, and their deep, instinctive belief in hidden powers.”

<sup>63</sup> Brenk (1973:1-11) gives an overview of the doctrine of daemons in Plutarch, minimising their role from an argument of absence in Plutarch’s Parallel Lives.

<sup>64</sup> DDO, XII.

<sup>65</sup> DDO, XIII.

<sup>66</sup> For a comparison of daemons with Cleombrotus and Philo’s Jewish use of the term, see Levison (1995:190-195).

<sup>67</sup> DDO, XV.

<sup>68</sup> Let the reader imagine a sound of bagpipes rather than a concert organ.

<sup>69</sup> Greek: Πάν ὁ μέγας τέθνηκε (cf. DDO, XV).

A young man present at the discussion, Heracleon, is not very happy with these thoughts. He considers the death of daemons, as if they were like mortal men, a “too bold and uncivilised theory.”<sup>70</sup> Cleombrotus asserts that daemons are distinct from gods and that mortality is a necessary difference. As long as the daemons have not died off, they might return.

### 3.5.3. The great Pan is dead!<sup>71</sup>

To defend his position on the mortality of daemons, Cleombrotus relates a supernatural event that took place in a previous generation. The father of a townsman of his travelled at sea, when the wind dropped and the current took them close to the Isle of Paxi in the Mediterranean. A voice called out three times to the pilot of the ship, an Egyptian, Thamus by name. When Thamus answered, the voice replied: “When thou comest over against Palodes, announce that the great Pan is dead!”<sup>72</sup> The current took them to Palodes and Thamus cried out his message to the shore. “Hardly had he finished speaking than there was a mighty cry, not of one, but of many voices mingled together in a wondrous manner. And inasmuch as many persons were then present, the story got spread about in Rome, and Thamus was sent for by Tiberius Caesar;<sup>73</sup> and Tiberius gave so much credence to the tale that he made inquiry and research concerning this Pan; and that the learned men about him, who were numerous, conjectured he was the one that was born from Hermes and Penelope.”<sup>74</sup> For this reason the Church historian Eusebius of Caesarea would later connect the death of Pan with the ministry of exorcism<sup>75</sup> by Christ in the Gospels.<sup>76</sup>

### 3.5.4 How daemons communicate

After wandering off to theological discussions about the character of the gods, Demetrius the Grammarian brings the friends back to the original topic. Why did the oracles fail? Long theological treatises don't make a great deal of difference to Demetrius, the pressing matter at hand is that the oracles are no longer in working order. “For,” says he, “the assertion that the oracles are lying idle and dumb, because the daemons have migrated or deceased, just as

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<sup>70</sup> DDO, XV.

<sup>71</sup> Interestingly, in the hills above Delphi lies the Korykian Cave, which some suggest to be the site of a dice oracle dedicated to Pan and the Nymphs. (Curnow 2004:58)

<sup>72</sup> Much has been done to revive him in post-enlightenment literature, cf. Irwin (1961:159-167).

<sup>73</sup> 42 B.C.–A.D. 37.

<sup>74</sup> DDO, XVII.

<sup>75</sup> Interestingly, it is in Plutarch (and not so much in earlier Greek writers) that Pan is associated with fear. (Harrison 1926:6)

<sup>76</sup> Eusebius calls Pan a daemon. After quoting Plutarch's *De Defectu Oraculorum* extensively, Eusebius (1903) writes in his *Preparatio Evangelica*, book 5.16: “So far Plutarch. But it is important to observe the time at which he says that the death of the daemon took place. For it was the time of Tiberius, in which our Saviour, making His sojourn among men, is recorded to have been ridding human life from daemons of every kind: so that there were some of them now kneeling before Him and beseeching Him not to deliver them over to the Tartarus that awaited them. You have therefore the date of the overthrow of the daemons, of which there was no record at any other time; just as you had the abolition of human sacrifice among the Gentiles as not having occurred until after the preaching of the doctrine of the Gospel had reached all mankind. Let then these refutations from recent history suffice.” Identifications of Pan's death with the crucifixion of Christ as the dying saviour seem to go back to Victorian and post-Victorian interpretations. (Borgeaud 1983:254-283). A modern day exponent of the latter is S. Fontelieu. Based on a Jungian proposition, she concludes: “Pan did not die. He, like an echo, continues, as an elusive, wordless reverberation, a din just outside our hearing. The divinity of the chthonic side of our animal nature is not dead. The embodiment of the split between the divine and the animal nature is waiting, whispering to be echoed, to be redeemed. This action is a psychological problem for our time. Pan has stayed alive, furtively slinking about in the collective shadows, echoing the split in our nature and the intersection within of the human and the divine. In this, he is indeed like Christ on the cross, both human and divine, and like Christ, he died and like Christ, Pan did not die.” (Fontelieu is presently preparing a PhD on Pan at St. Martin's College, University of Lancaster U.K. A draft of thesis was kindly made available for the purpose of this paper.)

workmen leave their tools, starts another yet more important inquiry into the cause and power, whereby they render prophets and prophetesses possessed with inspiration, and capable of seeing visions. For it is not possible to lay the blame on their desertion as the cause why the Oracles are dumb, *without first*<sup>77</sup> explaining in what way the daemons, when they do preside at them, and are present, render these same Oracles active and able to speak.”<sup>78</sup>

With a reference to Hesiod about daemons ‘in mist apparelled’, the friends explain that “it is therefore, neither absurd nor strange if spirits encountering spirits do create in them visions of the future,<sup>79</sup> just as we ourselves signify to each other, not by voice alone, but also by writing; nay, often also by a touch, or by a look.”<sup>80</sup>

### 3.5.5 How humans receive their message

Demetrius also asserts that the soul has a special faculty of reception. Prophecy is no guesswork, but tuning in to the wavelengths of the daemons.<sup>81</sup> The soul doesn’t exercise this faculty naturally, but is particularly receptive in dreams and also on the point of death. It is an escape from the present also called ‘inspiration.’<sup>82</sup>

This state can also be ‘drug-induced’ and acquired by drinking special liquids or inhaling fumes that are produced by the earth.<sup>83</sup> Sacrifice may have a role to play as well.<sup>84</sup>

“For when it (the daemon) unites itself with the body it engenders in the soul a temperament altogether unusual and strange, the peculiar nature of which it is difficult to explain clearly, although history in many places affords us means of a conjecture. That by means of its heat and diffusion it opens certain passages suited to admit impressions of the Future is probable enough, just as when wine gets up into the head it brings about other effects, and unlocks words stored up in memory and forgotten. Also the Bacchic frenzy and madness itself possesses much of the prophetic spirit, when the soul, becoming heated and full of fire, shakes off the caution that human prudence lays upon it, and thereby frequently turns aside and puts out the fire of inspiration.”<sup>85</sup>

Although wine may come close, the surest way to be imbued with the spirit of prophecy is to look for the right natural vapour,<sup>86</sup> gasses that flow from below the earth’s surface.<sup>87</sup>

“Although the earth sends up numerous streams, these alone should dispose the soul to ecstasy, and to conceive visions of future events.”<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Italics added for proper stress.

<sup>78</sup> DDO, XXXVIII.

<sup>79</sup> DDO XVII & XVIII emphasize that the oracle foretold future events, not just innovations, restorations and purifications in the cultic sphere, as proposed by the German/Swiss scholar Walter Burkert, who wrote an influential work on Greek Religion in the 1980’s (published in 1985 by Harvard University Press, see Burkert and Delphi entries in the Wikipedia).

<sup>80</sup> DDO, XXXVIII.

<sup>81</sup> The Greeks did not differentiate between the possessed speaker of the god’s words and the rational interpretation of these sayings, cf. Kadletz (1978:96).

<sup>82</sup> DDO, XL.

<sup>83</sup> Cf. Parker (1967:74-80).

<sup>84</sup> Ziegler 1964:198: “Das Opfer sei nicht überflüssig: im Verhalten des Opfertieres gebe der Gott ein Ziechen, ob die Stunde für die Einholung des Orakels günstig sei.”

<sup>85</sup> DDO, XL.

<sup>86</sup> Greek: Πνεῦμα, cf. Flacelière (1965:48).

<sup>87</sup> This is the traditional explanation held and shared by Plutarch and his friends. Excavations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century led some to doubt this as at that stage no evidence for gases emanating from a natural chasm could be found. Recent geological findings have reconfirmed the credibility of Plutarch’s description of the phenomenon. (Curnow 2004:56, cf. Boer, J.Z.de & Hale, J.R. 2000. The geological origins of the oracle at Delphi, Greece. In: McGuire, W.G. 2000. The Archeology of geological catastrophes. London: Geological Society, pp. 399-412.)

<sup>88</sup> DDO, XLII.

### 3.6 The secondary causes and tools wither

Ashes to ashes, dust unto dust. It is true of most earthly things and one of Plutarch's friends, probably Ammonius, feels it should extend to oracles as well. "In fact we must hold the same opinion with respect to oracular inspirations, inasmuch as they have not an everlasting, or undecaying power, but one that is subject to vicissitudes."<sup>89</sup>

Floods, lightning and earthquakes all had their toll on the effectiveness of oracles.

"Exhalations shift their place, or are put out entirely, just as in this place (Delphi) they say it (the oracular power) did not continue after the great earthquake, which also overthrew the whole city."<sup>90</sup> So in the end, the first century friends have to acknowledge that even the great oracle at Delphi speaks no longer for the gods. For some time they discourse on the fact that the withering away of daemons and sources of vapour does not require negative conclusions about the existence of the god that used these.<sup>91</sup>

#### 3.6.1 Receptiveness in humans can be a factor too

The friends keep hoping, and present the purity of the animal sacrifice and the prophetess as prerequisites for the effectiveness of divine speech.<sup>92</sup> The vapours do not work 'ex opera operato,' like a medicine with automatic results.<sup>93</sup> "For the power of the vapour does not affect all persons indiscriminately, nor yet the same persons always in the same way."<sup>94</sup>

### 3.7 Plutarch's ultimate crisis

Although there may be many factors responsible for the apparent sense of failure of the oracles by the first century AD, Plutarch takes us to the existence and wellbeing of the gods as the ultimate issue.<sup>95</sup> As he says goodbye to his readers, leaving Delphi and his learned friends, Plutarch concludes his book by saying that, despite all possible secondary means and causes,<sup>96</sup> "the power (of an oracle) is in reality due to a god, *and* to a daemon, yet it is not exempt from cessation, imperishable, undecaying, or capable of lasting to all eternity of time, by which all things between earth and moon are worn out, according to our theory. Some there be who hold that even things above that sphere do not hold out to all eternity and infinity, but are subject to violent revolutions and renewals."<sup>97</sup>

At the very ending of his book, Plutarch dramatically entertains the unthinkable, death in the spiritual realms! The thought that the demons, perhaps even the gods might be dieing, as the ultimate cause behind the cessation of the oracles! Was Apollo dead like the great Pan? Or was it only his daemons and faithful celestial servants that had perished, thus robbing mankind of its access to the gods? Who was to know?

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<sup>89</sup> DDO, XLIV.

<sup>90</sup> DDO, XLIV.

<sup>91</sup> About the role of Providence in Plutarch's theology, see Swain (1989:272-302).

<sup>92</sup> Cf. Dyer (1969:38-56) and Hewitt (1912:95-111).

<sup>93</sup> Other places in Plutarch and other first century writers make it clear that diviners who only told their audience what it wanted to hear were a widespread phenomenon in antiquity. Cf. Aune (1978:103, 104).

<sup>94</sup> DDO, LI.

<sup>95</sup> If Plutarch is not addressed as Lamprias (most contemporary scholars suppose that Lamprias is Plutarch's brother, another friend or family member), Plutarch sharing his personal view to the reader at the end of the book, would seem an even more dramatic turn: an author who remains silent throughout the conversation, but has the last word by suggesting to the reader to contemplate the thought that the gods might be dieing.

<sup>96</sup> DDO, LI.

<sup>97</sup> Greek: εἰσὶ δ' οἱ καὶ τὰ ἐπάνω φάσκοντες οὐχ ὑπομένειν.

Plutarch exhorts us and himself to examine these matters frequently. Religion, in his view, apparently needs relationship. If our gods do not communicate any longer, let us be brave enough to recognise the issue and look for the reason! Perhaps one should take it one step further. Like Plutarch and his friends, we might be willing to discuss the matter at great length, but do we have enough expectancy left to actually relate to the realms of the Divine, and 'consult the oracle,' as it were? Over the past few decades Western theologians have considered and experienced what they call a "God-eclipse."<sup>98</sup> A similar eclipse was the beginning of the end for Delphi and the ancient world.<sup>99</sup> Western Christianity might soon follow in its footsteps. If the gods no longer communicate, how shall we still worship them?<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> This theme was initially put on the agenda by Western philosophers like Nietzsche, Buber and Heidegger. In 2006 Pope Benedict XVI showed major concerns about the "eclipse of God" in 2006. (E.g. "Pope Sets Out on a Mission to Halt 'Eclipse of God'", Daily Telegraph (UK) of 7/8/06. See also Fabrizio 2007.) Benedict's *Pontifical Council for the Family* wrote: "The causes vary, but the "eclipse" of God, the Creator of man, lies at the root of the profound current crisis of the whole truth about man, about human procreation and about the family." (2006. The Family and Human Procreation. The full text of the document may be retrieved at <http://www.wf-f.org/FamilyandHumanProcreation.html>.) Earlier, Pope John Paul II called attention for the subject in his Encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (1995/3/25), chapter one (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/index.htm](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/index.htm)). See also footnote 45.

<sup>99</sup> It is noteworthy that the first persecutors of Christians, Nero and Domitian, were also restorers of the Apolline sanctuary. (Dempsey 1918:178) Emperor Hadrian tried to restore Delphi as the sacred city (*ἡ ἱερά πόλις*). "But this reform had too forced a character. And so, after the Antonines and Severus silence falls upon the Delphic sanctuary. The decline is this time decisive." (Dempsey 1918:179).

<sup>100</sup> This research concludes that *De Defectu Oraculorum* suggests a general cessation of genuine oracles in the Greco Roman world by the first century AD. The friends who allege this are members of the philosophical and religious elite and are widely travelled, both in the West and the East, and considered representative for that reason. There is evidence for a temporary revival of oracles in the second and third centuries, but there has been much debate to what extent this was 'organised' religion, funded by anti-Christian emperors to support their political strategies. According to Nilsson the decline of belief in oracles in general had come a long way (1986:141): "The belief in oracles declined in the fourth century B.C. but the desire to know the future was lasting." Nilsson supposes a decline in the fourth century on the basis of Plutarch's life of Demosthenes where the orator plays down an unfavourable oracle with the instrument of reason. The Thebans he reminded of Epaminondas, the Athenians of Pericles, who always preferred a rational approach and regarded oracles as mere pretexts for cowardice. As Pericles lived in the fifth century before Christ, Nilsson's thesis should perhaps be taken as a general indication of decline from c. 500 BC. One should realise, however, that Nilsson makes this suggestion on the basis of very limited data. The dialogue in *De Defectu Oraculorum* suggests more recent oracular activity than the fourth century BC. On the other hand, this could come under the category lip service, as Delphi lay in ruins for the greater part of that century and nobody was willing or able to put any money towards restoring the sanctuary. Philosophical scepticism had become more profound too. (Dempsey 1918:168) Nilsson explores the notion that decline is a process as well and emphasises that by the fourth century prominent leaders in Athens and Sparta publicly doubted the value of oracles without compromising their position in Greek society. This indicates a decline of the authority. Cf. footnote 46.

## Translation & Greek text

For English quotations from *De Defectu Oraculorum* (Περὶ τῶν ἐκλελοιπότων) in this paper, C.W. King's beautifully styled translation "On the Cessation of Oracles" from the Bohner Classical Library is used (PLUTARCH 1888).<sup>101</sup> The Greek text consulted is that of F.C. Babbitt (Plutarch 2003:347-501).

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<sup>101</sup> This is a matter of literary preference, although some scholars take exception that the popular Loeb translation by F.C. Babbitt (2003, *The Obsolence of the Oracles*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p.337-501) renders the words *δαίμονες* (cf. Matthew 6:31) and *πνεύματα* as "demigods" and "exhalations" respectively. Kupersmith (1984:191) and Fontenrose (1978:197) have objected to the latter because they suppose these to be a fully theoretical entity. Fontenrose's objections are inspired by outdated geological views (cf. Sechrist 2003:6; Broad 2006:72-75) that deny the presence of a chasm and any vapour at all (1978:196). There may, however, be a spiritual and a material component to *πνεύματα*, as Plutarch introduces secondary material causes (vapours) that are used by first spiritual causes (daemons). It could be argued that Babbitt's translation of 'demigod' confuses the issue. For *δαμόνιον* versus *δαίμων*, see Bauer (1988:337,338).

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