Introduction

Elisabeth Begemann

Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/mythos/417>

DOI: 10.4000/mythos.417

ISSN: 2037-7746

Publisher

Salvatore Sciascia Editore

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 December 2016

Number of pages: 9-15

ISBN: 978-88-8241-476-4

ISSN: 1972-2516

Electronic reference

Elisabeth Begemann, « Introduction », *Mythos* [Online], 10 | 2016, Online since 24 September 2019, connection on 23 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/mythos/417> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/mythos.417>

The question of the power of the gods, especially as it relates to a more or less abstract fate, has been considered and discussed many times, in different cultures and contexts, by priests, philosophical schools, and in the course of various cults. To this was later added the question of the free will of human beings. Indeed, we look back on a long tradition of literature over a wide range of cultures that wonders about human possibility, the inevitability of fate, the inexplicability of events, and the miraculous workings of fate. In the ancient cultures of the larger Mediterranean, we find almost as many opinions regarding the power of the gods and its limits and the existence of such a thing as fate and its relation to the gods, as there are cultures, if not, indeed, more.¹ Why was my child born disfigured? Why can I not marry the partner I desire? Why were our champions unable to avert disaster to our community? Why did we lose a fleet at Drepanum? Why did I dream of the calamity before it happened?

Most Mediterranean cultures developed their own terms and concepts that would allow them to provide explanations for otherwise inexplicable events and phenomena. Men and gods, personal and impersonal powers exerted an influence over the lives of men, which, depending on situation, social belonging, political circumstances and, of course, religious traditions, acted directly or indirectly, constantly or occasionally on the lives of men. Was man free in his decisions? Did the gods determine his fate? If so, to what extent? And whose fate? Or were the gods also subject to a higher power which restricted their own abilities to act, to intervene, to save or to condemn? If so, how are we to understand the relationship between god/the gods and fate? Were they, indeed, one? Was fate itself a deity? Or was fate superior to the gods, an abstract power that the gods were as much subjected to as men were?

The present collection of papers looks at a number of conceptions regarding fate and the gods and their relationship to one another, attempting to address some of the problems as well as possible solutions found for them in their relevant cultures. The focus is on the ancient cultures of the Mediterranean, in this volume: Egypt, Greece and Rome.

- 1 The present papers were first presented at a symposium of the Research Training Group 896 "Images of the Gods – Images of God – Images of the World: Polytheism and Monotheism in the Ancient World" at Georg August University, Göttingen. Six parallel projects researched ancient notions of fate in different contexts. The results have now been published in ELISABETH BEGEMANN 2012. *Schicksal als Argument. Ciceros Rede vom fatum in der späten Republik*. PawB 37. Stuttgart: Steiner. GÖSTA GABRIEL 2014. *Enuma Elis. Weg zu einer globalen Weltordnung. Pragmatik, Struktur und Semantik des babylonischen, Lieds auf Marduk*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck. MATTHIAS GERTH 2013. *Bildungsvorstellungen im 5. Jahrhundert n. Chr.: Macrobius, Martianus Capella und Sidonius Apollinaris*. Berlin: de Gruyter. ASTRID KHARIOUZOV 2013. *Prodigien in der römischen Königszeit: Eine motivgeschichtliche und narratologische Analyse im 1. Buch des Livius*. Berlin: Frank & Timme. ANNE PINKEPANK 2012. *Von Tyche verfolgt, von Eros gehasst: Schicksalsmächte und die Macht der Liebe in Charitons Kallirhoe*. Diss. Göttingen 2012.

Various levels must be taken into consideration. There is, first of all, the level of the supra-human, the numinous, reflecting the connection between agents and powers to one another, their relations and the way they interact. For the cultures here considered, we find that providence, fate and divine power are impersonal rather than personal notions. Fate, providence and extensive power (even omnipotence) may become divine attributes or may have numinous qualities of their own, even divine rank. Is there, then, an area in which the properties of personally defined deities are left undefined and which encourages the agent to test the limits of that undefined, numinous potential? In comparing different cultures and their religious traditions, we can outline different models of dependence, synergies, and influences, as well as of exclusion between god/the gods or divine powers and other numinous concepts.

A second level is that of the intermediary, in which divine and human spheres interact, in which the higher manifests itself and to which the lower directs its questions, expecting guidance and direction. The focus is as much on the interaction in the divine sphere as on the interaction of men, gods, and fate or destiny that it possibly a distinct power next to, or above, the gods. Divination and the predictability of future events are the relevant topics, i.e., the attempt of man to gain knowledge of what is to come and of the operating mechanisms of his world, by employing the multiple forms of divination at his disposal, and, in a second step, to become active himself in order to influence fate towards a better outcome. In this context, we find spontaneous declarations of divine will and future events on the one hand; but how can these spontaneous declarations be interpreted as divine? And how was man supposed to make sense of them? On the other hand, human agents take control, and ask for palpable clues. But how do they recognize them, and how are they able to interpret them, let alone correctly?

The subject of the third level of inquiry is that of human experience and reflection. How did people in antiquity think and speak about, or reflect on, fate? If man becomes an object of foreign control, did he suffer from his own powerlessness? Did he seek ways to come to terms with it? Did he seek to circumvent his own fate and the powers that define and control it? Or did he seek ways simply to deal with it? These reflections and the experience of the world as guided by fate found their way into numerous writings of different genres. One of the questions which must be addressed in this context is, how did people experience these numinous powers? Were they understood to be benign, even benevolent powers directing and guiding the life of the subject? Or were they rather negative, malign powers, threatening the safety and prosperity of the subject?

What the present publication aims for is not a comprehensive compilation of how fate and divine will in its relation to fate was understood and dealt with in the cultures of the ancient Mediterranean world. It cannot be, as one important area, monotheism, has not been included in this volume. The focus is rather on a polytheistic world in which god/the gods and fate must needs be understood as two distinct qualities, a world in which no power can *a priori* be understood as all-powerful, all-knowing and all-encompassing.

What is aimed for can rather be nothing more than a glimpse at different attempts to come to terms with the contingency experienced in the lives of people whose everyday experience was peopled with a multitude of powers that could be offended, pleased, petitioned, that could be asked for guidance, favors and protection, for justice and revenge. A multitude of powers whose intent and purpose could never be fully known or understood, no matter how hard one might try. Under these conditions, what safety, what security was there? And

how was one to live a life that was as desperately uncertain in view of the powers that may or may not direct it?

In looking beyond the borders of one culture and one discipline and extending the chronological frame, this publication hopes to outline selective connections and differences, helping to understand the shared and the distinctive notions of ancient cultures in their multiple forms and variations.

The literary basis for a publication as this one, regarding the notions of fate in the ancient world, is already quite extensive.² What is missing, however, are publications going beyond the boundaries of one culture. One publication in this direction is the comprehensive monograph by Martin West, *The East Face of Helicon*,³ which discussed the interdependencies between classical antiquity and the ancient Near East. A useful introduction to the varied conceptions in the different cultures of the ancient world is the published version of the lecture series *Vorsehung, Schicksal und göttliche Macht*,⁴ which compiles thirteen contributions from different disciplines and their reflections on fate. The authors take a two-fold approach, of concentration on a specific culture on the one hand, of comparison between cultures on the other.

It is this topic and this approach which is continued in the present publication. It discusses the three levels outlined above, of nature and power of the gods, of fate and man, so that similarities and differences can be clearly detected.

The beginning is made by four contributions from the field of Egyptology. In her first contribution, Alexandra von Lieven discusses the ways in which contingency was dealt with in Ancient Egypt, by introducing different forms of oracles which were used by various groups for specific ends: whether it was a matter of private decision making, a matter of temple diplomacy, or a matter of state justification, recurrence to the will of the or a specific deity served not only to alleviate uncertainty, but to establish unassailable authority. Whether these oracles came in the form of procession oracles, thereby taking place in an environment of highest visibility in the public sphere, or in the form of ticket oracles, which substitute “yes/no” formulae by conditionals, Egyptian oracles enabled the questioner not only to gain some form of certainty, but to partake in the deity’s greater wisdom and knowledge of past, present and future.

In two related contributions, Alexandra von Lieven and Christoffer Theis then discuss a specific divinatory practice, hemerology. First, von Lieven introduces the practice and its most relevant sources in the Egyptian context, underlining the chronological extent of the practice well into late antiquity, as well as its uses in everyday life, advising on the cautions for every day of the year. While on the one hand the gods are claimed as the authors of these divinatory texts, informing the reader of the “quality” of any given day (i.e., “good”, “bad” or “uncertain”), and must therefore be understood as originators of events to occur, the often found formula of “If A (occurs), then say B” in the calendars leaves plenty of room to avoid misfortunes, even with regard to birth oracles. With an eye on the substitute subject, von Lieven comes to the conclusion that certain events must happen, but it is not yet certain as to whom they will

2 Cf. AHN, KRATZ 2004; BERGMEIER 1999; BERGJAN 2002; BOBZIEN 1998; DIETRICH 1965; DIETRICH 1994; DIHLE 1982; ELIADE 1953; FREDE 2011; GLADIGOW 1981; HOLM 1969; MORENZ, MÜLLER 1960; KRETER 2006; LAMBERT 1972; MARTIN 1982; NESSELRATH 1992; OLSON 1988; RINGREN (ed.) 1967; RITTER, FELDMEIER, SCHOBERTH, ALTNER 1997; SCHRAGE 2005; VON DER GABLENTZ 168.

3 WEST 1997.

4 KRATZ, SPIECKERMANN 2008.

happen. Fate, then, is again debatable: the gods may determine what is to happen, but they can be influence and appeased and, as it were, change fate.

Joachim Quack then examines the nature of fate in demotic Egypt. He identifies three areas, in which fate manifests itself, which are the areas of divination, of life teachings (“Lebenslehren”), and of Isis as the ruler of fate. He shows clearly that Egypt did not possess a fatalistic concept of fate, but that the gods remained the highest instance, and that the human actor was quite able to (ritually) alter his or her fate – again: depending on the grace of the gods. The concept of fate was thus rather another element to create order in society, as the notion that fate was a punishment that could be “sated” shows. The human actor was encouraged to follow the rules of society (and the gods) in order to avoid a negative fate.

The contribution by Christof Theis then discusses a specific example of a calendar discussed above by von Lieven, *Pap. Heidelberg Inv. Kopt.* 236. Though only fragmentary in nature, this calendar shows that those who would refer to it would know exactly what to do and what not to do on a certain day, including whether the children born to them on those days would turn out successful and healthy, or poor and of ill repute. In these terms, a person’s life must be understood as predetermined from the beginning, as success of whatever action is contingent on the day the event occurs. And whereas a person might have some influence over his own actions, i.e., whether to do business or go to court on a certain day, the crucial day of one’s birth is, and must be, removed from human influence and remains in the hands of higher powers and their determining will.⁵ However, Theis stresses that the calendar was of local importance at most, since the days noted as good days for some activities were noted as bad days for the same activities in other, comparable, manuscripts. The focus is clearly on the individual, giving them the opportunity to come to terms with contingency by making the right, calendrical, choices for their actions and accepting what cannot be altered. Changing one’s fate could then be as easy as looking at a different, rival calendar.

Is nothing really fixed, then? In his discussion of the Homeric epics, Efstratios Sarischoulis comes to different conclusions. Counter to the common notion of “Homeric fate”, he postulates that the Homeric epics indeed do not portray man as a helpless puppet in a cosmos ruled by either fate or the gods. He rather proposes that the Homeric epics follow a stringent sequence of action/reaction: rather than assuming that the lives of the Homeric heroes are fated either by an impersonal fate or by the will of the gods, he views both gods and men as agents in the unfolding of events. Their actions, however caused, have consequences, either good or bad, which lead to further actions and reactions. Whatever happens, “Homeric fate”, is, in his reading, a chain of natural consequences of the decisions taken by gods and men, without either ever losing the ability to choose differently, thereby creating a different outcome to events. Ultimately, says Sarischoulis, man is responsible for his own fate, both in his actions, and in his relation to the gods and the moral order: it is man himself who determines his fate, though the gods may influence his decisions.

The next two papers discuss fate and divine will in a Roman context. First, Elisabeth Begemann looks at the ways in which an argument of fate and pre-determination is used in the Ciceronian oeuvre, not only in the philosophical context, but also in the public speeches. It is shown that Cicero does not allow for a fate that eradicates human responsibility, as his basic assumption was, and must be, that a moral and functioning society can only exist under the

5 See also SARISCHOULIS in this volume.

premise that the individual is responsible for all his actions. At the same time, Cicero upholds that the Roman *res publica* and its fate was bound to the will of the gods, who act, in this function, as determining and guardian powers of the Roman community.

Christoph Schubert then discusses the Senecan notion of fate, as it manifests itself in his use of the terms *fatum* and *fortuna* in the works of the Stoic philosopher. By looking at select *exempla*, Schubert finds a coherent use of both terms and concepts that, while recognizing divine providence and exhorting man (i.e., the wise man, the Stoic philosopher) to accept his fate, still describes a world view in which individual accountability is upheld. Though Seneca accepts the Stoic doctrine of fate, the politically active philosopher did not seem to struggle with it or its implications, but rather provides for his readers guidelines for both practical applicability and the discussion of finer points of the doctrine.

The problem, or notion, of fate is one that remains a subject of importance and virulent discussion throughout history. It is telling that, in a rationalized and science-driven world as the Western world today, neuro-science of all disciplines holds that man is not free in his will, whereas, as Schubert rightly notes, “the basic assumption that there is no determinism by fate or like powers [...] would preclude accountability for actions and possibility of punishment.”⁶ While operating under the assumption that our decisions are indeed our own, we might yet be subject to powers that determine who we are, what we do and how our lives will unfold – whether we call them neurons, gods or fate.

The papers here presented were aided by the input of many. Thanks must be extended to the participants of the Gottingen symposium for input and discussion, as well as Prof. Dr. Hermann Spieckermann and Prof. Dr. Reinhardt G. Kratz, Gottingen, the directors of the group. Much gratitude is also due to Prof. Dr. Jörg Rüpke, Erfurt, for his input, and advice. I gratefully acknowledge both the anonymous readers for their valuable comments on the papers and the editors of the “Mythos” series, Prof. Dr. Corinne Bonnet, Toulouse, Prof. Dr. Nicola Cusumano, Palermo, and Dr. Daniela Bonanno, for accompanying the process of this publication with patience and guidance.

Elisabeth Begemann

Universität Erfurt

Seminar für Religionswissenschaft

Postfach 900221

99105 Erfurt

Germany

6 SCHUBERT, p. 128 in this publication. Cf. also Cic. *fat.* 40 with BEGEMANN 2012.

Bibliography

- AHN, BERGMEIER 1999
G. Ahn, R. Bergmeier, Art. *Schicksal I-II*, TRE 30 (1999), 102-110.
- BEGEMANN 2012
E. Begemann, *Schicksal als Argument. Ciceros Rede vom fatum in der späten Republik*, Stuttgart 2012.
- BERGJAN 2002
S.-P. Bergjan, «Der fürsorgende Gott. Der Begriff der PRONOIA in der apologetischen Literatur der Alten Kirche», AKG 81, Berlin 2002.
- BOBZIEN 1998
S. Bobzien, *Determinism and Freedom in Stoic Philosophy*, Oxford - New York 1998.
- DIETRICH 1965
B. C. Dietrich, *Death, Fate, and the Gods. The Development of a Religious Idea in Greek Popular Belief and in Homer*, London 1965.
- DIETRICH 1994
M. Dietrich, «Ea hat die Geschicke des Menschen festgesetzt», *Mitteilungen für Anthropologie und Religionsgeschichte* 8 (1994), 1-24.
- DIHLE 1982
A. Dihle, *The Theory of Will in Classical Antiquity*, Berkeley, Calif. 1982 (= *Id.*?, *Die Vorstellung vom Willen in der Antike*, Göttingen 1985).
- ELIADE 1953
M. Eliade, «Puisance et Sacralité dans l'Histoire des Religions», *Eranos Jahrbuch* 21 (1953), 11-45.
- FISCHER 2008
K. P. Fischer, *Schicksal in Theologie und Philosophie*, Darmstadt 2008.
- FREDE 2011
M. Frede, «A Free Will. Origins of the Notion in Ancient Thought», in A.A. Long (ed.), *Sather Classical Lectures* 68, Berkeley 2011.
- GLADIGOW 1981
B. Gladigow, «Kraft, Macht, Herrschaft. Zur Religionsgeschichte politischer Begriffe», in *Id.*?, *Staat und Religion*, Düsseldorf 1981, 7-22.
- HOLM 1969
K. Holm, *Zum Begriff der Macht*, in: *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* 21 (1969), 269-288.
- KRATZ 2004
R. G. Kratz, «Das shema des Psalters. Die Botschaft vom Reich Gottes nach Ps 145», in M. Witte (ed.), *Gott und Mensch im Dialog (FS O. Kaiser)*, BZAW 345/II, Berlin/New York 2004, 624-638.
- KRATZ, SPIECKERMANN 2008
R. G. Kratz, H. Spieckermann (eds.), *Vorsehung, Schicksal und göttliche Macht. Antike Stimmen zu einem aktuellen Thema*, Tübingen 2008.
- KRETER 2006
F. Kreter, *Kann Fabius bei einer Seeschlacht sterben? Die Geschichte der Logik des Kontingenzproblems von Aristoteles, „De interpretatione“ 9 bis Cicero, „De fato“*, Trier 2006.
- LAMBERT 1972
W. G. Lambert, «Destiny and Divine Intervention in Babylon and Israel», in M.A. Beek (ed.), *The Witness of Tradition*, OTS 17, Leiden 1972, 65-72.
- MARTIN 1982
J.-P. Martin, *Providentia deorum*, Rom 1982.
- MORENZ, MÜLLER 1960
S. Morenz, D. Müller, «Untersuchungen zur Rolle des Schicksals in der ägyptischen Religion», ASAW 52/1 (1960), Leipzig.
- NESSELRATH 1992
H.-G. Nesselrath, «Göttliche Gerechtigkeit und das Schicksal des Menschen in Solons Musenelegie», MH 49 (1992), 91-104.
- OLSON 1988
C. Olson, «The Concept of Power in the Works of Eliade and van der Leeuw», *Studia Theologica* 42 (1988), 39-53.
- RINGGREN (ed.) 1967
H. Ringgren (ed.), *Fatalistic Beliefs in Religion, Folklore, and Literature*, Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis 2, Stockholm 1967.
- RITTER, FELDMEIER, SCHOBERTH, ALTNER 1997
W. H. Ritter, R. Feldmeier, W. Schoberth, G. Altner, *Der Allmächtige. Annäherungen an ein umstrittenes Gottesprädikat, Biblisch-theologische Schwerpunkte* 13, Göttingen 1997.
- SCHRAGE 2005
W. Schrage, *Vorsehung Gottes? Zur Rede von der providentia Dei in der Antike und im Neuen Testament*, Neukirchen-Vluyn 2005.

VON DER GABLENTZ 1968

O. H. Von der Gablentz, «*Religiöse Legitimation politischer Macht*», in C.J. Friedrich, B Reifenberg (eds.), *Sprache und Politik. FS D. Sternberger*, Heidelberg 1968, 164-188.

WEST 1997

M. West, *The East Face of Helicon. West Asiatic Elements in Early Poetry and Myth*. Oxford 1997.