



JOHN H. WALTON

THE
LOST
WORLD
OF THE
PROPHETS

OLD TESTAMENT PROPHECY AND
APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE
IN ANCIENT CONTEXT



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Proposition 1

Prophecy Is a Subset of Divination

Readers familiar with the Old Testament will recognize that, in Israel, prophecy was treasured, respected, and a fundamental institution used by Yahweh while divination was suspect and forbidden. It may therefore seem counterintuitive to consider prophecy to be one form of divination. Nevertheless, this association can be affirmed once we recognize that divination, broadly speaking, refers to any means by which humans believed they could receive messages or direction from the gods. Some forms of divination were initiated by humans (pouring oil on water), others by the gods (celestial divination relating to signs in the heavens). Some forms required a human interpreter (dreams) whereas others gave information that did not require mediation (casting lots). Some forms were binary (that is, offering either a “favorable” or “unfavorable” assessment, such as birth omens) while others involved complicated consideration of multiple indications (e.g., extispicy, reading of the entrails of a sacrificed animal).¹ Some divination was formal and involved specialists whereas other forms were informal and could be considered little more than the reflection

¹Excellent introductions to divination can be found in Stefan M. Maul, *The Art of Divination in the Ancient Near East*, trans. Brian McNeil and Alexander Johannes Edmonds (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2018); and Ulla Susanne Koch, *Mesopotamian Divination Texts: Conversing with the Gods* (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2015).

of timeworn superstition. Martti Nissinen, one of the most prominent experts in ancient Near Eastern prophecy, refers to divination and prophecy as both belonging to the category of “mediation of divine knowledge,”² which most readers would likely call “revelation.”

Everyone in the ancient world felt it was imperative to know what the gods were thinking and doing. Divination was based on the premise that gods communicated with humans through a wide variety of mechanisms. Some of that communication was intentional (for example, divinely given dreams) whereas other forms were more incidental (inherent in the movements of the heavenly bodies) but could nevertheless be discerned by those who knew the secrets to doing so. In the ancient world, the gods could not help but tip their hand in the events that transpired in the world because the ancients believed in the inherent connections between the gods and those events. Other times, the gods could be persuaded to divulge information by being offered something they needed or desired.

Some of the information gleaned from divination and prophecy was considered to be secret knowledge of the gods that could be pried from them. We see this perspective even in the New Testament when Jesus’ tormentors blindfold him and then strike him. “They spit in his face and struck him with their fists. Others slapped him and said, ‘Prophecy to us, Messiah. Who hit you?’” (Mt 26:67-68). Here the soldiers use the verb *prophesy* not in the expectation of receiving a divine message, or even in reference to telling the future; they are asking Jesus to show access to hidden information. Even Deuteronomy 29:29 refers to the “secret things” that belong to God.³ As the second part of the verse indicates, however, the focus should be not on what is secret (though such knowledge exists) but on what is revealed.

²Martti Nissinen, “Prophetic Intermediation in the Ancient Near East,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Prophets*, ed. Caroline Sharp (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 5.

³This was a significant issue in the ancient world. See Alan Lenzi, *Secrecy and the Gods: Secret Knowledge in Ancient Mesopotamia and Biblical Israel* (Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2008).

As mentioned, many forms of divination were forbidden to Israel. They did practice the casting of lots, and they at times received dreams—these were unobjectionable. In contrast, however, forms such as celestial divination and extispicy were censured. Why the distinction? By assessing the categories, I note that the approved forms of divination for Israel fall into two categories:

- those forms initiated by humans but with binary outcomes that are not subject to human mediation or manipulation (casting lots)
- those forms initiated by God in which God provided an interpreter (dreams; see Joseph and Daniel)

Other categories are encumbered with mystical speculation and magical practices, which is what made them unacceptable for Israelites.

Though divination in the ancient Near East was undoubtedly used in popular and informal ways by the general population, only elites would have had access to the specialized literature, information, and personnel to engage in divination formally.⁴ Documents show that Neo-Assyrian kings employed many types of divination experts as royal advisers, and a significant percentage of the documents found in Ashurbanipal's library (seventh century BC) relate to divination.⁵ From the divination literature that is preserved and the royal correspondence between the king and his advisory staff, it is evident that divination typically focused on legitimization of the king as one who

⁴Compare the difference between regular folk today who do their best to do their own tax forms each year in contrast to companies who employ departments full of tax experts.

⁵Sara J. Milstein, *Tracking the Master Scribe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 10, estimates 25 percent of the 30,000 tablets were related to divination. Since there are many fragments in addition to tablets, some estimates put the total number of texts at fewer than 20,000, but still divination texts are estimated at about one-quarter. More specifically, there are just under 3,600 Babylonian literary and scientific texts in Ashurbanipal's library, of which almost 1,200 are either divination reports or divinatory texts, according to Joachim Schaper, "Prophecy in Israel and Assyria: Are We Comparing Apples and Pears?: The Materiality of Writing and the Avoidance of Parallelomania," in *Thus Speaks Ishtar of Arbela: Prophecy in Israel, Assyria, and Egypt in the Neo-Assyrian Period*, ed. Robert P. Gordon and Hans M. Barstad (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 225-38 (231 for statistics).

was sponsored by the gods and was faithfully executing his duties to them. As such, divination often justified a course of action or offered warnings that could steer his policies and decisions.

From this literature we learn that divination generally concerned the present situation and its immediate future rather than the distant future. The king wanted the gods to weigh in on decisions he was making in the present context; he did not expect the omens to tell the future. At times, negative omens would warn of looming danger or jeopardy. These entailed some level of looking at the future or, more precisely, a potential future. We find that ancient peoples thought negative omens could be reversed; they did not present an unavoidable fate. The omens do not claim “X will inevitably happen.” They do not even claim that X may or may not happen. Rather they express, with confidence, X will happen unless a course of action can be taken to prevent it.⁶ Given such warnings about a potential future, the king would then alter his conduct or decisions in the present. As Michael Hundley says it,

Omens portended future events by expressing the divine will, which could always be altered by the appropriate human actions. Rather than being exercises in fatalism, omens gave people agency. The gods shared their plans with humans and invited us to shape the future with them.⁷

This is not substantially different from someone hearing a weather report of dangerous driving conditions and therefore deciding to stay home. We might also compare modern warnings of climate change and ecosystem collapse that could lead to a dystopian future (though these typically operate in a longer time frame than divination). The common ground found in a dire weather forecast and a negative omen in the ancient world is the expectation that present behaviors will

⁶Francesca Rochberg, *Before Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 247.

⁷Michael B. Hundley, *Yahweh Among the Gods* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2022), 59.

change in the hope that negative exigencies can be avoided. To the extent that people consider the future projection to be reliable, they adjust their behavior accordingly.

In this proposition, I have adopted a view, common in academia, that prophecy is a subset of divination.⁸ I now turn our attention to that relationship realizing that, if it is so, then many of the above statements about divination are also true of prophecy.

Just as divination involved various approaches to receiving or discerning communication from the gods, prophecy was a means by which God/gods communicated to people. As noted above, some divinatory methods of communication involved human specialists or mediators. Specialists, whether reading the stars or the liver of a sacrificed animal, would use their expertise to interpret the signs and deliver the purported divine messages to the king. Those trained in dream interpretation would supply the meaning of dreams and what response was called for, generally to their royal patrons.⁹

Even though prophecy also functioned through human mediation, the difference is that ancient prophets (biblical or otherwise) were not presenting their messages as an interpretation of signs or omens. Though we know that at times that message was delivered to the prophet through dreams or visions, in prophecy the message was understood to have been received through a cognitive experience. Prophecy is a subset of divination because it is counted among those mediated mechanisms through which the gods communicated. Nevertheless, it is a discrete subset in that it does not require technical skill as is necessary for the interpretation of omens. Prophecy does not involve the manipulation or observation of objects. In contrast, it operates by means of oracular speeches. The distinction is that omens are

⁸See a seminal discussion in Anne Marie Kitz, "Prophecy as Divination," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 65 (2003): 22-42.

⁹In Mesopotamia it was not believed that all dreams were communications from the gods, but the dreams of kings were considered more likely to be portentous.

observed and need to be interpreted through technical skill; oracular speeches report the intuitive messages received by the human mediator from the divine realm.

Observed omens include movements of the heavenly bodies, behavior of animals, appearances of human or animal miscarriages, configurations of the internal organs of sacrificed animals, and even circumstances such as the color of the city dump. In the Old Testament, people occasionally request omens (rather than just observing them) and interpret them as messages from deity (Gen 24:11-14 [Abraham's servant]; Judg 6:36-40 [Gideon]; 1 Sam 6:7-12 [the Philistines]).

Oracular speeches may result from the interpretation of omens, but prophetic oracles require no such mechanism. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that oracles belong in the category of ways in which communication comes from the divine world. Prophets were at times counted among the council of advisers to kings in the ancient world, just as diviners were. Their value was recognized, and their advice was sought and followed.

Some of the observations I made about divination in general above we can now affirm also about prophecy. This recognition will give us a richer understanding of how prophecy was understood in the ancient world. Like other divination experts, prophets in the ancient world directed their messages primarily to kings. In the Old Testament, this focus is characteristic most observably in the earlier periods (for example, Samuel, Nathan, Elijah, Micaiah, and the hundreds of prophets of Baal in 1 Kings 18), though later prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah continued to address kings as well as the general population (more about this in proposition 4).

A more important insight that we glean from the association of prophecy and divination concerns what was believed about them. Like other forms of divination, prophecy had its focus on how people were to act in the present and immediate future. It is reductionistic to think of either prophecy or divination as a means of telling the future; the

present was always the focus. The prophets often offered potential futures as they delivered messages warning of coming judgment (such as the message to Nineveh in the book of Jonah). The messages were not designed to tell the future; they were expressions of the plans and purposes of God/the gods (more about this in propositions 3, 5).

We have now learned not only that the prophetic institution was a commonplace in the ancient world but that it was part of a larger enterprise by which it was believed that the gods communicated with humanity. We have therefore learned that Israel was not unique in having prophets, though we will find that Israelite prophecy has some unique elements. It is therefore incumbent on us that we seek to understand the prophetic phenomenon in Israel both in comparison and in contrast to its cousins in the ancient world, as well as in the context of the larger category of divination. Israel was immersed in the cultural river of the ancient world, and if we are going to understand prophecy on their terms, we must take account of the context in which Israelite thoughts and ideas took shape. As always, this approach is not going to assume that the people of Israel thought exactly like their neighbors, but that broader context should stand as the default. That is, if the Bible does not demonstrate a distinctiveness on a particular point, it is more likely that the Israelites thought like those around them more than that they thought like we do; that is, our cultural river is not the default.

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