

Divination in the Ancient Near East

Humans are creatures that thrive on information. We have always tried to learn what was going on around us, particularly in times of danger or crisis. If we cannot find hard facts, we will make something up. Divination in the ancient world helped to soothe this need, but it served other functions as well.

The ultimate basis of divination was a sense that divine action and intent has a ripple effect across the rest of the physical world. These manifest themselves in subtle changes and events both large and small that the wise could identify and interpret.



Figure 1: Etruscan Bronze Mirror of Chalchas the Seer Reading a Liver (Vatican: Gregorian Museum, Rome, cat # 12240).

Usually when we talk of divination we focus on the mechanics, and we will do that here to some extent. Perhaps the most famous form of divination among Israel's neighbors and especially the civilizations of Mesopotamia was *hepatoscopy* or divining based on marks or deformations of the liver of a sacrificial animal. This was part of a larger form of divination called *extispicy*, which tried to discern divine intent by examining an animal's internal organs. The Babylonian and Assyrians were not the only ones to practice this; one finds it throughout

the Mediterranean basin, but they brought it to unparalleled levels of sophistication.

One obvious question is, "why a liver?" The most likely reason is that it was something beyond reach until it was extracted by the diviner. Until then, no one could touch it or manipulate it, and so it constituted something on which the action and intent of the gods could write itself without human interference or manipulation. Moreover, since the liver was considered the seat of the soul in much of the ancient Near East, it was a natural place for divine intent to manifest itself.

Hepatoscopy was so important in ancient Mesopotamia that a bad reading or omen could bring even the most mundane activities to a complete standstill. Many letters from the period refer to omens and the implied impact on this or that venture, such as this example written by one Idin-Numushda:

My Lord has written to me previously concerning the detention of the caravan destined for Qatanim. I have been detaining these men for five days (now), and they have used up their lambs in making extispicies. Let me lord send instructions (as follows): let not these men be detained; Let them go. The men are distressed.¹

Modern scholars have had a difficult time unraveling the mechanics of hepatoscopy, largely due to an obscure technical language used to describe the marks and regions of the liver.

Another form of divination was the birth omen or *shuma izbu*. This read meaning into unusual births, particularly deformities. These kinds of omens were very highly regarded, as they were often thought to refer to the royal household. Both animal and human birth anomalies formed part of the *shuma izbu* corpus. One interesting item in this particular case is that the catalogues of omens indicate that their authors would make



Figure 2: Sheep's liver in clay. 14.6 cm across. Old Babylonian, circa 1900-1600 BC. Provenance: likely Sippar in modern southern Iraq. British Museum,

up omens that were the inverse of one that had been seen. So for instance if one omen concerning a baby's left hand was thought to be bad, a similar omen on the right must be good. Obviously, this could lead to omens that were contradictory or nonsensical, but this does not seem to have hampered the practice. One thing that is clear is that the reliance on divination introduced an uncertainty factor that must have had a deleterious effect on the conduct of political and military affairs.

¹ ARM 2 133, as cited and translated in Ivan Starr, "In Search of Principles of Prognostication in Extispicy," *HUCA* 45 (1974), p. 18.

Divination in Israel



Figure 3: Depiction of the Israelite High Priest wearing the ephod, set with twelve stones for the twelve tribes.

Ezekiel 21:26, when Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, "shakes the arrows, he consults the teraphim...." We also have the case of the servant of Abraham who specified a sign by which he would know which girl was the one best suited as a wife for Isaac.

The grey area between what is considered legitimate divination or sign reading in ancient Israel and the actual practices we find make the issue problematic. In much the same way that Victorian scholars tried and failed to find a decisive distinction between "religion" and "magic" it is difficult to do the same between divination and prophecy. The Talmud, for example, draws a distinction between divination that one seeks, which is forbidden, versus signs that appear of themselves,² something that, ironically, we don't see much of in the OT.

In the end, the objections against divination versus prophecy could be best explained as efforts to ward off the influence of foreign cults in Israelite religion. The example of Baalam makes clear that non-Israelites could divine effectively, and even draw upon the power of Yahweh to do it. But the chosen

² Sifra Kedushim 6.

prophets, apart from the professional prophets mentioned as part of Israelite royal courts, were at least in theory the only legitimate vehicles for divine revelation.

Consulting the Dead

Necromancy is one area where the legal status is very clear. It is utterly forbidden, and anyone who practices it faces capital punishment.³ Necromancy is outlawed in Lev. 19:31 and Deut. 18:11. Those who consult them are also liable to the death penalty (Lev. 20:6, 27; cf. I Chr. 10:13). Kings who drive out the necromancers are lauded (I Sam 28:39 and II Kings 23:24) while those who tolerate them face condemnation (II Kings 21:6; II Chr. 33:6).

The Old Testament refers to those who practice necromancy as “those who have a familiar spirit” although there are two technical terms found: *‘ob* and *yiddoni*, meaning respectively a “ghost” and “Known one.” Scholarship on this point is still not settled, but it seems that the former could refer to any ghost, while the latter was the ghost of a known person, or a ghost one could refer to repeatedly.⁴

One of the reasons why necromancy poses such a problem for students of the Old Testament is that the stated test of a true prophecy was that it comes true. In this case, the one signal example of necromancy in I Sam. 28 when Saul consults the medium of Endor constitutes a prophecy that came true, even if it was obtained by forbidden means:

¹¹Then the woman said, ‘Whom shall I bring up for you?’ He answered, ‘Bring up Samuel for me.’ ¹²When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out with a loud voice; and the woman said to Saul, ‘Why have you deceived me? You are Saul!’ ¹³The king said to her, ‘Have no fear; what do you see?’ The woman said to Saul, ‘I see a divine being coming up out of the ground.’ ¹⁴He said to her, ‘What is his appearance?’ She said, ‘An old man is coming up; he is wrapped in a robe.’ So Saul knew that it was Samuel, and he bowed with his face to the ground, and did obeisance.

¹⁵ Then Samuel said to Saul, ‘Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?’ Saul answered, ‘I am in great distress, for the Philistines are warring against me, and God has turned away from me and answers me no more, either by prophets or by dreams; so I have summoned you to tell me what

⁴ Davies, T. W. *Magic, Divination, and Demonology Among the Hebrews and Their Neighbors*, KTAV 1969, first edition 1898, p. 88.

I should do.’¹⁶ Samuel said, ‘Why then do you ask me, since the LORD has turned from you and become your enemy? ¹⁷The LORD has done to you just as he spoke by me; for the LORD has torn the kingdom out of your hand, and given it to your neighbour David. ¹⁸Because you did not obey the voice of the LORD, and did not carry out his fierce wrath against Amalek, therefore the LORD has done this thing to you today. ¹⁹Moreover, the LORD will give Israel along with you into the hands of the Philistines; and tomorrow you and your sons shall be with me; the LORD will also give the army of Israel into the hands of the Philistines.’

Why then was necromancy so severely proscribed? My own theory is that to bring the dead into contact with the living requires the necromancer to dissolve the boundaries between the living world and the realm of the dead. In so doing, he or she is toying with the very fabric of creation which is not only God’s sole domain, it risks the mingling of dead and living which would be an expression of ultimate chaos.⁵



Figure 4: Saul and the Witch of Endor, by Benjamin West, late 18th Century.

⁵ In the Akkadian story of The Descent of Ishtar, Ishtar only gains access to the netherworld by threatening to destroy the gate that keeps the two realms separate, which would allow the dead to mingle with the living.