

Inquiring of God

1. Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. While the biblical view of prophecy is dominated by intuitive manticism, active inquiring of a deity, called “inductive manticism” according to the terminology established by Bouché-Leclercq (Bouché-Leclercq: 109), plays a rather subordinate role in the HB/OT. However, this circumstance probably does not mirror the religio-historical reality in ancient Israel. Rather, it is the result of a long-term theological reflection about the nature of true prophecy and the means by which God would communicate with his people. The law about prophecy in Deut 18:9-14 (cf. Lev 19:26, 31; 20:6, 27; Isa 8:19) gives witness to how divinatory practices, which probably used to be very common, are tagged with the label of idolatry and disqualified as “abominations” (*tô’äbôt*) of the nations. Whether the famous story about the “Witch of Endor” in 1 Sam 28 is still indicative of how an originally innocuous necromantic séance was reworked into Saul’s great final sin (Fischer: 115-22) or whether the scene was constructed polemically through and through from the start (Nihan: 32-43), is a matter of discussion.

From illegitimate summonings of deities (cf. 1 Sam 28:13: *’ēlōhīm*) must be distinguished the legitimate inductive inquiring of YHWH, for which mostly the verbal roots *d-r-š* (to seek) or *š-’-l* (to ask) are used. Scholars used to attribute to both types of inquiring a respective *Sitz im Leben* and ascribed the former to prophetic, the latter to priestly divination (Long: 490). Originally, *š’l bē’ēlōhīm*, possibly by means of Teraphim and the Ephod, would have been the duty of the priest during the war of YHWH before it was increasingly made a prophetic matter (Madl: 67-69). However, it remains doubtful whether this terminological differentiation (cf. 1 Sam 28:6-7; Deut 18:11), as well as any clear distinction between certain “offices” of religious specialists in ancient Israel (Cryer: 292-93) works out.

The “pattern” of inquiring of God in biblical texts is rather simple:

a) “There is a situation of distress, most commonly war” (Thelle: 207) – but also complications in pregnancy (Gen 25:22) or lost donkeys (1 Sam 9:9).

b) A religious specialist is called upon.

c) An answer is issued – or not (cf. 1 Sam 14:37; 28:6).

First Kings 22 is stylized in the sense of a theology of judgment but nevertheless with a realistic setting at the royal court, and displays exemplarily the scene of an inquiry of YHWH in times of war.

The meaning of “seeking God” undergoes some transformation during the inner-biblical theological development. From a divinatory technical term, *drš yhw* turns into the general ideal of the piety of all those who “seek the Lord.” In Chronicles, it has become the criterion for the kings’ wellbeing (cf. 2 Chr 12:14; 14:3; 15:12; 19:3; 22:9; 26:5; 30:19), as well as the wellbeing of the supplicants in some late verses of the Psalms (9:11; 22:27; 34:11; Wagner: 320), among which Ps 24:6 may be counted as well (Spieckermann: 199–200). The documents from Qumran attest a continuation of this process. The members of the *yaḥad* are the true seekers of God (*ldrwš ʿl*, 1QS I,1–2) who reveal themselves as such by researching the Torah (*drš btwrh*, 1QS VI,6) as well as by mutual care (*wldrwš ʿyš ʿt šlwm ʿhyhw*, CD VI, 21–22). Now it is everybody’s duty to educate themselves as a religious specialist able to inquire the will of God, no longer by manticism but by seeking the word of God in scripture.

A special case in the context of OT divinatory practices are the enigmatic Urim and Thummim. They were probably tools for a priestly binary oracle in postexilic times (cf. the references Exod 28:30; Lev 8:8; Num 27:21; Deut 33:8; 1 Sam 14:41 [according to the *lectio longior* of LXX]; 28:6; Ezra 2:63; Neh 7:65) – “a late catch-all invention designed to symbolise the entire practice of cultic divination” (Cryer: 324).

2. Ancient Near East/Egypt. “Inquiring of God” follows the assumption that gods as creators of the world are disposed for communication with their creatures and that the will of the gods rules the world. “Inquiring of God” describes the form of inductive manticism. In contrast, prophecy, astrology, and omens, defined as perceptions which are interpreted as signs pointing to the future (Maul: 45), are deductive. Dreams are partially a way of “inquiring of God,” if they are induced by an incubation ritual. However, due to the same “if... x then y”-structure in the ANE the words omen and oracle are often used misleadingly as synonyms (Maul: 47). The common way of inquiring of gods in the ANE and Egypt is that of oracles. That is, the initiative of eliciting the will of the gods is taken by humans, always following the same rules. People attempt to foresee the future with precise requests, while specialists, mostly priests, establish the conditions for the gods to answer and interpret the given oracle, often followed by rituals.

From the existing material it seems most likely that there was one main practice in Egypt and an-

other in the ANE, in addition to some other practices. In Egypt, the most frequently attested oracle is the procession-oracle. During gods-processions the cult-image was put in a shrine and transported in a portable “Barke” carried by priests (Lieven: 79). During the so-called “Barken”-ordeal people asked yes-no questions in front of the statue and a priest interpreted the movement of the idol as answer or the idol itself answered. Idols from the Roman period show signs of drilled holes through which priests were able to give an answer, pretending the god himself gave it (Lieven: 83).

The oldest oracle stems from the 18th dynasty. During the New Kingdom (1550–1069 BC) oracles are quite often attested and used in political or private decisions and in decisions about the investiture of cultic personnel (Lieven: 87). The procession-oracle is only sparsely documented in Mesopotamia (Maul: 86). However, of similar importance in the ANE was extispicy, especially hepatoscopy. It was the most important instrument for political, military, private, personnel, and cultic issues. The inspection of the entrails of a sacrificial animal was first documented in the 3rd millennium (Falkenstein: 46) and spread throughout the ANE to ancient Israel and the classical mediterranean (Maul: 69). This form of inquiring of God is carried out by the *bārū* priest during a ritual and can yield concrete, distinguished, and fast answers. The liver was the writing tablet of the gods, in Akkadian *tuppi ilāni* (Maul: 69). This ritual is not mentioned in Egypt.

Some other methods common in both regions are lecanomancy, libanomancy, and necromancy but they are sparsely attested in the ANE and Egypt. Furthermore, some methods existed which required no specialist for interpretation, which were mostly used by people who wanted a divine oracle in everyday life (Maul: 87).

Both the ANE and Egypt have rules concerning the best time for an oracle to be given (Maul; Lieven). The question of cultural exchange between the ANE and Egypt is often discussed (Noegel: 102) since there are some parallels between some textual sources but more often in case of omens than in that of oracles (Noegel: 102–5).

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