

Oracle Inquiries in Judges

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The issues regarding divination and oracle inquiry transcend any single book of the Hebrew Bible, although we indeed do find thicker material for discussing them in the work of the Deuteronomist.¹ In this brief study that is dedicated to Shalom Paul, a good friend and a fine colleague, I have settled on a few illustrations from the book of Judges around which to explore their occurrence; but the implications I draw should be applicable elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible (see table 1, p. 165). While there are many aspects to these issues—political and religious, cultural and contextual—I will be concerned here mostly with their pragmatic side, namely, how to interpret divine answers to human inquiry. For reasons that cannot surprise Shalom, I draw most of my background material from the Mari records of the 18th century B.C.E., not least because divination there was a living rather than a scribal enterprise. I do not imply direct connection between the Mari and biblical manifestations of the phenomenon but do observe that their practitioners shared an understanding of how to gain useful knowledge from the practice. At the outset, it might be worth repeating the commonplace that divination was hardly ever meant to foresee the future, although the response may superficially appear to have been guided by the resulting foreknowledge; rather, divination aimed to gauge the auspiciousness of a contemplated act, to ascertain when best to undertake it, and to develop a strategy on how to proceed on it.

I open with King Saul, who turned to the famous necromancer of En-dor, for “the Lord would not answer [him], whether through dreams (*hālômôt*), casting lots (*’ūrîm*), or prophets (*nēbî’îm*)” (1 Sam 28:6).² Essentially, this repeats the litany of another desperate king, centuries earlier. Hoping to

1. In this paper, I use the term *Deuteronomist* very broadly, without adhering to any of the differing ascriptions of deuteronomic language to diverse segments of the Former Prophets. See the interesting essay of A. Graeme Auld (1998) and now the book by Römer (2007).

2. *Bā’ūrîm* here is for *mišpaṭ ḥā’ūrîm* of Num 27:21. See also Num 12:6.

stop a plague devastating his land, Mursilis II of Ḫatti (late 14th century) begs the Hattian storm-god, “If people have been dying because of some other reason [than the guilt of my father Suppiluliumas], then let me either see it in a dream, or let it be established through an oracle, or let a man of god declare it, or, according to what I instructed all the priests, they shall regularly sleep holy [= induce dream revelations at sanctuaries]” (Singer 2002: 60 §11).³

Here we notice two essential dimensions to the endeavor: who initiates the delivery of information and who shapes its formulation. A deity may initiate the communication spontaneously, possibly also unexpectedly (*auguria oblativa*), by choosing either a human or a nonsentient channel. Humans may be given dreams, oracles, visions, and prophecies; the innards of animals may be stamped with coded messages; nature may deliver anomalous signs, and heavenly orbs may be arrayed in pregnant conjunctions. For the gods, the goal was not so much to help humans chart the future but to improve their chances at nudging beneficially preordained destinies.

However, when gods shut off communication or simply delay it, more frontal means are needed, for which a whole range of techniques was available (*auguria impetrativa*).⁴ To begin with, many of the channels used by the gods can themselves be artificially exploited. For example, humans may try a linkage with the divine, by ingesting or inhaling substances or simply by positioning their bodies in an accepting orientation. However, these approaches can be frustrating, for deities can be inscrutable, and it devolved on humans to develop strategies by which to force the gods into revealing what they would rather not. In Mari, Queen Shiptu had devised a program that, as far as we can tell, was unique to her. She plied potential mediums with a potion and had them respond to a series of questions she herself framed, about the fate of her king, Zimri-Lim, and of his enemy, Išme-Dagan (ARM 10 4 = ARM 26 207 = LAPO 18 1144).⁵

3. Full text is also available in Beckman 1997a. Further, there is reference to a mysterious “stroking”³ via the pins³ of a *sarpa*. Mursilis made similar *cris de coeur* to other deities, such as to the sun-goddess of Arinna (p. 52 §7) and to the gods in assembly (p. 65 §5).

4. Admittedly, some of these channels were less officially condoned than others; in antiquity, no less than in Israel, inquiries made through the dead were not encouraged; see Deut 18:10-12.

5. This particular text has received much scholarly attention. Moran translated it in ANET 629-30, and it was featured in a number of studies, among which are Sasson 1974; Finet 1982; Wilcke 1983; Nissinen 2003: 39-41; and Durand 1982 and 1984.

For a report on the campaign that my lord wants to undertake, I gave everyone (lit. male and female) signs to drink. I queried and, as it concerns my lord, the omens are favorable. However, when I similarly queried everyone as it concerns Išme-Dagan, his omen was not favorable. In fact, his case is now under my lord's foot, with them saying (as one person): "My lord lifted the cane[?]; as he lifted the cane[?] against Išme-Dagan, he said, 'I will best with the cane[?]. Struggle as you might, I will prevail.'" (lines 3-17)

Toward the end of her letter, Shiptu felt the need to deny coaxing any of the results (lines 35-43):

I fear that my lord might say, "she tricked them into speaking." I did not make them speak! They themselves are speaking; they themselves are opposing, saying, "Išme-Dagan's allies are captives. With lies and deception they roam with him. They will not take his orders seriously. Facing my lord, his troops will disband."⁶

Shiptu's protest strongly suggests that her husband was likely to be dubious of her effort. In fact, in another letter that is similarly couched, Shiptu herself harmonized her findings by matching them with the results of another form of prognostication, in this case prophecy (ARM 10 6 = ARM 26 212:1'-16' = LAPO 18 1146):

Regarding matters about Babylon, I gave signs to drink and made enquiry. This man [Hammurabi of Babylon] plots many things against this land; but he will not prevail. My lord will see what God will do to this man. You will capture him and stand over him. His days are numbered; he will not live long. My lord should know this. Even before the message of Ili-ḥaznaya [a prophet] that (the goddess) Annunitum sent through him—5 days ago in fact—, I myself posed (a similar) query. The message that Annunitum sent you and the information I obtained through inquiry are one and the same.

Elsewhere, I argued that the technique may have been influenced by protocol described in apocalypticizing scenes (ARM 26 208) in which deities are made to imbibe dirt from Mari as a way to guarantee their oath of protection; see Sasson 1994: 308. A recently published text (FM 6 45; van Koppen 2002: 356-57) has a diviner drinking a potion as he testifies about the theft of property. For what it is worth, a Middle Bronze Age cylinder seal of Ma'anum, a diviner of Enki, was found in Late Bronze Beth-shean. It could be an heirloom, or (less likely) it could have been in the possession of an itinerant diviner. See Horowitz, Oshima, and Sanders 2006: 47-48.

6. Many different translations have been offered for this passage, and they can be sampled in the references cited in the preceding note.

Here the principle at work is that the best confirmation of a divine message is its reduplication in as many diverse revelatory channels as possible. In Mesopotamia, it was agreed that validation is achieved most reliably through extispicy, the reading of signs embedded in an animal's innards. I anticipate the research presented below when I note here the particularly clever merging of divinatory processes as reported in Judg 7:9-15: God reassures Gideon of victory by directing him to hear the retelling of a dream forced on a Midianite soldier.⁷

Ultimately, however, for those wishing to stimulate the production of divine messages, the trick was not just to catch the deity in a garrulous mood, but also to minimize ambiguity about the answer. This could be done in one of two ways. The first forced the choices to be narrow; the second multiplied the confirmations. In the first case, an inquiry was shaped to demand a "yes" or a "no" for an answer, with the possibility that the absence of an answer (that is a clash of answers) was itself a third, albeit decidedly ambiguous choice.⁸ The instrument or tools for achieving this relatively clear-cut response could vary from one culture to another. In Egypt, deities in procession provided the answer as they tilted forward or backward to posed questions. From Mari, we have a precursor to the oracular use of the Hebrew teraphim. A statue of the god Aštabi-El would be set on a couch with an 'arbitrator' (*rābišum*) standing by. When quizzed, the answers came through an acolyte (*ḥayatum*). I quote what a governor wrote to Zimri-Lim:

My lord had given me the following instructions, "Aštabi-El should lie down on his couch and be interrogated so that his 'seer' (*ḥa-ia-sū*) could

7. That very night the Lord said to [Gideon], "Go ahead and descend on the camp [of the Midianites], for I have delivered it into your hands. However, should you fear descending, you and your attendant Purah should go down to the camp. Listen to what they are saying, after which you will draw courage and will descend on the camp." So he and his attendant Purah went down to the outpost of warriors who were in the camp. . . . As Gideon came there, a man was revealing a dream to his comrade saying, "Here is a dream I had: There was a commotion—a loaf of barley bread was tumbling through the Midianite camp. Reaching a tent, it struck it and it collapsed. Having tumbled toward the top, the tent collapsed." His comrade reacted, "That can only be the sword of the Israelite Gideon son of Joash. God himself is delivering into his hand Midian and the entire camp." When Gideon heard the dream account as well as its interpretation, he bowed low. Returning to the camp of Israel, he said, "Up! The Lord has delivered the Midianite camp into your hands!"

8. When Saul failed to get an answer to his inquiry, he knew that a sin had been committed; 1 Sam 14:36-46.

“speak. Take account of it to keep me informed.” With Warad-Sin as their ‘arbitrator’ (*ra-b[i-is]-sū-nu*), Aštābi-El stretched himself out (*ir-bi-iš*). In accordance with Aštābi-El’s determination, the matter turned out false. The slanderers will (therefore) be spared, in accordance with the god’s determination. However, in my own case, so that sooner or later there could not be a false matter, I have rebuked him/them before the elders of the land. (A.747, Durand 1995: 337–38)⁹

In Mari, as elsewhere in Mesopotamia, a practically inexhaustible variety of observable phenomena—from the behavior of inert materials (such as flour, oil, incense) when activated, to the flight or nesting habits of birds—were searched for clusters of characteristics that were judged “normal” or “favorable” and so equivalent to “yes.” Deviations were reckoned as “no.” It is likely that the famous *’ūrīm* and *tummīm* (“Urim and Thummim”) of Israel belong here; albeit etymologically obscure, the terms could mean, respectively, ‘implicated’ and ‘unimplicated’.¹⁰

It makes sense that the challenge in this form of divination should be in shaping a query in which a “yes” or a “no” was not equivocal. This was relatively manageable when mundane decisions were at stake, such as deciding who was to inherit the bulk of an estate or who was to lead a family. But issues of state, especially issues bearing on war, involved complex choices or decisions that could not easily be resolved by a single answer. In Mari, where extispicy was the instrument of choice, we read of multiple strategies to resolve ambiguity. One approach was to increase the stakes by making it a condition that either a “yes” or a “no” should emerge consistently at each of a string of interlocking questions. Thus, in ARM 26 121, Zimri-Lim asks his diviner Išhi-Addu,

9. See also Durand 1997a: 65–69; 1997b: 129–31. In A.1890, the god Itur-Mer plays a similar role in solving the problem of a disappearing slave. See my exposition (Sasson 2001) on both of these texts and their connection to the Hebrew teraphim.

10. These Urim often were paired with Thummim and were kept by the high priest in/on an ephod or in a *ḥōšēn [ham]mišpāt* ‘pouch of decision’ (Exod 28:30, Lev 8:8). There are many proposed etymologies for them, the most attractive (to me) being ‘implicated’ and ‘unimplicated’ or, if taken as a farrago or as a merismus, ‘thorough enlightenment’; see discussion in van Dam 1997: 94–98. Milgrom (1991: 507–11, regarding Lev 8:8) promotes an earlier speculation that the two terms stand for the first and last letters of the Hebrew alphabet and so stood for the full alphabetic series that was cast down in an inquiry.

Go to Dur-Yaḥdullim and confirm the extispicies for the people of Qatna and Zalmaqum with regard to the Yaminites. These omens should be [bad/good] (for the following questions) “If, when Zimri-Lim and his troops are set to go on a campaign; [if] the Yaminites together with their troops and [their allies] will be united⁷ and besiege Dur-Yaḥdullim, and [if they] seize [the city] by means of arms or by doing [tricks?]. . . .”

Here, Zimri-Lim was actually requiring his diviner to confirm the inquiry, in this case by repeating it. Indeed, the overwhelming sense we have of the divinatory program is of the need to restate the question, whether the results were negative or not; for in antiquity duplication of results was deemed a ratification of authenticity if not also of veracity. The reruns could be done by the same official or collaboratively with other officials. Depending on signs internal to the omens themselves, the repeats could be done instantly or at a future date, locally or at a distance from the original site of inquiry. This drive to arrive at clarity by repetition, reformulation, or duplication of the inquiry was, in fact, a hallmark of the Old Babylonian oracular material. In Mari, where the process gravitated toward extispicy, about 550 sheep each month were slaughtered just to make the gods say what was on their minds.¹¹

Not yet in Mari, but certainly by the Late Bronze Age, it became acceptable to use a less time-consuming (if not also animal-devouring) form of the same program, the casting of lots. In the Old Babylonian period, lot-casting was mostly limited to resolving personal disputes and land and property division (*isqu*, *kipputtātu*). But by the Late Bronze Age, especially among the Hittites, lots (*KIN*) were used for martial and state purposes. In a pattern that remains obscure, the lots were deployed on a ouija-like board with symbolic signs embedded on it.¹² However, whether the Hittite manifestation foreshadowed a developing reliance on a polar (possibly triadic) sys-

11. Durand cites M.11293 (1988: 36–38; see his 1995: 386–88), in which over 4,150 sheep were said to have been used for divination during 9 months in one of Zimri-Lim’s years (ZL 9⁷). Almost 1,300 sheep were slaughtered during an unknown stretch of one year, of which only 10 sheep were assigned to the gods; see ARM 7 224. Beal (2002b: 19) calculates that 32 sheep were slaughtered in deciding just one segment of an inquiry into the illness of a Hittite king. For the text, see also Beckman 1997b.

12. They are described in Archi 1974 and Taggar-Cohen 2002. Two recent articles by Richard Beal (2002a; 2002b) are rich in material on the topics. See especially 2002a: 76–81. For overviews, see Frantz-Szabó in Sasson 1995: 2016. There is much literature on the Assyrian use of lots (*pūru*) with which to make decisions (mostly on the selection of eponyms), on which see van Dam 1997 as well as Finkel and Reade 1995.

tem of choices (such as likely obtained in the use of Urim and Thummim) ultimately is less consequential for us to keep in mind than the risks inherent in depending on it: one could not be certain about the auspiciousness of a contemplated act, one rarely knew when to undertake it, and one could hardly be confident of its ultimate success when proceeding on it.

The paradox that a seemingly firm “yes” or “no” could potentially deliver an equivocal if not also a deceptive message is exploited in Hebrew narratives.¹³ So as elsewhere, the usefulness and reliability of the process were made to depend on the quality of the question, possibly also on the sincerity of the inquirer. A single question might yield a deceptively definitive answer, and the same question needed to be posed from different angles. To illustrate what is at stake, let me turn to 1 Samuel 23, in which we find David trying to reassure his soldiers about fighting the better-armed Philistines (vv. 1–5):

David was told that the Philistines were battling at Keilah and were just then plundering the threshing areas. David inquired of the Lord, asking, “Should I go and fight these Philistines?”¹⁴ The Lord told David, “Go and

13. It must not be doubted (as in Milgrom 1991: 509–20) that a simple “yes” or “no” answer could adequately control complex military choices. This was a major feature of Hittite oracular inquiry, on which see Beal 2002a, 2002b.

14. The technical idiom for consulting God, used here and frequently elsewhere, is *šā'al bē-*, with YHWH or Elohim as indirect objects. There are expansions, however, such as *šā'al 'et-pī YHWH* ‘to ask for the Lord’s opinion’ (Josh 9:14) and *šā'al bidbar hā'elōhīm* ‘to ask for a divine statement’ (2 Sam 16:23). This technical idiom must not be confused with other *šā'al* constructions involving God, even if some of them might have eventually recalled oracular procedures, for example *šā'al min* (+ *'et/'im*) ‘requesting [something] from God’, as in Deut 18:16 (everything), 1 Sam 1:20, 27 (son), 1 Sam 8:20 (a king), Isa 7:11 (a sign), Zech 10:1 (rain), and Ps 27:4 (one wish). The same can be said for *šā'al lē-*, as in 1 Sam 1:28 and 2:20 (a son). It was apparently possible to obtain responses by inquiring of a “curse” (Job 31:30) or of “Abel” (name or noun, 2 Sam 20:18). What is at stake here is not clear. The idiom is obviously instrumental when applied to teraphim (Ezek 21:26, pagan practice), a block of wood (Hos 4:12, sarcastically), ghosts (1 Chr 10:12, denouncing Saul). A somewhat similar range of meanings applies to phrase *dāraš bē-* (seldom, also *dāraš lē-*).

Num 27:21 is often called upon to flesh out the meaning behind the idiom. Moses, the last of the ancestors to meet God face to face, is receiving instruction on how his successor will learn the will of God: “[Joshua] should stand before the priest Eleazar, who will inquire on his behalf for an Urim decision, the Lord being present. At his [God’s] command the armies will go out, and at his command they will come back—he as well as all of Israel—that is, the whole community.” Joshua, being no Moses, must make inquiry through a priest and by means of Urim.

fight the Philistines, and rescue Keilah.” But David’s men told him, “We are already terrified here in Judah; how much more so, then, if we go toward Keilah and the Philistines’ battlefield?” David kept on inquiring of the Lord (וַיִּוֹסֵף עוֹד דָּוִד לִשְׂאֵל בַּיהוָה), and the Lord answered him, “Go ahead, march down to Keilah; I am handing the Philistines over to you myself.” David and his men headed to Keilah. Battling the Philistines, he carried off their cattle and inflicted on them a great defeat. So David rescued the people of Keilah. (Abiathar son of Ahimelech, having escaped to David at Keilah, brought with him the ephod.)¹⁵

The problem here is in God’s answer to David. David had asked whether to confront the Philistines. It was certainly good of God to be encouraging; but when God mentioned the fate of Keilah, he was also expanding gratuitously, even though David had not explicitly posed the issue in his original inquiry. And while we cannot easily grasp how a polar system of responses led to the mention of Keilah, we do notice that David’s men were themselves apprehensive, forcing David into a more precise inquiry that we presume clarified whether the road to victory over the Philistines must include capture of Keilah.

With God’s second answer covering a sortie toward Keilah and a victory against the Philistines, we might imagine that David’s triumph would now be complete; for why would the God of Israel wish to mislead his anointed David? Yet the story continues (1 Sam 23:9-13):

[David] told Abiathar the priest, “Bring the ephod here.” David then said, “Lord, God of Israel, your servant has heard reliably that Saul seeks to come to Keilah, to devastate the town because of me: Will the town’s leaders surrender me for him? Will Saul march down, as your servant has

15. See also 2 Sam 2:1, wherein David needed to inquire twice before he found out where to begin his rule after Saul’s death (“‘Shall I move into one of the towns in Judah?’ The Lord answered, ‘Yes!’ David asked, ‘Move where?’ ‘To Hebron,’ he answered”). Who knows how many inquiries were needed to get God to pinpoint Hebron?

The same sort of hazy reporting can be found in 2 Samuel 5. When the Philistines threatened the newly crowned David, the king asked a twofold question (v. 19, “Shall I attack the Philistines? Will you hand them over to me?”) and receives, seriatim, an answer for each (“Attack; I will indeed hand the Philistines over to you”). However, it is difficult to understand how David managed to receive the following convoluted answer on further inquiry (vv. 23-24), “David inquired of the Lord who answered, ‘Don’t attack, but circle behind them, facing them from the *bākā*’-groves. Once you hear the sound of footsteps at the entrance of the *bākā*’-groves [other translations possible], then go into action, for the Lord would have preceded you in attacking the Philistine forces.’”

heard? Lord, God of Israel, please reveal it to your servant.” The Lord replied, “He will march down.” David repeated, “Will the leaders of Keilah detain me and my men for Saul?” The Lord replied, “They will detain.” David and his men, about 600 men, went out of Keilah and moved out wherever they could.¹⁶

Worth noticing here is the fact that, of David’s original twofold inquiry, God answered only the last posed, confirming that Saul indeed aimed to capture David. At this point, David returns to the first and potentially the most relevant of his inquiries, asking about the behavior of Keilah’s leaders when facing Saul’s army.¹⁷ For good measure, this time around David expands by involving the safety of his own men in the inquiry, so possibly avoiding the implication that only his own safety was of concern. From the Keilah story, therefore, we learn that matters of deep importance required sophisticated, multilayered, and repetitious inquiry.¹⁸ Yet many commentators have failed to recognize what is at stake and have unappreciatively pruned the Masoretic query on the grounds that a verbose Deuteronomist was needlessly harassing God.¹⁹

16. David’s anxiety duplicates that of Zimri-Lim, king of Mari. Fearing that his ally, Hammurabi of Babylon, would detain his troops, Zimri-Lim asks his wife to pose the following questions to diviners or prophets:

For now, inquire about Hammurabi of Babylon: “Will this man die? Will he be honest with us? Will he battle against us? If I go north, will he besiege us? What?” Inquire about this man. Once you inquire, do so again and send me a report about him on all you inquire.” (ARM 26 185b = ARM 10 134+177)

Perhaps from the same context, we have a dispatch by Erib-Sin, a diviner for a Mari army aiding Hammurabi of Babylon. He writes from near Sippar, close to Babylon:

I made another round of omen taking (inquiring as follows), “My lord’s army, which he sent Hammurabi: this army, will Hammurabi not stir it to revolt, not exterminate it, not have it exterminated? Will he keep it captive, for harm or good? Having left Mari’s gate intact, will its men reenter Mari alive?” (ARM 26 100b)

17. In fact, the Hebrew of this query is rather pungent: *היִסְגְּרוּ בְעֵלֵי קַעִילָה אֹתִי וְאֶת־אֲנָשֵׁי בֵּית־שָׂאֵוֶל* “Will the leaders of Keilah block me and my men in, for his control?” (1 Sam 23:12).

18. The Mari archives demonstrate this point repeatedly, and I give two examples in n. 16, above.

19. See Veijola 1984; McCarter 1980: 368–72. Note that the repetition of inquiry despite an ostensibly clear answer was also a feature of Hittite military oracles, for it was never enough to know where to attack; one also needed to know where not to attack; see the material cited in Beal 2002b: 32–33.

As we turn to our examples from Judges, we should be keeping in mind that reliance on what seems to be a clear answer to a sharply posed question may not be a prudent approach; skepticism of facile answers is. I set aside the example in Judg 18:6, in which a Levite in the employ of Micah reassures Danites about their search for a potential new home because the response, “Go safely, *facing* God, on your path in which you are heading” (לכו לשלום נכח יהוה דרככם אשר תלכו־בה), is likely to be Micah’s answer rather than God’s: it is anomalous in form, reads frivolously, and may even have a sinister connotation.²⁰ It also raises doubt about Micah’s use of the requisite paraphernalia.

I mention here also a kindred category in ascertaining God’s will that involves forcing God toward the production of clues but without recourse to expert personnel or to required paraphernalia. In Judg 6:36–40, we are told of a fine game that Gideon played with God, requiring a fleece to display conditions contrary to its natural setting: wet when all else is dry; then dry when all else is wet. The test was reversed for confirmation, and so the story exposes not just Gideon’s skeptical mind but also an interesting manifestation of divination.²¹ A close correspondence to Gideon’s fleece test is the way Philistine diviners and priests (1 Sam 6:2–9) dictated the conditions by which to identify the god(s) responsible for their woes. The remaining examples for inquiry appear in Judges 1 and 20, and they use hauntingly similar vocabulary. I turn to Judges 20 first, because it allows us to appreciate the importance of sequencing inquiry properly.

20. The problem here is נכח יהוה. When not construed as a compound preposition (with אל or ל), נכח simply means ‘opposite, against, before’, or the like and appears three more times in this narrative (18:17, 19:10, 20:43). In the only other example in which it modifies God, in Prov 5:21, the phrase has a decidedly negative completion (“Why be infatuated, my son, with a forbidden woman? Why hug the body of an alien woman?”). “For the ways of man face the eyes of God; (כי נכח עיני יהוה דרכי־איש), who observes his entire existence.” It may well be that behind the Levite’s answer is the notion expressed in Isa 57:2, “Yet he who marches opposite him [= evildoer] shall end well—as do those who rest on their beds (יבוא שלום ינחמו על־משכבותם הלך נחמו).” (Other translations are proposed for this difficult verse.)

21. Notice how Gideon initiates the need for proofs as well as dictating their manifestation, so this anecdote must not be compared with Exod 4:1–9, where God persuades Moses through a series of magical tricks. The same discrimination should be applied in many instances where the issue of choice is not at stake, for example, in Gideon’s requiring the presence of God’s angel (Judg 6:17–23), in Saul’s acquiring proof of his kingship (1 Sam 10:1–8), and in the many plagues cast on Egypt.

Outraged by the uncouth behavior of Benjamin toward a Levite and his concubine, Israel is eager to fight and poses this question of God in Judg 20:18, “Who should march for us first, to battle Benjamin? (מי יעלה־לנו) (בתחלה למלחמה עם־בני בנימן).” But Israel compromised God’s will by forcing an answer about who must lead rather than whether there ought to be a battle at all. Given the system of inquiry in which only “yes” or “no” was available for each time a tribe was named, Israel was bound to get an answer. “Judah first,” God said, ostensibly allowing the tribe of the outraged Levite and his concubine the first right of revenge. Despite God’s answer, however, Israel attacked as a unit, and so naturally it found defeat. (Notice how the narrator dwells on Israel’s stubbornness by thrice mentioning its battle formation, Judg 20:19–20.) The next day, displaying singular hubris, Israel deployed in battle array; this time before inquiring on the success of the enterprise. So when in tears Israel asked God whether to *continue fighting* Benjamin (האוסף לגשת למלחמה, v. 23), essentially it gave God no choice to make, for the inquiry did not include the option of not undertaking a battle. Once again, Israel was encouraged to fight, and once again it bit the dust. The third inquiry, however, proved the charm (v. 28), for Israel framed its question properly, “Shall I resume taking the field against my kin Benjamin, or shall I desist” (האוסף עור לצאת למלחמה עם־בני בנימן אחי אם־אחדל)? Israel was rewarded not only with the correct answer but also with an encouragement to be creative militarily.

Our final example, from Judg 1:1, may be the most interesting of the lot. Unlike the occasion that followed the death of Moses, when God initiated instruction, here, after the death of Joshua, it is Israel that takes the first step. I read what Israel asks, paying attention to the Masoretic punctuation and pauses:

מי יעלה־לנו אֶל־הַכְּנַעֲנִי בַתְּחִלָּה לְהִלָּחֵם בּוֹ

As vocalized, the query is disjunctive, perhaps conveying hesitation, but also suggesting the chaining of separate inquiries, “Who should march for us—against the Canaanites—at first—to fight them?” Yet, as posed, the question fosters ambiguity: the inserted *lānū* may mean ‘on our behalf’ (meaning: “so we do not have to do it ourselves”) or ‘among us’ (suggesting: “eventually we will all have to do it”). In fact, in Deut 30:11–14 the same phrase, *mī ya’ālē-llānū* actually implies a potentially impossible task (“Who will climb for us toward Heaven to get [God’s instruction] for us, so that when he imparts it to us we could do it?”), and so its use here suggests anxiety rather than resolve. *Battēhillā* ‘at first’ is not syntactically organic to the

inquiry as it is, say, in the example from 20:18 (“who should march first for us?”). There, it receives a precise answer (“Judah first”); but here, *battēhillā* contributes to the ambiguity by suggesting fear (implying: “Let me not be the first one, please”) as much as bravery (implying: “I hope I get selected first”). So, for a query on which so much rides, this particular example in Judg 1:1 is especially inexpert, and David’s ingenuity at Keilah is sorely missed here.

We notice too that God’s response, “Judah must march; I have already handed him the land,” begs for further elucidation. Yet here too there is no David to pin God down. Judah is designated and, unsolicited, is assured of victory. But on all sides, there is evident discomfort. God omits mention of “at first,” and so establishes no time limit to the brunt Judah is to bear. Judah fails to redraft the inquiry so as to obtain more detail about tactics or more precision about the foe. Moreover, Judah lacks confidence in God’s message and without consulting God asks Simeon to join its battles. Simeon likewise fails to clarify its own agreement so that, when eventually Judah and Simeon conquer Zephath/Hormah (Judg 1:17), the town ends up shared by both (Josh 15:30) rather than falling wholly to Simeon (Josh 19:4, 1 Chr 4:30).

This lack of clarity of purpose and goals for the task assigned to Judah has results that become paradigmatic for the remaining narratives about that tribe. Judah’s victories are displayed seriatim and formulaically: there is a battle, a victory, or occupation of a town. But there are also alerts about Judah’s failure, allegedly because its enemy had iron chariots (1:19) or because it did not give God exclusive devotion (implied by 1:21). Yet, from this series of inconsequential victories, the little story about Adoni-Bezek and his ignominious end (Judg 1:5–7) breaks out to deliver the lesson that becomes emblematic for all the succeeding narratives in Judges. Toeless and thumbless (so forced to feed like a dog), Adoni-Bezek tells all that the God who can give glory to one leader can also bestow it on his enemy. This conviction about God’s autonomy is certainly Israelite even if traceable at least into the Mari archive.²² But the Deuteronomist was pleased to have it

22. We find this moral in Canaan, its main burden delivered in a prophecy that the god Addu of Aleppo communicated hundreds of years earlier to Zimri-Lim of Mari:

I had given all the land [of your kingdom] to your father and because of my weapons, he had no opponents. But when he abandoned me, I took his land away and gave it to his enemy. But then I restored you to your father’s throne and handed

broadcast by a king who had not yet learned all there is to know about the Hebrew God.

In offering this programmatic study to Shalom, I have sought to show through a limited sampling that the Deuteronomist's work shares with other Near Eastern documentation not just a healthy recognition of the role divination played in assessing the will of God but also an instinct for the consequences of imperfectly deploying its techniques at crucial moments.²³ In a rich 1997 study titled *The Urim and Thummim*, Cornelis van Dam has amply demonstrated that divination and prophecy had a stable coexistence in Israel's historiography if not also in its history. In narrating Israel's past, the Deuteronomist, however, gradually gravitated toward prophecy as tool for revelation, setting the shift at David's occupation of Jerusalem (2 Samuel 7). There is a narrative explanation for this development, of course: prophets make better foils for kings than do the casters of lots. Moreover, as mouth-pieces for God, prophets can be infinitely more eloquent than a "yes" or a "no" answer from cast lots. But there is a phenomenological foundation for the shift as well. Although prophecy can trump the authority of rulers by promoting God's authority, rulers can neutralize the threat by enlarging the pool of prophets and thus fragmenting a divine message or contradicting its gist. As a result, kings no less than narratives can achieve more freedom to maneuver when relying on prophecy than when depending on divination. We may therefore imagine that, as Israel and Judah vied with their neighbors in maintaining royal courts, prophecy came to be more plausible as an avenue for discourse with God.

In all this, I am by no means claiming that Israel would have earned a better historical fate had it been sharper at phrasing its divinatory inquiries or exploiting their results. Nor am I arguing that the Deuteronomist might

you the weapons with which I battled the Sea. I rubbed your body with oil from my own numinous glow so that no one could ever stand up to you. Now therefore listen to my only wish: Whenever anyone appeals to you for judgment, saying, "I am aggrieved"; be there to decide his case and to give him satisfaction. This is all that I desire of you.

This is a paraphrase of a good portion of a text that has been reedited most recently as FM 7 38 (Durand 2002: 133-37). The most recent English rendering is in Nissinen 2003: 21-22. For discussion, see Sasson 1994: 314-16.

23. Ironically, nowhere but in passing (Deut 33:8) are there any references to the use of lots or any other nonprophetic means to ascertain God's will, and scholars have debated the verse's attribution to the Deuteronomist. Tigay (1996: 523) thinks that only v. 11 in the Levi blessing may be "original."

have favored polar divination over prophecy longer had Israel been better at controlling its codes. In fact, the connection between the roles of divination and of prophecy in Israel's history and the parts they played in the Deuteronomist's sense of this history is beyond recovery by scholarship. I simply want to suggest that, despite a distance from *verismo* literature, the Deuteronomist did have a fine grasp of the conventions controlling the presentation and the outcome of divination. It therefore behooves us to be more appreciative of that effort.

We can begin to do so by testing the hypothesis presented above on the two dozen or so remaining examples of divinatory inquiry in the remaining works of the Deuteronomist.

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Table 1. Divination in the Deuteronomistic Works

[N.B.: Parallel formulations in Chronicles are not included.]

Reference	For whom done	Occasion	Idiom used	Tools used	Results
Deut 33:8		Assigned to Levi		Thummim and Urim	
Josh 7:13-18	Joshua	Ai debacle	<i>tākad</i> (G,N) 'select'; (see 1 Sam 10:17-22)	Use of lots implied	Achan identified
Josh 9:14	Israelites	Gibeonite ruse	did not <i>šā'al</i> <i>'et pī YHWH</i>	None mentioned	Peace with Gibeonites
Josh 14:1-2	Eleazar the priest, Joshua, tribal leaders	Allocation of inheritances	Not applicable	<i>gōrāl</i> ('lot', here in a collective sense)	Inheritances subsequently detailed
Josh 16:1	Not specified	Inheritance of tribe of Joseph	<i>yāšā' gōrāl</i>	<i>gōrāl</i>	Joseph's inheritance described in chaps. 16-17
Josh 18:3-10	Joshua	Inheritances to 7 remaining tribes	<i>yārā gōrāl</i> (v. 6); <i>šālah gōrāl</i> (vv. 8, 10)	<i>gōrāl</i> , "before YHWH" in Shiloh	(See below)
Josh 18:11; 19:1, 10, 17, 24, 32, 40, 51	Eleazar the priest, Joshua, tribal leaders	Inheritance to 7 remaining tribes	' <i>ālā gōrāl</i> (18:11; 19:10); <i>yāšā' gōrāl</i> (19:1, 17, 24, 32, 40)	<i>gōrāl</i> , "before YHWH" at Shiloh's tent of meeting	7 tribes receive inheritances
Josh 21:1-8	Eleazar the priest, Joshua, and tribal leaders	Allocation of cities and lands to the Levites	<i>yāšā' gōrāl</i>	<i>gōrāl</i>	Levites receive cities and lands from various tribes
Judg 1:1-3	Israel	War with Canaanites	<i>šā'al bēYHWH</i>	<i>gōrāl</i> mentioned in v. 3	"Judah shall go up"; Judah is victorious (see Judg 20:18)
Judg 6:36-40	Gideon	War against Midian	' <i>amar 'el hā'elōhīm</i>	Gideon imposes signs using a fleece of wool	God fulfills signs
Judg 7:9-15	Gideon	War against Midian	Dream of a Midianite interpreted by another Midianite	God forces signs on Midian	Gideon's victory

Table 1. Divination in the Deuteronomistic Works (cont.)

[N.B.: Parallel formulations in Chronicles are not included.]

Reference	For whom done	Occasion	Idiom used	Tools used	Results
Judg 18:5-6	Danites	Consulting the Levite of Micah	<i>šā'al bē'lōhim</i>	None mentioned (possibly not performed)	Danites will have a prosperous venture
Judg 20:9	Israel	Punitive war against Benjamin	<i>'ālā bēgōrāl</i> (see LXX)	<i>gōrāl</i>	(See next three entries)
Judg 20:18	Israel	Punitive war against Benjamin	<i>šā'al bē'lōhim</i>	None mentioned here (but see above)	Judah selected (see Judg 1:1-2); Israel loses
Judg 20:23	Israel	Punitive war against Benjamin	<i>šā'al bēYHWH</i>	None mentioned; Israel weeps and inquires "before the Lord"	God encourages; Israel loses a second time
Judg 20:27-28	Israel: 'Shall I continue to battle Benjamin. . . ?'	Punitive war against Benjamin	<i>šā'al bē YHWH</i> (twofold query)	Fasts, sacrifices; presence of ark of the covenant	God promises victory; Israel wins
1 Sam 9:9	Any Israelite	Explanatory notice	<i>dāraš 'ēlōhim</i> (cf. LXX of 2 Kgs 1:16)	Prophet or seer	None given: hypothetical situation
1 Sam 10:17-22	Samuel and Israel	Choosing of a king	<i>nilkad</i> (cf. Josh 7:13-18); (v. 22) <i>šā'al bēYHWH</i>	Use of lots implied; drawing near the Lord	Saul identified as future king
1 Sam 14:8-10	Jonathan and his men	Battle against Philistines	Not applicable	Sign via response of the Philistine garrison	Sign given for attack; Jonathan is successful
1 Sam 14:36-37	Saul	War with Philistines	<i>šā'al bē'lōhim</i> (twofold inquiry)	None mentioned, but they 'approached God'	No answer; therefore, Israel is sinning
1 Sam 14:38-42	Saul and Israel	Identifying transgressor	<i>hābā tāmīm</i> ('give <i>tammim</i> '); <i>hippīl</i> ('casting') <i>gōrāl</i> ; <i>nilkad</i>	Use of lots is implied; possibly includes Thummim	Jonathan is identified as the one who had transgressed

Table 1. Divination in the Deuteronomistic Works (cont.)

[N.B.: Parallel formulations in Chronicles are not included.]

Reference	For whom done	Occasion	Idiom used	Tools used	Results
1 Sam 22:10, 13, 15	Ahimelech inquiring for David	Massacre of Nob priests	<i>šā'al bēYHWH</i> (10), <i>šā'al bē'lōhim</i> (13, 15)	None mentioned	No direct result; Saul kills Ahimelech and priests
1 Sam 23:1-2, 4	David	War with Philistines	<i>šā'al bēYHWH</i> (two separate queries)	None mentioned	Two separate answers; David is victorious
1 Sam 23:9-12	David	Saul to trap David in Keilah	David <i>'amar</i> (to God) (two separate queries)	Ephod	God gives separate answers
1 Sam 28:6	Saul	War with Philistines	<i>šā'al bēYHWH</i>	Dreams, Urim, prophets	No answer
1 Sam 28:7-19	Saul via <i>'ēšet ba'alat 'ōb</i>	War with Philistines; lack of divine revelation	<i>qāsam bā'ōb</i> ; <i>he'ēlā</i> [<i>'ēlōhim/šēmū'el</i>]	<i>'ōb</i>	Spirit of Samuel gives a prophecy of doom
1 Sam 30:7-8	David	War with Amalekites	<i>šā'al bēYHWH</i>	Ephod	"Pursue the Amalekites"; David does and wins Ephod
2 Sam 2:1	David	Selecting royal city	<i>šā'al bēYHWH</i> (twofold query)	None mentioned	(1) Go to a city in Judah (2) Settle in Hebron
2 Sam 5:19	David	War with the Philistines	<i>šā'al bēYHWH</i> (twofold query)	None mentioned	"Go up"; David wins
2 Sam 5:23	David	War with the Philistines	<i>šā'al bēYHWH</i>	None mentioned	Divine strategy says to go around, not up; David is victorious
2 Sam 16:23	"Ahithophel's advice was as asking God's counsel"	counseling Absalom	<i>šā'al bidēbar hā'ēlōhim</i>	None mentioned	None
2 Sam 20:18	End of Sheba rebellion	Siege of city of Abel (indirect context)	<i>šā'al bē'ābēl</i> 'inquire via Abel (the dead?)'	None mentioned	N/A

Table 1. Divination in the Deuteronomistic Works (cont.)

[N.B.: Parallel formulations in Chronicles are not included.]

Reference	For whom done	Occasion	Idiom used	Tools used	Results
2 Sam 21:1	David	Three-year famine	<i>bikkēs 'et pēnē</i> <i>YHWH</i>	None mentioned	Guilt of Saul for killing Gibeonites
1 Kgs 22:5-28	Jehoshaphat (Judah) and Ahab (Israel)	Prospective war with Aram	<i>dāraš 'et dēbar</i> <i>YHWH</i> (5); <i>dāraš mē'et</i> <i>YHWH</i> (7); <i>dāraš 'et</i> <i>YHWH</i> (8)	Prophets; reference to "the spirit of YHWH" (21-24)	Micaiah excepted, prophets urge war; Ahab is killed in battle
2 Kgs 1:2-3, 6, 16	Ahaziah, king of Israel	Ahaziah consults about recovery from accident	<i>dāraš bēba'al</i> <i>zēbūb 'elōhē</i> <i>'eqrōn</i> (2-3, 6, 16); <i>dāraš</i> <i>bidēbar</i> <i>'elōhīm</i> <i>beyisrā'el</i> (16); see <i>dāraš</i> <i>'elōhīm</i> (1 Sam 9:9)	None mentioned	Messengers never reach Ekron
2 Kgs 3:11-19	Kings of Israel, Judah, and Edom	Campaign against Moab, lack of water for troops	<i>dāraš 'et</i> <i>YHWH</i>	Prophet (Elisha); use of a musician (<i>mēnaggēn</i> , 15)	"You will have water and defeat Moab"; prophecies fulfilled (20, 24)
2 Kgs 8:8-13	Hazael, on behalf of Ben-Hadad, king of Aram	Ben-Hadad is ill	<i>dāraš 'et</i> <i>YHWH</i>	Prophet (Elisha)	Ben-Hadad to die; Hazael to rule Aram; prophecies fulfilled (vv. 14-15)
2 Kgs 16:15 [Doubtful]	King Ahaz of Judah, without an intermediary	"The altar of bronze shall be for me 'to examine'?"	<i>biqqēr</i>	The altar of bronze	None
2 Kgs 22:12-20	Hilkiah, for Josiah	Discovery and reading of book of the law	<i>dāraš 'et</i> <i>YHWH</i> (13, 18)	The prophetess Huldah	Judah punished for sins; Josiah will die in peace [<i>bēšālōm</i> = <i>Yērūsālayim</i>]