

ANCIENT VIEWS OF PROPHECY AND FULFILLMENT: MESOPOTAMIA AND ASIA MINOR

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I. PROPHECY = DIVINE KNOWLEDGE

OT prophecy is the communication of God's superior knowledge to human beings, not always involving information about the future and sometimes in matters quite mundane. Samuel told Saul where to find his father's stray donkeys (1 Samuel 9-10). In words describing Mesopotamian divination, which we shall apply to prophecy, A. Leo Oppenheim expressed the matter well: "Basically, divination represents a technique of communication with the supernatural forces that are supposed to shape the history of the individual as well as that of the group. It presupposes the belief that these powers are able and, at times, willing to communicate their intentions . . . and that if evil is predicted or threatened, it can be averted through appropriate means."¹

II. INTEREST IN ACQUIRING DIVINE KNOWLEDGE

Among the ancient Babylonians, Assyrians and Hittites there was considerable interest in acquiring such divine knowledge.² In a prayer uttered during the course of a prolonged plague in his land the Hittite emperor Mursili II succinctly expressed the avenues of divine revelation open to the ancient Near Easterner:³ "If people are dying for some reason other [than the sins we have discovered thus far], then either let me see it by a dream, or let it be determined by oracular inquiry, or let an ecstatic prophet declare it, or, as I have instructed all the priests, they shall practice incubation."⁴ What Mursili was seeking from

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¹A. L. Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1964) 207.

²Cf. J. J. Finkelstein, "Mesopotamian Historiography," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 107 (1963) 463 ff.

³Second Plague Prayer of Mursili, ed. A. Goetze in *Kleinasiatische Forschungen* 1 (Leipzig, 1930) 218-219, sec. 11, line 3. In *ANET* 396 Goetze paraphrased too freely.

⁴Incubation (Hittite *šuppaya šeške-*) is the practice of deliberately sleeping in a holy place in order to solicit a dream oracle. For the Classical evidence see "Tempelschaf" in *Der Kleine Pauly*; "Incubation" in *Oxford Classical Dictionary* 451-452 with literature cited there. A good example of its use can be found in the Hittite Ritual of Paskuwatti edited by H. Hoffner in *Aula Orientalis* (forthcoming). In the OT it may be present in Jacob's dream oracle at Bethel and the boy Samuel's dream in 1 Samuel 3.

the god through these channels was more in the nature of information about the known past than about the unknown future—to wit, just what deed had triggered the wrath of the deity. Yet it is true that for very practical purposes ancient man, like his modern counterpart, needed and wished to know what the morrow might bring. Success of many enterprises depended upon anticipating contingencies. Kings regularly took prophets or diviners with them on military expeditions. Faced with a very dangerous Philistine attack, King Saul of Israel sought to induce revelatory dreams and consulted the priestly Urim and Thummim and, when these failed to give an answer, even used a necromancer in order to learn from God or Samuel how to cope with the Philistine threat (1 Samuel 28).

Nonroyal persons also needed predictions. Business plans were dependent upon good weather, international peace, security on the roads, and the availability of resources and markets. Some Mesopotamian omen apodoses predict the rise or fall of prices. Since the entire collection of Hittite tablets and most of the Akkadian and Egyptian texts represent royal collections, our documentation sometimes leaves the mistaken impression that only kings practiced divination or sought an answer from a god through a prophet. But it is likely that through all levels of ancient society there was a brisk interest in obtaining knowledge of the immediate future.

III. TYPES OF DIVINATION

Although there is evidence throughout the OT that Israelites used divinatory techniques to inquire of God, and even the priestly use of the Urim and Thummim is thought by many to be a form of divination by lots, the OT writers uniformly scorned divination. It was the method of the nations who did not know God.⁵ Indeed, divination was widely practiced in Mesopotamia and Hatti.⁶ We shall consider five types of divination.

1. *Extispicy*. By far the most popular form in Mesopotamia, extispicy was the examination of the entrails of a sacrificial sheep by a trained specialist called a *bārû* ("seer"). What the *bārû* "saw" were messages from the gods encoded in the intricate arrangements of the internal organs of the slaughtered animal.⁷ Manuals to be used by the *bārû* consider every possible combination of alignments of the liver, gall bladder and other organs, in each case indicating the meaning of these signs.⁸ Statements such as "it is the liver of King Sargon, who (did such-and-such)" show that at the basis of many of the interpretations

⁵Numbers 22–23; Deut 18:10 ff.; 2 Kgs 21:6 = 2 Chr 33:6; Isa 44:25; 47:13, 15.

⁶Cf. *La Divination en Mésopotamie ancienne et dans les Régions Voisines* (Travaux du Centre d'Études Supérieures Spécialisé d'Historie de Religions de Strasbourg, 1965); E. Reiner, "Fortune-Telling in Mesopotamia," *JNES* 19 (1960) 23 ff.; Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia* 206 ff.

⁷Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia* 212 ff.

⁸Cf. I. Starr, *The "Bārû" Rituals* (dissertation Yale University, 1974; Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1984).

was the earlier recording of momentous events that temporally coincided with configurations of sheep intestines observed at that time. In a pseudo-scientific manner the specialists concluded that if this configuration of entrails ever recurred a similar historical event would transpire. Hittite texts recording liver oracles show that they borrowed this technique from Babylonia through the intermediacy of Hurrians.

2. *Astrology*. "The royal art of astrology," wrote Oppenheim, "is the method of divination for which Mesopotamia is famed."⁹ Evidence shows that the astrological tradition was already diversified during the Old Babylonian period. In the following centuries (c. 1500–1100 B.C.) astrological literature derivative from Babylonia appeared in such widely dispersed areas of the cuneiform world as Hittite Asia Minor, Qatna and Mari in Syria, and Elam in the east. In Hatti astrological omen treatises such as the famous *Enūma Anu Enlil* were copied in bilingual Akkadian-Hittite versions and used by Hittite officials.¹⁰ The canonical series *Enūma Anu Enlil* consisted of at least seventy tablets. Signs connected with the moon are treated in the first third (twenty-three tablets), followed by the sun, meteorological phenomena, the planets, and the fixed stars. The time of the disappearance of the old moon, its reappearance, its relation to the sun, and other data on eclipses make up the principal concerns of the series. During the reign of Mursili II (c. 1339–1306) a solar eclipse took place.¹¹ From Hittite texts¹² we learn that the king's stepmother, who disliked the king's wife, spread the word in the capital that the eclipse portended not the king's death but the queen's. Eclipses usually portended disasters of the magnitude of the death of the king. When this happened, kings sought to avoid their fate by appointing a prisoner of war as king in their places so that the gods' death threat would fall upon him. This procedure is well attested for both Mesopotamia and Hatti.¹³ At the time of the eclipse Mursili was on a military campaign, so his stepmother had ample opportunity in his absence to propagate her own interpretation of the eclipse. When the queen died soon after, Mursili accused his stepmother of sorcery and had her removed from all her offices and forced into seclusion.¹⁴

⁹Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia* 224–225, 309–310; Ch. Virolleaud, *L'Astrologie Chaldéenne* (Paris, 1908/1911).

¹⁰For the treatises cf. E. Laroche, *Catalogue des textes hittites* (Paris, 1971) 91 ff.

¹¹See M. Rowton in *CAH* (3d ed.), 1. part 1, p. 206.

¹²For cuneiform publication see *Keilschrifturkunden aus Boghazköi* (hereafter KUB) 14/4 (1926); for literature see E. Forrer, *Forschungen* 1/2 (1926) 1 ff.; E. Laroche and H. G. Güterbock in *Ugaritica* 3 (1956) 101–102; A. Goetze, *Kleinasiatische Forschungen* 1 (1930) 405–406; *CAH* (2d ed.), 2. chap. 17, sec. 2; chap. 21a, sec. 2; F. Imparati, *Studi micenei ed egeo-anatolici* 18 (1977) 25 n. 26.

¹³The so-called "substitute king" (Akkadian *šar pūhi*). Cf. H. M. Kümmel, *Ersatzrituale für den hethitischen König* (Wiesbaden, 1967).

¹⁴For Mursili's justification of his actions see H. A. Hoffner, "A Prayer of Mursili II about his Step-mother," *JAOS* 103 (1983) 187–190.

Appearing first in the fifth century B.C. are the Babylonian horoscopes, formerly thought to be due to Greek influence but now recognized as a natural development from native traditions. These mention the date of birth, followed by an astronomical report and concluding with predictions of the child's future. A simpler forerunner, which lists only the birth date and the prediction, is attested on a Hittite tablet almost a thousand years earlier.

3. *Augury*. Not practiced in Mesopotamia but widely used by the Hittites,¹⁵ augury (the movements and behavior of birds) was observed in a controlled environment similar to what the Romans called a *templum*.¹⁶ Both the direction and manner of the flight of birds had significance. Since this technique was not borrowed from Mesopotamia, the terminology shows no trace of Akkadian words. Many of the special terms used in bird omen texts are of unclear meaning, so our understanding of the details of the praxis is rudimentary. It is also not quite clear if the birds observed were always in a controlled environment. The only case in which we hear of oracle bird observation on a military campaign is so laconic that we cannot tell if a particular type of significant bird was sighted unexpectedly (*auguria oblativa*) or if the Hittite augur had set up his controlled observation field and solicited the omen (*auguria impetrativa*). So serious were the Hittites about consulting bird omens before beginning important or dangerous missions that in a treaty with a vassal king the king had to warn: "If you hear about a threat against me, act immediately! Don't even pause to take a bird oracle!"¹⁷

4. *Kleromancy*. Divination by means of lots was practiced in several areas of the ancient Near East. Some understand the Israelite oracle of the Urim and Thummim as the manipulation of lots.¹⁸ In Hittite the lot was denoted by the Sumerogram KIN.¹⁹ Its Hittite name is yet unknown. Each lot observed during inquiry had a symbolic name. Some lots (the actors) "arose," "seized" other lots (the objects), and "placed" or "gave" them into areas that also bore symbolic names. From the texts that describe the movements of the lots it seems that

¹⁵Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia* 209–210. On Hittite augurs and their practices see A. Unal, "Zum Status der 'Augures'," *Revue Hittite et Asiatique* 31 (1973) 27–28. On the interpretation of the technical language of the bird oracles see A. Archi, "L'ornitomanzia ittita," in *Studi micenei ed egeo-anatolici* 16 (1975) 119–180. From the Assyriological point of view see Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia* 209–210; C. Gadd in *La Divination en Mésopotamie ancienne*.

¹⁶Cf. *Oxford Classical Dictionary* 120; "Augures" in *Lempriere's Classical Dictionary* (3d ed., 1984) 95–96. The Hittite word for the *templum* may have been *warpi*; cf. *The Hittite Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago*, 3. 2, meaning 5.

¹⁷Treaty with Kupantainara (*Catalogue des textes hittites* 68), par. 17 (*Keilschrifttexte aus Boghazköi* 4.3 + 19.64 ii 13–14). Edition and German translation by J. Friedrich, *Staatsverträge des Hatt-Reiches*, 1. Teil (Leipzig, 1926) 126–127.

¹⁸IDB, 4. 739–740.

¹⁹On the Hittite lot oracles see A. Archi, "Il sistema KIN della divinazione ittita," *OrAnt* 13 (1974) 113–144.

they were able to move on their own. They may have been small animals with labels attached in some way. Each of the various configurations of symbolic actors, objects and areas had a significance that contributed to the outcome of the oracle. The outcome was always binary—i.e., a “yes” or “no” answer was given to the question.

5. *Oneiromancy*. In the Bible divine revelation through dreams is well attested as an approved means of communication to Jacob, Joseph, Daniel and others in the OT and to Mary’s husband Joseph, Peter and others in the NT. The significance of dreams was a subject of written analysis in Mesopotamia, Egypt and Hatti.²⁰

Sometimes a dream contained a straightforward verbal communication from a god. This could not be misunderstood and needed no specially trained interpreter. Oppenheim called these “message dreams.” Cuneiform tablets record that such dreams were reported through royal officials to Zimrilim, the king of Mari (1779–1761 B.C.), Sin-kashid of Uruk, and Ashurbanipal of Assyria (668–631).²¹ It is possible also that the messages from Ishtar of Arbela and from Bel to Esarhaddon and the king’s mother, which were delivered to royal officials by various private citizens (mostly women) who were apparently not professional prophets or prophetesses, were dreams.²² Such a dream came to Muwatalli, the Hittite crown prince, regarding the health of his younger brother Hattusili III. Muwatalli reported the dream to his father Mursili, much as the commoners at Mari reported theirs to the royal officials. In the dream the goddess Shaushka predicted that young Hattusili would die unless his father dedicated him immediately to her as a priest.²³ Hattusili III also claimed to have been directed in a dream to take Puduhepa in marriage as his queen.²⁴

But since most dreams are nonverbal experiences, there grew up a dream interpreter’s lore that provided rules to be used in the interpreting of symbolic elements in dreams. Certain colors, animals, or activities were always associated with an announced misfortune, while others indicated happiness and success. Among other examples we might cite Mursili II’s recurring dream that the hand of the deity touched his mouth in judgment. Eventually this dream produced a severe psychological trauma, manifesting itself in hysterical aphonia (or aphasia), which persisted for some time and was the occasion for

²⁰Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia* 67, 150, 207, 222, 260, 268, 272; *The Interpretation of Dreams in the Ancient Near East* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1956).

²¹Cf. the more recent translations of these texts by R. D. Biggs in *ANET* 604–606, which are to be preferred to R. H. Pfeiffer’s older ones in *ANET* 449–454.

²²Among the nine examples given in *ANET* 605 no reporting person’s name appears more than once. None is called an *āpilu* or an *āpiltu*, a *mahhū*, or any other designation of prophet or diviner.

²³English translation in E. Sturtevant and G. Bechtel, *A Hittite Chrestomathy* (Philadelphia, 1935) 65. Cf. Oppenheim, *The Interpretation of Dreams* 197–198, 254 #25.

²⁴Oppenheim, *Dreams* 254 #29.

an elaborate healing ritual.²⁵ Another example would be the dream of Hattusili III's queen, Puduhepa, that she was sexually assaulted behind the bath house by a gang of young men.²⁶

The above examples from Mesopotamia and Hatti show that reporting an unsolicited revelatory dream did not constitute the reporter a prophet or seer. Quite ordinary nonprofessionals could receive such dreams. But one could also solicit a revelatory dream. This is what Mursili meant when he said, "The priests will practice incubation."²⁷

IV. PROPHETS

1. *In Mesopotamia.* Ever since the publication of the Mari "prophet" texts it has been customary to view these reporters as "prophets." But we have seen that insofar as they reported dreams, like the reporters to Esarhaddon, they may not be entitled to such a designation. Nevertheless Akkadian texts refer to individuals as *āpilu* ("answerer"), *maḥḥū* ("ecstatic prophet"), and other terms, by which is meant individuals who habitually receive and relay divine messages. Assyriologists think that these individuals, although they are described in Akkadian texts, represent a manifestation of West Semitic rather than Babylonian or Assyrian culture.²⁸ Oppenheim even assigns them to a low stratum of society. They should be considered alongside the prophets of Baal, Asherah, and other Syrian or Canaanite deities.

2. *In Hatti.* From the statement of Mursili II with which I began this paper it is obvious that ecstatic prophets were one of the channels of communication between the Hittite gods and their worshipers. It must be admitted that the laconic form of this statement does not permit us to determine if such prophets gave unsolicited information to the king like the prophets of Mari and Assyria or merely served like the oracles as a means of inquiry. Yet we may be assuming a dichotomy of prophetic activity that is unrealistic. Persons who could give a god's answers could surely also give his unsolicited warnings and promises. An example of such warnings, although cited in retrospect a century later by a king who was certainly not impartial, is the criticism of royal internecine struggle voiced by the "men of the gods" in the Telepinu Proclamation.

An oracle delivered to the Hittite king by a diviner²⁹ predicts victory in an upcoming battle with these words: "Fear not, O king! The god Teshub will place

²⁵Ibid., pp. 197 ff., 230–231.

²⁶KUB 15/1 ii 6–10, 38–41; Oppenheim, *Dreams* 227.

²⁷Cf. n. 4 above.

²⁸Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia* 221; R. D. Biggs, "More Babylonian Prophecies," *Iraq* 29 (1967) 117.

²⁹*Keilschrifttexte aus Boghazköi* 15 52 v 9 ff. The Hurrian loanword into Hittite that designates him is *purapšiš*, which O. R. Gurney, *Some Aspects of Hittite Religion* (Oxford, 1977) 45–46 and n. 6, rightly interprets as equivalent to the Sumerograms LÚ.ĪHAL and LÚ.AZU (= Akkadian *bārū*, "seer," "diviner").

the enemy lands under your feet, and you will smash them like empty clay pots."³⁰ The fact that the promise is made in the third person, seemingly Teshub rather than by him, need not disqualify it as a reported revelation. Some OT prophecies use just this third-person form in reporting victory oracles.³¹ More important is the fact that, since this oracle is imbedded in a festival text, it was intended for periodic use. It was therefore not a one-time prediction but a more general reassurance for the king. That it was delivered by a diviner, however, assures us that it was not just a well-wisher's "good luck" but a genuine oracle.

Fortune-tellers and spiritualists of all ages have employed tricks to deceive and impress their clients. They have clothed their predictions in mysterious, ambiguous or overly general terms in order to cover possible error. The Greek Delphic Oracle spoke in riddles. Undoubtedly Mesopotamian and Hittite practitioners did the same. Such terminology does occur in the apodoses to Akkadian omens, which in turn passed into the Akkadian "apocalypses." Some of the message dreams reported to Esarhaddon could fall in this category, but other predictions seem quite straightforward.

V. LITERARY PROPHECY

1. *Form and origin.* In addition predictive prophecy could take an anonymous, literary form in which the person and presence of a "prophet" is totally unnecessary. Such is the form taken by the Akkadian literary "prophecies." Focusing his attention principally on the text that he published in *Iraq* 29, R. D. Biggs regards these texts as mere compilations of apodoses from astrological omens stripped of their usual protases.³² The following section quoted from Biggs' translation will illustrate the tone: "The king will cause his land to complain, the king of Akkad will not achieve his goal, the king of Babylon will be killed. The entire land will rebel against the prince who will sit on the throne and he will not conquer his enemies. . . . City will turn against city, family . . . against family, brother will slay brother, . . . the shrines of the great gods will be obliterated, there will be a reduction of the inhabitants of Nippur by slaughter. . . . A son of the king who is not mentioned by the people as a successor will seize the throne."³³ It is easy to see that Biggs' text bears no resemblance to a known sequence of historical events and justifies his claim that some of these texts were mere compilations of astrological omen apodoses. But other literary prophecies have quite a different wording and justify the

³⁰The oracle continues for five more lines, but they are too badly broken to translate.

³¹Cf. the prophets of Samaria reporting to Ahab and Jehoshaphat (1 Kings 22 = 2 Chronicles 18).

³²Cf. Biggs, "More Babylonian" 117 ff.; "The Babylonian Prophecies and the Astrological Traditions of Mesopotamia," *JCS* 37 (1985) 86 ff.; *ANET* 606. See also the remarks of H. Hunger and S. Kaufman, "A New Akkadian Prophecy Text," *JAOS* 95 (1975) 375.

³³Biggs, "More Babylonian" 121, 123.

interpretation of William Hallo, who dubbed them "apocalypses"³⁴ because of their similarity in form to apocalyptic literature. Texts such as Prophecy Text A,³⁵ the Uruk Prophecy,³⁶ the Dynastic Prophecy³⁷ and the Marduk and Shulgi Prophecies³⁸ were carefully constructed rewritings of history in the guise of prediction (*vaticinia ex eventu*) with the names of the intended kings suppressed but with sufficient detail to make each recognizable to an audience relatively knowledgeable about recent history. The transition point between history in the guise of prediction and real attempted prediction in these compositions is supposed to come near the end, with the description of the king reigning at the time of the writing. Here, it is assumed, the real predicting began—which would, of course, be much less accurate than the pseudo-prophecy that preceded.

The truthfulness of the earlier "predictions" thus validated the prophecy and encouraged the audience to believe the final (usually favorable) predictions about the reigning king.

One of these, the so-called Dynastic Prophecy, actually traces the fortunes of four successive world empires—Neo-Babylonian, Median, Persian and Macedonian—in a manner reminding us of Daniel's visions. But since the end of the tablet is broken away, we cannot determine what lesson this prediction was intended to reinforce.

2. *Audience and effect.* An important question was posed by Biggs: "The purpose of this literary genre may be guessed at, but the fact remains that we do not know. If the 'prophecies' were political tracts, who was to read them and be influenced by them? . . . Literacy in Mesopotamia . . . was almost exclusively the prerogative of professionally trained scribes."³⁹ These literary works apparently had no wide audience. Therefore if they were not merely whimsical in-house creations they could hardly have influenced many people, even though their ostensible purpose was to provide propaganda for certain kings.

No such literary prophecies have been found among the Hittite tablets, which leads us to conclude that the purposes served by the Akkadian literary prophecies were attained by other means. The clearest example of Hittite royal propaganda is the so-called Apology of Hattusili III. This text, known since the dawn of Hittitology, seeks to demonstrate the divine choice of Hattusili III to seize the throne of his nephew Mursili III. This divine choice is demonstrated

³⁴W. W. Hallo, "Akkadian Apocalypses," *IEJ* 16 (1966) 231–242. Cf. also W. G. Lambert, *The Background of Jewish Apocalyptic* (London, 1978).

³⁵Published by K. Grayson and W. G. Lambert in *JCS* 18 (1964) 7–30.

³⁶Hunger and Kaufman, "New Akkadian" 371–375; Lambert, *Background* 10 ff.

³⁷A. K. Grayson, *Babylonian Historical-Literary Texts* (Toronto, 1975) 13–37; cf. comments by Lambert, *Background* 12 ff.

³⁸R. Borger, *BO* 28 (1971) 3–24.

³⁹Biggs, "More Babylonian" 117.

in various ways in the text. Dreams, one given to his older brother while Hattusili was a child and others given to his allies and supporters and to his wife when he was a mature man, demonstrate the gods' determination to favor him and bring him to the kingship. Examples of remarkable turns of events are recited throughout his career to prove that the gods were controlling the course of events leading to his enthronement. With propaganda such as this, a lengthy literary prophecy was clearly unnecessary even if it had occurred to the king's advisors to use one. But running throughout the text is the important theme of promise (or prediction) and fulfillment. The attitude is well summed up by the king's words: "The goddess Shaushka, my lady, supported me. And *it all came to pass precisely as she had been predicting.*"⁴⁰ Since this document—the contents of which may have been promulgated orally among the kingdom's officialdom, even if not among the populace in general—records Ishtar's early promises of kingship to Hattusili, the obvious "fulfillment" in his assumption of the throne would be interpreted by all as a justification of what otherwise appears as a simple *coup d'état*.

VI. SUMMARY

Although political propaganda in the form of so-called "literary prophecies" or "apocalypses" was occasionally employed in Mesopotamia and Egypt, and although West-Semitic-type ecstatic prophets sometimes relayed messages from certain gods to the kings of Mari and Assyria, it is clear that the preferred methods both in Mesopotamia and Hatti of ascertaining what was the likely outcome of an enterprise were extispicy, astrology, augury and dream interpretation. Herein lies a vivid contrast between ancient Israel and her neighbors. Devout Israelites rejected divination as a means to know the likely outcome of events. For them God made known what he wished them to know—either by the sacred Urim and Thummim of the priests, or by his servants the prophets.

⁴⁰H. Otten, *Die Apologie Hattusilis III* (Wiesbaden, 1981) 24–25, lines 16–17 (italics mine).