DIVINATION AND INTERPRETATION OF SIGNS IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

edited by

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Cover Illustration: Bronze model of a sheep's liver indicating the seats of the deities. From Decima di Gossolengo, Piacenza. Etruscan, late 2nd–early 1st c. B.C. Photo credit: Scala / Art Resource, NY

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Symposium participants, from left to right: Front row: John Jacobs, Amar Annus, JoAnn Scurlock, Ulla Koch, Martti Nissinen, Ann Guinan, Francesca Rochberg, James Allen. Back row: Edward Shaughnessy, Nils Heeßel, Eckart Frahm, Seth Richardson, Scott Noegel, Clifford Ando, Abraham Winitzer, Robert Biggs. Photo by Kaye Oberhausen

8

"SIGN, SIGN, EVERYWHERE A SIGN": SCRIPT, POWER, AND INTERPRETATION IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST[1]

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As the title of this study indicates, my primary aim is to shed light on ancient Near Eastern conceptions of the divine sign by bringing into relief the intricate relationship between script, power, and interpretation. At the seminar organizer's request I have adopted a comparative approach and herein consider evidence from Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Israel.[2]

I divide my study into three parts. In the first, I argue that we obtain insight into the interpretive process of ancient diviners by recognizing the cosmological underpinnings that inform the production of divinatory and other mantic texts. Among these underpinnings is an ontological understanding of words and script as potentially powerful.

In the second part of the essay, I should like to show that the ontological understanding of words and script provides a contextual framework that permits us to see the exegetical process as a ritual act of performative power that legitimates and promotes the cosmological and ideological systems of the interpreter.

In my third and final section, I argue that recognizing the process of exegesis as an act of power provides insights into the generative role that scripts (or writing systems) play in shaping ancient Near Eastern conceptions of the divine sign.

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[2] There is more evidence for divination in Mesopotamia than in Egypt, and far more publications on the subject. Nevertheless, our understanding of Egyptian divination is changing drastically with the publication of previously unknown texts. Currently, the earliest evidence for divination in Egypt appears in the form of kledonomancy and hemerology texts of the Middle Kingdom (von Lieven 1999). Thereafter, we have a dream omen text that dates to the New Kingdom (Gardiner 1935; Szpakowska 2003; Noegel 2007: 92–106), and an increasing number of divinatory texts of the Late Period and beyond, mostly unpublished (Volten 1942; Andrews 1993: 13–14; Andrews 1994: 29–32; Demichelis 2002; Quack 2006). With regard to the Israelites, it is largely recognized that they also practiced divination, even though scholars debate its extent and role in Israelite religion (see Cryer 1994; Jeffers 1996; Noegel 2007: 113–82). Regardless of what constitutes divination in ancient Israel, my focus in this study is on the exegesis of divine signs (often in visions), for which there is ample evidence in the Hebrew Bible. For a discussion on the taxonomic relationship between visions and prophecy in ancient Israel, see Noegel 2007: 263–69.

COSMOLOGY AND THE POWER OF WORDS

It is well known that the literati of the ancient Near East regarded words, whether written or spoken, to be inherently, and at least potentially powerful (see already Heinisch 1922; Dürr 1938; Masing 1936). With reference to Mesopotamia, Georges Contenau explains:

> Since to know and pronounce the name of an object instantly endowed it with reality, and created power over it, and since the degree of knowledge and consequently of power was strengthened by the tone of voice in which the name was uttered, writing, which was a permanent record of the name, naturally contributed to this power, as did both drawing and sculpture,[3] since both were a means of asserting knowledge of the object and consequently of exercising over it the power which knowledge gave (Contenau 1955: 164).

Statements by scribal elites concerning the cosmological dimension of speech and writing are plentiful in Mesopotamia. A textbook example is the Babylonian creation account, which characterizes the primordial world of pre-existence as one not yet put into words.

> *enūma eliš lā nabû šamāmu*
> *šapliš ammatum šuma lā zakrat*
>
> When the heavens above had not yet been termed
> Nor the earth below called by name
>
> — *Enuma Elish* I 1–2

Piotr Michalowski has remarked about this text that it "… contains puns and exegeses that play specifically on the learned written tradition and on the very nature of the cuneiform script" (Michalowski 1990b: 39). Elsewhere we hear that writing is *markas kullat* or "the (cosmic) bond of everything" (Sjöberg 1972) and the secret of scribes and gods (Borger 1957; Lenzi 2008a).[4] Moreover, diviners in Mesopotamia viewed themselves as integral links in a chain of transmission going back to the gods (Lambert 1957: 1–14), and in some circles, traced their genealogy back to Enmeduranki, the antediluvian king of Sippar (Lambert 1967: 126–38; Lenzi 2008b). Elsewhere, we are told that diviners transmitted knowledge "from the mouth of the God Ea" (Michalowski 1996: 186). The Mesopotamian conception of divine ledgers or "Tablets of Life" on which gods inscribed the destinies of individuals similarly registers the cosmological underpinnings of writing (Paul 1973: 345–53). One could add to this list many Mesopotamian incantations that presume the illocutionary power of an utterance.[5]

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[3] On the power of images in Mesopotamia, see Bahrani 2003.

[4] The *markasu* also appears in *Enuma Elish* V 59–60, VII 95–96, as the means for holding the earth, heavens, and the *apsû* in place (CAD M/1, 283 s.v. *markasu*; Horowitz 1998: 119–20). It also appears in reference to temples (CAD M/1, 283–84 s.v. *markasu*; George 2001–2002: 40). Like the cosmological cable (i.e., *markasu*) and temple, writing was a linking device that permitted the diviner to connect and communicate with the gods. The comment by Rochberg concerning the worldview of Mesopotamian celestial diviners is apropos: "A central feature of this relation to the world is the attention to the divine and the assumption of the possibility of a connection and communication between divine and human. In the specific case of celestial divination, that form of communication connected humans not only to gods but to the heavens wherein the gods were thought to make themselves manifest and produce signs for humankind" (Rochberg 2003: 185).

[5] The study of the "illocutionary" power of language was inaugurated by Austin (1962) and Searle (1969); but it received its most influential stamp from Tambiah (1968, 1973, 1985). See also Turner 1974. For an excellent synopsis on the various ancient and

A similar cosmology undergirds the Egyptian conception of text, as David Frankfurter points out:

> … Egyptian letters were the chief technology of a hierocratic scribal elite who preserved and enacted rituals — and by extension the cosmic order itself — through the written word (Frankfurter 1994: 192).

The Egyptians referred to the hieroglyphic script as *mdw nṯr*, literally, "the words of the gods" and the scribal art was to them an occupation without equal. The ibis-headed god Thoth, who is credited with the invention of writing, is said to be "excellent of magic" (*mnḥ ḥkȝ*) and "Lord of hieroglyphs" (*nb mdw nṯr*) (Ritner 1993: 35). He is depicted (see fig. 8.1) writing the hieroglyphic feather sign ∫ [6] representing *maat* (*mȝˤt*), a word that stands for the cosmic force of equilibrium by which kings keep their thrones and justice prevails (Assmann 1990; Teeter 1997).[7]

Figure 8.1. Thoth writing the hieroglyphic sign for *mȝˤt*

The link between writing and *maat* underscores how integral the scribal art was perceived for maintaining the cosmic order in Egypt (Hodge 1975). The spoken word too was capable of packing power in Egypt, as countless ritual and "magic" texts make clear. In the words of Geraldine Pinch, "In the hieroglyphic script, the power of the image and the power of the word are almost inseparable" (Pinch 1994: 69).

According to Isaac Rabinowitz, the Israelites shared this ontological understanding of words:

> … words were not merely presumed to have the properties of material objects, but might be thought of as foci or concentrations of dynamic power. They were plainly regarded as not only movable but mobile, not only susceptible to being acted upon, but capable of acting upon other entities in ways not confined to communication, of producing and enacting effects, conditions, circumstances and states (Rabinowitz 1993: 16).

modern approaches to this topic, see Leick 1994: 23–55; and Greaves 1996. On the relationship between Mesopotamian conceptions of words as power and the later Greek doctrine of the logos, see already Langdon 1918; Hehn 1906; Böhl 1916; and more recently Lawson 2001. Images, like text, could also serve as loci of divine power in Mesopotamia. See Bahrani 2008: 59–65.

[6] All references to Egyptian signs follow the sigla of Gardiner 1988.

[7] *Maat* was also personified as Thoth's wife.

The conceptual link between a word and an object is reflected most clearly in the Hebrew word דבר (*dābār*), which means "word" and also "thing, object." Of course, this notion of words contextualizes Yahweh's creation of the universe by fiat in Genesis 1 (Moriarty 1974).[8]

Like the Mesopotamians and Egyptians, the Israelites also attribute a cosmologically powerful role to writing (Rabinowitz 1993: 33–36). One could cite many proof texts, such as the role that divine writing plays in issuing the Ten Commandments (Exodus 31:18), or Yahweh's heavenly text in which he keeps the names of the sinless (Exodus 32:32–33), or the priestly curses that must be written on a scroll, dissolved in water, and imbibed by a wife tested for unfaithfulness (Numbers 5:23–24), or the many prophecies that Yahweh orders his prophets to utter before an audience and put into writing (e.g., Jeremiah 36:18, 36:27–28).

Perhaps one of the best demonstrations of the cosmological dimension of the written word in Israel appears in Numbers 11, in which we hear how Yahweh gave a portion of Moses' spirit to seventy leading Israelites so they could help bear the people's burdens (Numbers 11:17). In this story, the names of the seventy men are written on a list at the Tent of Meeting, *outside* the camp. As the text tells us:

> Now two men stayed behind in the camp, one named Eldad, the second Medad; but as they were among those written (on the list), the spirit rested upon them even though they had not gone out to the Tent; so they were prophetically possessed within the camp. Thereupon a lad ran and told Moses, and said, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying *within* the camp" (Numbers 11:26–27).

This text illustrates that the written names of the seventy men alone sufficed to bring on the spirit of prophesy (Rabinowitz 1995: 34). The expectation was that prophesying would occur close to the Tent of Meeting and not in the camp.[9]

Such references could be multiplied, but these should suffice to show that speaking and writing in the ancient Near East, especially in ritual contexts, could be perceived as acts of cosmological power. This ontological conception of words would appear to be a necessary starting point for understanding the perceived nature of language, writing, and text in the ancient Near East. Nevertheless, it is seldom integrated into studies of scribal culture or textual production, and even more rarely into studies of ancient divination, despite the importance that language, writing, and text play in the ritual process (see Noegel 2004).

INTERPRETATION OF DIVINE SIGNS AS AN ACT OF POWER

The exegesis of divine signs is often treated as if it were a purely hermeneutical act. However, recognizing the cosmological dimension of the spoken and written word naturally forces us to reconsider the ontological and ritual dimensions of the interpretative process. Indeed, I believe it is more accurate to think of the exegesis of divine signs as a ritual act,[10] in

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[8] This view also is found in Ugaritic texts. See Sanders 2004.

[9] For additional demonstrations of the power of the written word in Israel, see the insightful work of Rabinowitz 1995: 34–36. On the longevity of the power of names in Israelite religion in later Judaism

note the comment of Bohak 2008: 305: "Of all the characteristic features of Jewish magic of all periods, the magical powers attributed to the Name of God are perhaps the longest continuous practice."

[10] Definitions of ritual have multiplied and expanded in recent years. I refer the reader to the taxonomy of

some cases, as one chain in a link of ritual acts. In Mesopotamia, for example, exegesis could be preceded by extispicy or other ritual means for provoking omens and followed by *namburbû* rituals when something went wrong or the omen portended ill (Maul 1994). Therefore, the exegesis of divine signs is cosmologically significant and constitutes a performative act of power.

Until one deciphers them, omens represent unbridled forms of divine power. While their meanings and consequences are unknown they remain liminal and potentially dangerous. The act of interpreting a sign seeks to limit that power by restricting the parameters of a sign's interpretation.[11] A divine sign cannot now mean *anything*, but only *one* thing. Seen in this way, the act of interpretation — like the act of naming — constitutes a performative act of power; hence the importance of well-trained professionals and of secrecy in the transmission of texts of ritual power.

Moreover, the performative power vested in the interpreter is both cosmological and ideological. It is cosmological in the sense that the interpreter takes as axiomatic the notion that the gods *can* and *want to* communicate their intentions through signs, and that the universe works according to certain principles that require only knowledge and expertise to decode. Insofar as the process of interpretation reflects a desire to demonstrate that such principles continue to function, it also registers and dispels ritual or mantic insecurities.[12] The Mesopotamian and Egyptian lists of omens that justify titling this essay "Sign, Sign, Everywhere a Sign,"[13] not only demonstrate that virtually anything could be ominous when witnessed in the appropriate context, they also index a preoccupation with performative forms of control.[14] To wit, all signs, no matter how bewildering or farfetched they might appear, not only *can* be explained, they *must* be explained.

Moreover, to understand the cosmological context of words of power within ancient interpretive contexts, it is important to recognize that acts of interpretation are also acts of divine judgment. In Mesopotamia, diviners use the word *purussû* "legal decision" or "verdict" to refer to an omen's prediction. As Francesca Rochberg has shown, divinatory texts also share in common with legal codes the formula *if x, then y*.[15]

Snoek (2008), who lists twenty-four characteristics that one might find in most (but not all) rituals. I assert that the interpretation of divine signs in the ancient Near East exhibits most of these characteristics. I treat this topic more directly in Noegel, in press.

[11] This perspective also sheds light on why diviners recorded protases that appear "impossible." For a convenient summary of scholarship on these protases, see Rochberg 2004: 247–55.

[12] This may explain why some anthropologists have conceived of divination as a blaming strategy. See Leick 1998: 195–98. On the mantic anxieties that underlie divination generally in Mesopotamia, see Bahrani 2008: 183–89.

[13] This portion of the article's title detourns a lyric from the song "Signs" by the Five Man Electrical Band (1970).

[14] A preoccupation with performative forms of control also might explain the format and organization of the divinatory collections, especially in Mesopotamia.

Mogens T. Larsen has described the compiling of lexical lists as presenting "… a systematic and ordered picture of the world" (Larsen 1987: 209–12). Joan G. Westenholz's remarks concerning the practice of listing is equally apposite: "… the earliest lexical compilations may have been more than a utilitarian convenience for the scribes who wrote them; that they may have contained a systematization of the world order; and that at least one was considered as containing 'secret lore'"; and "On the intellectual level, knowing the organization of the world made it possible to affect the universe by magical means" (Westenholz 1998: 451, 453). See also Rochberg 2004: 214.

[15] On the relationship between law codes and omens, see Rochberg 1999: 566: "The formulation itself gives the omens a lawlike appearance, especially when it is further evident that predictions derivable from the relation of x to y are the goal of the inquiry into the set of x that bear predictive possibilities." See also Rochberg 2003, 2004. Reiner (1960: 29–30), shows

In fact, Babylonian oracle questions (i.e., *tamītu*) specifically request judgments (i.e., *dīnū*) from the god Shamash (Lambert 2007: 5–10). Therefore, within this performative juridical context, all means of connecting protases to apodoses constitute vehicles for demonstrating and justifying divine judgment.[16]

The cosmological underpinnings that connect interpretation, power, and judgment in Mesopotamia were no more present than during an extispicy, as Alan Lenzi tells us:

> … only the diviner had the authority to set the king's plans before the gods via an extispicy and to read the judgment of the gods from the liver and other exta of the animal. In this very act … the diviner experienced the presence of the divine assembly itself, which had gathered about the victim to write their judgments in the organs of the animal (Lenzi 2008a: 55).

In Egypt there is a great deal of evidence for viewing the interpretation of divine signs as an act of judgment. The very concept of judgment is embedded in a cosmological system that distinguishes sharply between justice or cosmic order (i.e., *mзʕt*) and injustice or chaos (i.e., *jsft*). According to Egyptian belief, *maat* was bestowed upon Egypt by the creator god Atum. Therefore, rendering justice was a cosmological act. For this reason, judicial officials from the Fifth Dynasty onward also held the title "divine priest of *maat*" (*ḥm-nṯr mзʕt*) (Morenz 1973: 12–13). Moreover, since the interpretation of divine signs fell under the purview of the priests, it was they who often rendered judgment in legal matters. Serge Sauneron observes:

> … divine oracles were often supposed to resolve legal questions. In the New Kingdom, cases were frequently heard within the temples or in their immediate vicinity. Moreover, in every town, priests sat side by side with officials of the Residence on judicial tribunals (Sauneron 2000: 104).

Potsherds discovered at Deir el-Medina also show that priests served as oracular media for obtaining divine judgments (MacDowell 1990: 107–41). Petitioners would inscribe their queries on the potsherds in the form of yes or no questions and the priests would consult the gods before pronouncing their verdicts.

In Israel, interpreting divine signs and judgment also were intimately connected. This is in part because the Israelites regarded Yahweh as both a king and a judge. So close is this connection that the pre-exilic prophetic oracles have been classified as *Gerichtsrede* "lawsuit speeches" (Nielsen 1978). The conceptual tie between the interpreters of divine signs, cosmological power, and judgment continued long after the post-exilic period, as we know from Talmudic texts that discuss the rabbinic interpreters of divinely sent dreams. About the rabbinic interpreter, Philip Alexander remarks:

> He wields enormous power — the power of performative speech. The dream creates a situation in which — like the act of blessing and cursing, or the act of pronouncing judgment in a court of law — speech can lead directly to physical results. And the dream-interpreter exercises this power in virtue of the knowledge and the tradition

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that *purussû*s could come from stars, birds, cattle, and wild animals as well.

[16] Compare the remark of Shaked 1998: 174, with respect to the language of magic: "… spells are like legal documents … in that they have the tendency to use formulaic language, and that the language they use creates, by its mere utterance, a new legal situation." See also the comment of Mauss 1972: 122: "… all kinds of magical representations take the form of judgments, and all kinds of magical operations proceed from judgments, or at least from rational decisions."

which he has received from hoary antiquity as to how dreams are to be understood (Alexander 1995: 237–38).[17]

Of course, as this statement also reveals, the power of the interpreter is as much ideological as cosmological. Throughout the ancient Near East the knowledge and expertise required for decoding divine missives typically comes from a privileged few literati, masters of the scribal arts, and/or disciples who keep their knowledge "in house."[18] We may characterize this as an ideology of privilege and erudition.[19] In order to ascertain the meaning of a divine sign, one *must* go to *them*.

Contributing to the ideological power of the interpreter is the role that deciphering divine signs plays in shaping behaviors and beliefs (Sweek 1996). By harnessing the performative power of words, interpreters determine an individual's fate. Thus, the interpretation of signs also can function as a form of social control.[20]

Therefore, we may understand the process of interpreting divine signs as a performative ritual act that empowers the interpreter while demonstrating and promoting his/her cosmological and ideological systems.

THE GENERATIVE ROLE OF SCRIPT

Up to this point I have focused primarily on the cosmological and ideological contexts that inform the interpretation of signs in the ancient Near East. I have underscored the illocutionary power of words and the cosmic dimension of writing, and I have suggested that we see the interpretation of divine signs as a performative ritual. These considerations lead me to the third and final section of this study, an explorative look at the role that writing systems play in shaping ancient Near Eastern conceptions of the divine sign.

Since interpreting divine signs is a semiotic process, it is worthwhile considering how writing systems inform this process. In Mesopotamia, the divination of omens and the process of writing were conceptually linked, even though the Akkadian words for "omenological sign" (i.e., *ittu*) and "cuneiform sign" (i.e., *miḥiṣtu*) were not the same. The conceptual overlap likely derives from the pictographic origins and associations of cuneiform signs (Bottéro 1974). Bendt Alster's comment on the associative nature of the script is apposite: "Cuneiform writing from its very origin provided the scribes with orthographical conventions that lent notions to the texts which had no basis in spoken language" (Alster 1992: 25).

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[17] Note also that a number of scholars have observed a correlation between the hermeneutics of omens in Mesopotamia and the *pesher* genre found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. See Finkel 1963; Rabinowitz 1973; Fishbane 1977; Geller 1998; Noegel 2007: 24–26, 131, n. 73; Jassen 2007: 343–62; Nissinen forthcoming.

[18] In Mesopotamia the link between secrecy and the reading of omens also is reflected in the Akkadian word for "omen" (i.e., *ittu*), which also can mean

"password" or "inside information." See CAD I/J s.v. *ittu* A.

[19] On the relationship between ideology and divinatory ritual in Mesopotamia, see Bahrani 2008: 65–74.

[20] On the use of other omens as vehicles of social control, see Guinan 1996: 61–68. On the increasing complexity of the cuneiform script and the roles of elitism and literacy as mechanisms of social control, see Michalowski 1990a; Pongratz-Leisten 1999.

The dialectic between ominous signs and linguistic signs was so close in Mesopotamia that some extispicy omens were interpreted based on a similarity in shape between features of the exta and various cuneiform signs (Noegel 2007).[21]

  a. When the lobe is like the grapheme (named) PAB (*ki-ma pa-ap-pi-im*), (then) the god wants an *ugbabtum*-priestess (YOS 10 17:47).[22]

  b. When (the) lobe is like the grapheme (named) *kaškaš*, (then) Adad will inundate (with rain) (YOS 10 17:48).[23]

  c. When (the) lobe is like a particular grapheme [here we have the grapheme itself (i.e., *kaškaš*), not its name], then the king will kill his favorites in order to allocate their goods to the temples of the gods (YOS 10 8–9).[24]

Also demonstrating a close relationship between divine signs and cuneiform signs are a number of omens that suggest that diviners either wrote down the omen in order to interpret it or at least conceived of it in written form. These omens derive their interpretations from the polyvalent readings of cuneiform signs in their protases (Noegel 2007: 20–03; Bilbija 2008). Witness the following dream omen.

> If a man dreams that he is traveling to Idran (*id-ra-an*); he will free himself from a crime (Á-*ra-an*).[25]
>
> — K. 2582 rev. ii, x + 21

This omen exploits the cuneiform sign *id* for its multiple values (in this case as Á), which enables the interpreter to read it as an altogether different word. The apodosis illustrates erudition and the importance of understanding the polyvalent values of individual signs. It is reminiscent of the interpretive strategy that appears in Mesopotamian mythological commentaries by which scholars obtain divine mysteries (Lieberman 1978; Tigay 1983; Livingstone 1986). In fact, many omen texts reveal knowledge of a vast array of lexical and literary traditions.[26]

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[21] Mesopotamian divinatory professionals considered their literate gods capable of using a variety of writing surfaces to communicate their intentions, from clay and stone to animal livers and constellations. The Akkadian term for "liver" (i.e., *amūtum*) may be related etymologically to *awātu* "word," as suggested first by Nougayrol (1944–45: 14, n. 54). Cited also in Jeyes 1989: 17, see also 46. Moreover, the Sumerian sign MUL can refer to a "cuneiform sign" and also a "star" (see Roaf and Zgoll 2001) and astronomical portents and constellations were called the "writing of heaven" (*šiṭir šamê*). See Reiner 1995: 9; Rochberg 2004.

[22] Lieberman (1977: 148, n. 19) notes a pun between the grapheme name and the second syllable of *ugbabtum*. Discussed also in Noegel 2007: 12. For the meaning of YOS, see Goetze 1966.

[23] Lieberman (1977: 148, n. 24) observes that the grapheme *kaškaš* puns on *kaškaššu*, which is an epithet used of the storm-god Adad. Discussed also in Noegel 2007: 12.

[24] The omen appears in Lieberman 1977: 148. A pun between the grapheme *kaškaš* and the verb *kašāšu*, "exact services for a debt or fine, hold sway, to master," is discussed in Noegel 2007: 13.

[25] Translations and transliterations of this omen appear in Oppenheim 1956: 268, 313. The siglum K. = tablets in the Kouyunjik collection of the British Museum.

[26] See the remark of Nissinen (2000b: 108): "What united the scholars of different kinds (astrologers, haruspices, and exorcists) was their scholarship, the profound knowledge of traditional literature, and a high level of literacy …"

An even more sophisticated example of polyvalent reading appears in the following dream omen.

> If he seizes a fox ($KA_5.A$ = *šēlibu*); he will seize a Lamassu (AN.KAL), but if he seizes a fox in his hand (ŠU), and it escapes; he will have seized a Lamassu, but it also will escape from his hand (ŠU)[27]
>
> — Sm. 801 rev. iii, x + 10

Though the protasis records the image of a fox, written with the Sumerogram $KA_5.A$ (= Akkadian *šēlibu*), its interpretation derives from understanding the Akkadian counterpart *šēlibu* as if it were written syllabically. When written as *še₇-líb-bu* the same signs can be read as (A).AN.KAL-*u*, that is, "Lamassu."[28] Moreover, though the Sumerogram ŠU here stands for the Akkadian word *qātu* "hand," one lexical list gives us the equation ^dLAMMA = ^dŠU.[29] Like the previous example, this omen's interpretation derives from the divine sign conceived of in written form.

Though unrelated to cuneiform, hieroglyphic Egyptian also began and continued as a pictographic system. The connection between the name of an object and its pictographic form similarly led to a conception of texts as images, but also images as texts. The Egyptian word *tjt* means both "written word" or "letter," and also an artistic "image, form, or sign." Sculpted images too could be read as hieroglyphic signs and drawings functioned as tools of performative power (Ritner 1993: 111–43). As Robert Ritner notes: "The very notions of divinity and imagery are cojoined in Egyptian thought; the conventional term for 'god' (*nṯr*) has as its root meaning 'image'" (Ritner 1995: 51).

As in Mesopotamia, some Egyptian omens derive their interpretations solely from their written forms as in the following dream omen.

> … ḥr mꜣꜣjꜥḥ wbn≠f; nfr ḥtp n≠f jn nṯr≠f
>
> … seeing the moon when it is risen; good, (it means) being clement to him by his god.[30]
>
> — Papyrus Chester Beatty III recto 5.22

Of note is the determinative of the falcon-god Horus , which occurs after the word *wbn* "risen" in the protasis. This is not the usual determinative for this word (which is). Nevertheless, it provides the interpreter with a reason for interpreting the omen as the sign of a "god" (*nṯr*). Like the Akkadian examples, this interpretation derives from the omen's written form.

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[27] Translations and transliterations of this dream omen appear in Oppenheim 1956: 281, 326. On the clever reading of signs in this omen, see Noegel 1995; 2007: 21. The siglum Sm. = tablets in the collections of the British Museum.

[28] For a similar divinatory pun on this word, see the omen series *Šumma ālu* I 178, "If, before the daises of my city, a dog yelps and a [fox(?) = $KA_5.A$ = *šēlebu*]

answers it; the king of Lullubu (*lul-lu-bu*) will die." The pun hinges on the reading $KA_5.(LUL).A.$ Noted in Freedman 1998: 41. On the integrated use of Sumerian and Akkadian in the scribal schools of the ancient Near East, see Rubio 2006: 49.

[29] Matouš and von Soden 1933: 2, 285 and 4 iv 16. Cited in CAD L s.v. *lamassu*.

[30] Noegel and Szpakowsa 2006: 205.

Another example appears on the same scroll.

> … ḥr fꜣj-ṯꜣ.w m ḥd; ḏw, ꜥnḫ pw nj sḥḥ

> … sailing downstream; bad, (it means) a life of running backward.[31]

> — Papyrus Chester Beatty III recto 8.3

This omen employs the words for "sailing" (fꜣy-ṯꜣ.w, lit., "carrying the wind"), which is the usual way of writing "upstream" since the wind flows north to south in Egypt. Yet the omen also employs the term ḥd with the boat and oars determinative �⟩, which only can mean flowing downstream from south to north. In this way the omen offers contradictory directions in its hieroglyphic signs and suggests the use of sails to go downstream. For this reason the omen is interpreted as going backward, a reading that is given further visual support by the determinative of backward-facing legs following the word for "running" (sḥḥ ⟨glyph⟩).

These Mesopotamian and Egyptian examples demonstrate the centrality of writing and the generative role of script in the interpretive process. Despite their differences, the cuneiform and hieroglyphic writing systems both have a large repertoire of signs with polyvalent, logographic, and determinative values. Since divination aimed to control the power inherent in the divine word, and since words and images shared the same ontological framework, the pictographic associations of individual *linguistic* signs were naturally exploited when interpreting *divine* signs.

Viewed from this perspective, the Israelites appear as something of an anomaly, for the Bible's Ten Commandments specifically prohibit the creation of images,[32] but demand the transmission of divine knowledge by way of the written and spoken word. While the legal code rejects all forms of "magical" praxis and divination (e.g., Deuteronomy 18:10–14), the very presence of laws prohibiting such practices, and references to speech and words found elsewhere in the Bible, as I have shown above, imply a belief in the power of words on par with Mesopotamian and Egyptian dogmata. Moreover, while the Hebrew word for a "written mark" אות (ʾôt) also means "sign, portent,"[33] the Bible connects the two semantic ranges only in reference to oneiromancy. Thus, Deuteronomy 13:2–6 states that the Israelites perceived dream interpreters as providing אות או מופת (ʾôt ʾôw mōfēt) "a sign or portent." Unlike the Mesopotamians and Egyptians, therefore, the Israelites appear to have reserved

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[31] Noegel and Szpakowsa 2006: 205–06.

[32] On the conceptual overlap between iconic images and the veneration of the Torah, see van der Toorn 1997.

[33] Though the biblical Hebrew word for "alphabetic letter" is unknown, it is highly likely that it was אות (ʾôt). Not only does this word mean "alphabetic letter" in Middle Hebrew (e.g., Babylonian Talmud *Bava Batra* 15a, *Shabbat* 103a, and *Qiddushin* 30a), it derives from a root, i.e., אוה (ʾāwāh), which means "inscribe a mark." Thus, some biblical passages employ the word אות (ʾôt) in a way that suggests inscribing or writing (e.g., Exodus 13:9, 13:16). The word's appearance for the mark of Cain (Genesis 4:15) has resulted in a variety of interpretations (see Mellinkoff 1981), of which some included writing (e.g., Rashi, Ibn Ezra). Compare the related root תאה

(tā ʾāh) "leave a mark" used in conjunction with the letter ת (tāw) in Ezekiel 9:4–6 (spelled out as תו, i.e., tāw). See also Job 31:35 where the word תו means "written document" or "signature." The connection of the Hebrew word אות (ʾôt) to writing finds support also in the cognate data. In Babylonian Aramaic, אתא (ʾātāʾ) is used for a consonantal letter. See Sokoloff 2002: 175, s.v. אתא. The related form יותא yūtāʾ means "constellation" (see Sokoloff 2002: 532, s.v. יותא, and compare the Akkadian šiṭir šamê "writing of heaven"). The Syriac cognate ʾātuw also occurs for "sign," "alphabetic letter," and "constellation." See Smith 1903: 32, s.v. ʾātuw. The Arabic cognate too (i.e., ʾāyat) means "sign," "mark," and also a Quranic verse(!). See Wehr 1976: 36, s.v. ʾāyat; Lane 1968: 135, s.v. ʾāyat.

the performative power of the written word for divination by dreams and for texts perceived as authored by Yahweh (see Noegel 2007: 113–82).[34]

I believe that this distinction can be explained, at least in part, by acknowledging the generative role of scripts in shaping Near Eastern conceptions of the divine sign. The Israelites used a consonantal script. Though the Hebrew script evolved from pictographic signs, by the time of the Israelites it had lost its pictographic associations. Consequently, its associative dimension was limited largely to sound devices like paronomasia and polysemous homonyms.

See, for example, a vision of the prophet Amos in which Yahweh shows Amos a basket of "summer fruits" (קיץ, *qayiṣ*), objects that are interpreted as signaling the "end" (קץ, *qēṣ*) of Israel (Amos 8:1–2).[35]

Similarly, in the book of Jeremiah Yahweh shows the prophet an "almond branch" (שקד, *šāqēd*), which is decoded as meaning that Yahweh will "watch" (שקד, *šōqēd*) to ensure that his word is fulfilled (Jeremiah 1:11–12). Like the vision of Amos, the interpretation exploits the phonetic similarity of these homonyms (Noegel 2007: 265).[36]

The examples from Amos and Jeremiah do not entirely rule out the notion that divine signs were written down or conceived of in writing before interpreting them, because homonyms also operate on a visual level. Nevertheless, they do appear to place a greater emphasis on orality in the interpretive process.[37]

Moreover, unlike the Egyptian conception of creation, which permits a role for writing (Frankfurter 1994), the book of Genesis reports creation as solely an oral work, though later Jewish tradition recalls the role of the alphabet in the creative process (Babylonian Talmud *Menahot* 20b; *Midrash Rabbah* 1:10). It therefore seems likely that in the same way that pictographic scripts played formative roles in Mesopotamian and Egyptian conceptions of the divine sign, the non-pictographic script played a role in shaping the Israelite conception.

The Hebrew Bible's preference for referencing oral as opposed to written modes of performative power also might represent a conceptual shift with regard to the perceived locus of this power. In Mesopotamia and Egypt, performative power was centered in the divine sign and script, and was activated by the professional during the processes of speaking, writing, and decoding. Israel inclined toward oral modes of performative power, which naturally centered the locus of power more firmly on the speaker. Consequently, an Israelite could embody the same performative power that a cuneiform or hieroglyphic sign could in Mesopotamia and

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[34] A related use of ritualistic writing in the ancient Near East, including Israel, is the composing of devotional prayers, see van der Toorn 2008.

[35] Though the two words contain different Proto-Semitic phonemes (i.e., קיץ [*qyẓ*] and קץ [*qṣ*]), by Amos's time the phonemes had merged.

[36] As in the previous example, the two words contain different Proto-Semitic phonemes (i.e., "almond" [*ṯqd*] and "watch" [*šqd*]), but these phonemes already had merged.

[37] The two passages might also reflect an effort to distance Amos and Jeremiah from other divinatory experts, for in both cases, Yahweh both provides the sign and interprets it.

Egypt. This explains why Isaiah could refer to himself and his children as לאות ולמופתים, *lĕʾôt ul-môftîm* "signs and portents" (Isaiah 8:18),[38] and Ezekiel could be called a אות *ʾôt* "sign" while personifying the siege of Israel (Ezekiel 4:3).[39]

CONCLUSION

In this essay I argue for the importance of viewing the divinatory enterprise through a cosmological lens that brings into focus an ontological understanding of words and script as potentially powerful. I argue for the centrality of writing in the exegetical process and I suggest that we see the interpretation of divine signs as an act of ritual and ideological power that serves to promote the cosmological system upon which divination is based. Building upon these observations, I offer some explorative thoughts on the generative role that scripts play in shaping ancient Near Eastern conceptions of the divine sign. As research continues on this subject it is my hope that scholars pay greater attention to such topics and test the framework I provide here.

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[38] It is important to distinguish here what I have called the locus or embodiment of divine power from the perceived source of this power. As abundant biblical texts make clear, the Israelite prophets and their audiences perceived the power to be divine in origin even if embodied in a prophet. Yet, the fact that prophets could be called an אות *ʾôt* "sign" means that their bodies served to encode divine meaning in a way that the cuneiform and hieroglyphic scripts did in Mesopotamia and Egypt. This does not mean that writing did not retain its cosmological significance for the prophets. As we see in Isaiah 8:1, Yahweh commanded Isaiah to write the divine signs on a large scroll. The signs (i.e., מהר שלל חש בז *mahēr šālāl ḥāš baz* "swift is the booty, speedy is the prey") would later become the name of his son. Note also

that in Isaiah 8:19 the function of Isaiah and his children as "signs and portents" is placed in contradistinction to those who seek oracles from necromancers and other diviners.

[39] Note also that even an idolatrous man could become an אות *ʾôt* "sign" (Ezekiel 14:8). It also is of considerable interest that at Mari a prophet also could be called an *ittu* "sign." See Durand 1982: 44 and the Epic of Zimri-Lim, line 139, cited in Nissinen 2000a: 263. Curious is the mention in Atrahasis I 215–16 of a human ghost proclaiming the living human as *ittaša* "its sign." In Israel, the shift in the locus of performative power from the written sign to spoken word to the individual perhaps prefigures the role of the rabbi in late antiquity who embodied for his disciples the Oral Torah (Jaffee 2001).

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