

CONDEMNATIONS OF NECROMANCY IN THE HEBREW BIBLE:

AN INVESTIGATION OF RATIONALE

By

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(Under the Direction of Richard Elliott Friedman)

ABSTRACT

This study will address the question: why was necromancy illicit in the estimation of the biblical writers? Was it considered theologically aberrant (that is, did it offend any monotheistic or henotheistic sensitivities in the biblical writers)? Or, did social factors such as centralization, the rivalry of cultic practitioners, or nationalistic sentiment, play a leading role? To pursue these questions, this study will explore seven texts of relevance to this discussion: Deut. 18:9-14; 2 Kings 21:6; Isa. 8:19-20; 19:1-4.

INDEX WORDS: Necromancy; Divination; Cultic Rivalry; Ancient Israel; Bible.

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DEDICATION

To my father and mother. I love you. . . .

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful for all the guidance of my professors and committee members, though I have space to honor only a few here:

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### Purpose of the Study

This study will address the question: why was necromancy illicit in the estimation of the biblical writers? Was it considered theologically aberrant (that is, did it offend any monotheistic or henotheistic sensitivities in the biblical writers)? Or, did social factors such as centralization, the rivalry of cultic practitioners, or nationalistic sentiment, play a leading role?

To pursue these questions, this study will explore seven texts of relevance to this discussion: Lev. 19:3; 20:6, 27; Deut. 18:9-14; 2 Kings 21:6; Isa. 8:19-20; 19:1-4. It will examine those elements in the text of relevance to the questions posed in this survey. In the final chapter, several leading explanations for the ban on necromancy will be examined in light of the evidence gleaned from each of the aforementioned texts.

#### Definition of Necromancy

This study will assume an etymologically derived definition of necromancy, as "any form of knowledge obtained by way of consultation of a defunct person," thereby limiting the term "to

the range of divinatory practices.”<sup>1</sup> This definition conforms to the aims of necromantic practice related in the preeminent biblical depiction of the same: 1 Sam. 28:3-25.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Nihan, 24.

2. Schmidt 1994, 11, no. 27.

## CHAPTER 2

### CONDEMNATIONS OF NECROMANCY IN THE HEBREW BIBLE:

#### AN INVESTIGATION OF RATIONALE

#### LEVITICUS 19:31

##### Translation<sup>3</sup>

<sup>31</sup>Do not turn to the revenants and the knowers; do not seek them out to be defiled by them. I am Yahweh your God.

##### Context

Lev. 19:31 is nestled among various stipulations oriented towards the "sanctification of the congregation Israel" (cf. Lev. 19:2).<sup>4</sup> The previous verse asserts the obligation of respecting sacred time and space (v. 30); the following verse requires respect for the aged (v. 32).

The concluding statement of the prohibition, "I am Yahweh your God," is appended to other laws in the chapter, including those concerning the observation of the Sabbath (v. 3), the rejection of idols (v. 4), the provision of gleanings for

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3. Translation mine.

4. Gerstenberger, 262.

disadvantaged classes (v. 10), profaning the name of God (v. 12), and cursing the handicapped (v. 14). Especially in chapter 19, the expression functions as an organizing principle, grouping "thematically and formally related prohibitives."<sup>5</sup> Of note, the twin prohibitions in v. 31 are isolated from the other commandments by the use of the same expression as an organizational principle.<sup>6</sup>

### Analysis

Leviticus 19:31 condemns popular recourse to necromancers, rather than the actual practice of necromancy by specialists (a prohibition reserved for Lev. 20:27).<sup>7</sup> No particular juridical punishment is dictated in the text itself for those who violate the prohibition, suggesting the law primarily functions as an exhortation.<sup>8</sup>

The passage introduces two specialized terms recurrent in later condemnations of necromancy: *'ôb* and *yidd'ônî*. Ascertaining the meaning of each is critical for the study of

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5. Gerstenberger, 261; Milgrom, 1596-7.

6. Gerstenberger, 261.

7. Milgrom, 1701.

8. Milgrom also highlights the choice of the negative particle *'al* over *lô*' as an indication that "this injunction is less a probation than an exhortation" (Milgrom, 1701).

this text and others discussing necromancy. In certain texts, the term 'ôb sometimes stands independently in apparent references to the dead (Isa. 29:4). In those contexts where 'ôb functions as an object of such verbs as "inquire" (*dāraš 'el*: Isa. 8:19; 19:3; 1 Chr. 10:13), "ask" (*šā'al*; Deut. 18:11), "divine" (*qāsam + b<sup>o</sup>*: 1 Sam. 28:8), "turn to" (*pānâ 'el*: Lev. 19:31), and "seek unto" (Piel of *bāqaš 'el*: Lev. 19:31), 'ôb also seems to refer to the dead.<sup>9</sup> Mention of the voice of the 'ôb rising from the earth in Isa. 29:4 also suggests the term primarily denotes the consulted dead (cf. 1 Sam. 28:14).<sup>10</sup> However, the term also stands independently in ostensible references to those who consult the dead (Lev. 20:27; 2 Kings 21:6 || 2 Chron. 33:6; pl. in 1 Sam 28:3; 2 Kings 23:34), frustrating those who seek a single denotation for the term.<sup>11</sup>

The term 'ôbôt also appears Job 32:19, where it refers to a "water skin" or "leather bottle."<sup>12</sup> That usage may represent a separate lexeme with no bearing on the present discussion<sup>13</sup> or,

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9. Schmidt 1994, 153; Milgrom, 1769.

10. Lust, 139.

11. Kuemmerlin-McLean, 469.

12. Gesenius, 20; BDB, 15; Kuemmerlin-McLean, 469; Wildberger, 371.

13. Tropper, 809.

worse, a textual corruption of *nō'dôt* ("skin").<sup>14</sup> Caquot, on the other hand, finds this alternative denotation illuminating and proposes that the *'ôb* is "un objet utilisé pour l'évocation des morts peut-être un instrument à vent comme le biniou, avec lequel on appellerait le spectre ou qui parlerait en son nom."<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, no evidence supports the existence or use of such a device. Gesenius' suggestion that "the conjurer, while possessed by the demon, as a *bottle* i.e. vessel, case, in which the demon was contained," also seems rather speculative.<sup>16</sup>

Several suggested translations of *'ôb* exist, including: "the revenants," and "the fathers/ancestors."<sup>17</sup> The first option associates the term with the Arabic root *'wb* ("to return"; Sabeian *y'b*) so that the *'ôb* is "the one who returns [from the grave, to communicate]" or "the revenant" (to borrow a contemporary French term)<sup>18</sup> The second option, which connects the term to the Hebrew *'āb* ("father") so that *'ôb* is the "ancestral

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14. Gesenius, 20; Tropper, 809.

15. Coquot, 30.

16. Gesenius, 20.

17. Schmidt 1994, 151.

18. Eichrodt, 215; Wildberger, 371-2;. Schmidt 1994, 151; Lust, 135.

spirit," departed father," or "divinsed father,"<sup>19</sup> is common, though not without its difficulties.<sup>20</sup> A third option, which etymologically ties the term to the Sumerian *ab* ("the [ritual] pit,"),<sup>21</sup> has fallen into disfavor.<sup>22</sup>

The term *yiddē'ōnî* is even more elusive. Never occurring independently of the word *'ôb*,<sup>23</sup> it is possible the word

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19. Schmidt 1994 151; van der Toorn, 318; Lust, 139; respectively.

20. Schmidt 1994 excludes this interpretation on several grounds: (1) it assumes that *'ôb* is a general reference to all the dead (not including one's ancestors), despite a lack of evidence for this claim, and (2) the etymology Lust suggests (Lust, 136) "requires a protracted and unconvincing argument involving the Canaanite shift *a* to *o* as well as a highly speculative theological motivation for the vowel change, i.e., to disassociate the highly regarded fathers from the condemned practice of necromancy" (Schmidt 1994, 151-2). Nihan adds that the appearance of *'ôb* in the plural also excludes its association with a ritual pit used in necromantic rites (Nihan, 31).

21. Hoffner, 385-401.

22. Schmidt 1994, 151. Lust, 134.

23. Friedman and Overton, 44.

necessarily exists in conjunction with *'ôb*, the two forming a hendiadys: an expression formed by the union of two nouns.<sup>24</sup> However, in Lev. 19:31, the terms are placed in discrete prepositional phrases;<sup>25</sup> furthermore, Lev. 20:27 divides the two with the conjunction *'ô* ("or").<sup>26</sup>

Extracted from the root *yd'* ("to know"), the term could be translated "knower" or "one who knows," though it is uncertain whether the "knower" is an entity or item consulted by the practitioner or the practitioner himself.<sup>27</sup> Like *'ôb*, both may be possible. Where *yidd<sup>a</sup>'ônî* stands as the object of a verbal action like *šā'al*, however, the terms certainly refer to the entity or item consulted by the practitioner.

The use of both terms as objects for the verbs *'āśāh* (Qal, "to make": 2 Kings 21:6; 2 Chron. 33:6), *bā'ar* (Piel, "to purge/burn": 2 Kings 23:24), and *kārat* (Hiphil, "to destroy": 1 Sam. 28:9), has led some scholars to suggest that, in at least some contexts, they refer to items (e.g., images of the dead) or

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24. Zevit 515; Nihan, 30; Kuemmerlin-McLean, 469; Friedman and Overton, 44.

25. Milgrom, 1701.

26. *Ibid.*

27. Friedman and Overton, 44; Schmidt 1994, 150-1; Nihan, 30; Kuemmerlin-McLean, 469.



cultic installations, used in necromantic rites.<sup>28</sup> However, these verbs are sometimes used of human beings, living or dead.<sup>29</sup>

Regarding the latter, Schmidt suggests:

Ghosts, or, figuratively speaking, those rites and cults associated with them, might be appointed or instituted ('*āsāh* [cf. "appointing" of priests, e.g., in 1 Kings 12:31; 13:33; 2 Kings 17:32; 2 Chron. 2:17<sup>30</sup>]), exterminated or purged (Piel of *bā'ar* and cf. the formula *bi'artā hārā' miqqirbekā* "you shall purge the evil from your midst."

E.g., Deit. 21:21), cut off, i.e., forbidden (Hiphil of *kārat*, cf. 1 Sam 20:15), and rejected or put aside (Hiphil of *sūr*, cf. e.g., Josh. 11:15; Ps. 66:20).<sup>31</sup>

Of note, Lev. 20:27 condemns those in whom (*bāhem*) an 'ōb and *yidd'ōnî* are found, a usage that cannot embrace images or

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28. Wildberger, 371. Cf. Nihan, 31; Tropper, 809; Milgrom, 1769; Lust, 137-8. Schmidt 1994 criticizes this position (Schmidt 1994, 152). Wildberger draws an analogy between the use of *asherah* as a reference to both a goddess and a cultic installation (Wildberger, 371).

29. Schmidt 1994, 152-3.

30. *Ibid.*, 152.

31. *Ibid.*, 153.

practitioners<sup>32</sup> but refers to a "ghost" or some spiritual presence of the dead (perhaps as the primary denotation of the terms).<sup>33</sup> Finally, the construction *ba'ălat 'ôb*, which Milgrom translates as "possessor of an 'ôb," may parallel the title for a Sumerian-Akkadian necromancer *lú gidim-ma* and *ša etemmi* (lit. "master of the spirit of the dead"), so that 'ôb again corresponds to the consulted dead.

From the latter verse, Schmidt concludes that the terms never refer to necromancers, and that "where it was previously assumed that necromancers are in view, the evidence favors ghosts as the fitting referents."<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, Schmidt's view may be too rigid. It is as likely that the terms simply function as metonymies in those contexts where they more comfortably refer to necromancers.<sup>35</sup> One purges 'ôbôt from the land precisely

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32. *Ibid.*, 152.

33. *Ibid.*, 153. Gesenius prefers "the divining spirit, the foreboding demon, python, supposed to be present in the body of such a conjurer; comp. Acts 16, 16" (Gesenius, 20).

34. *Ibid.*, 153. Along similar lines, Lust contends "there is no need" to consider any references to the 'ôb without the use of such verbs as *šo'el* as direct references to necromancers (Lust, 138).

35. Milgrom, 1769.

by purging those individuals whom they indwell or within whom they operate. Furthermore, Nihan (who believes 'ôb primarily refers to the "dead ancestor") asserts the term also metonymously refers to images created in the ancestor's likeness, and used in certain rituals.<sup>36</sup> This denotation of 'ôb could also serve the subject of such verbs as "purged" or "burned."<sup>37</sup>

The consequence of disobeying the prohibition is "defilement," a state that lacks an apparent rite of purification.<sup>38</sup> The theme of avoiding defilement receives particular expansion in Lev. 18:24-30. There, all the prohibitions from vv. 7-23 concerning illicit intercourse (for instance, incest and consanguinity issues) are identified as "defiling practices," in which the previous inhabitants of the land participated, leading to their punishment and ejection during the Israelite conquest. Apparently, any who consult necromancers offend Yahweh to the point of certain punishment.<sup>39</sup>

The expression "I am Yahweh your God," earlier noted as an organizational principle in the chapter, "solemnly underscores

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36. Nihan, 31; Spronk, 253.

37. Nihan, 31; Tropper, 809.

38. Milgrom, 1702.

39. *Ibid.*, 1702.

the norms imparted in these verses,"<sup>40</sup> establishing the authority of the Lawgiver issuing the prohibitions. In particular, it highlights the *exclusive* loyalty Israel owes Yahweh as *their* God, contextualizing the commandments within a covenantal (and perhaps, henotheistic) context. Of note, only in the Decalogue does the expression "I am Yahweh your God" elsewhere head a particular group of laws (Ex. 20:2; Deut. 5:6). In those instances, the clause occurs in tandem with references to the exodus tradition (cf. Hos. 12:10)<sup>41</sup> and is immediately followed by prohibitions against the worship of other gods, reinforcing the suggestion that the exclusive claims of Yahweh upon Israel are communicated by the phrase.

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40. Gerstenberger, 262.

41. Milgrom, 1601.

## CHAPTER 3

### LEVITICUS 20:6

#### Translation

<sup>6</sup>And the being who turns to the revenants and the knowers to whore after them: I will set my face against that being, and cut him off from the midst of his people.

#### Context

This first prohibition against necromancy is preceded by a condemnation of giving one's "seed to Molek" (vv. 1-5). Various linguistic parallels suggest a relation between these two pericopes, including the recurrence of: *zānâ* (v. 5), *nātan pānîm* (v. 3), and *wēhikrattî 'ōtô. . . miqqereb ['am]* (v. 5).<sup>42</sup>

#### Analysis

Where participation in the "Molek" rite condemned in vv. 1-5 merits both stoning (v. 2) and being cut off from among the people (v. 3, 5), the individual who consults necromancers only merits the latter judgment.<sup>43</sup> Capital punishment is reserved only for the professional practitioners of necromancy (v. 27), and not those who avail themselves of their services.

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42. Milgrom, 1738.

43. *Ibid.*, 1739.

A person was "cut. . . off from the midst of his people" as a consequence of various transgressions, including: the refusal of circumcision (Gen. 17:14), the profanation of the Sabbath (Ex. 31:14), and the eating sacrificial fat and blood (Lev. 7:25,27).<sup>44</sup> In this chapter, the sentence appears to be a purely divine judgment, which Yahweh personally levels against a transgressor irrespective of the judgments and sentences of the community (vv. 2-5). As such, it would be inappropriate to consider *kārēt* an act of "excommunication" on the part of the community.<sup>45</sup> It is preceded by the setting of Yahweh's face against the transgressor, a verbal action mirroring the transgressor's "turning to" the forbidden practice.<sup>46</sup>

The verbal construction "to whore after," here used with reference to the revenants and knowers, is elsewhere applied to Molek (v. 5) and goat demons (17:7). In other texts, it is ordinarily applied to false deities (cf. Ex. 34:15; Deut. 31:16; Judg. 2:17).<sup>47</sup> This could indicate that the writer understood the consultation of the dead to be a cultic act rivaling the cult of Yahweh. At the very least, it casts the practice as a betrayal

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44. Hasel, 247.

45. Milgrom, 1737.

46. *Ibid.*, 1739.

47. *Ibid.*, 1738.

of Israel's exclusive devotion to Yahweh, implicitly following the metaphor of Israel's marriage to Yahweh (cf. Ez. 16; 23).<sup>48</sup>

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48. Gerstenberger, 293.

## CHAPTER 4

### LEVITICUS 20:27

#### Translation

<sup>27</sup>And a man or a woman who has in them a revenant or a knower will surely die. They will stone them with stones; their blood shall be upon them.

#### Context

V. 27 is isolated from the earlier condemnation of those who make recourse to necromancers, being placed at the end of the chapter. Like v. 6, it contains verbal links to vv. 2-5: particularly in its repetition of the sentence of stoning, *yirgēmūhū bā'āben* (v. 2) and *bā'eben yirgēmū* (v. 27). In its present position, however, it may provide a transition to the next chapter, which condemns sources of priestly defilement relating to the dead (21:1-5).<sup>49</sup>

#### Analysis

This text emphatically levels a sentence of capital punishment, by stoning, against professional necromancers. The sentence of stoning is elsewhere leveled against those who participate in Molek rites (20:27), and blaspheme (24:16). The expression "their blood shall be upon them" appears beside other

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49. Milgrom, 1765.



sentences of capital punishment, issued against those curse their parents (20:9), or engage in various illicit sexual unions, incestual or bestial (20:11-13, 16).

## CHAPTER 5:

### DEUTERONOMY 18:9-14

#### Translation

<sup>9</sup>When you come to the land that Yahweh your God gives to you, do not learn to act according to the abominations of the nations!

<sup>10</sup>Do not let one who makes his son or daughter pass through the fire be found among you, or a diviner, or soothsayers, or an enchanter, or a magician,

<sup>11</sup>Or one who charms, or one who asks a revenant or knower, or one who seeks the dead!

<sup>12</sup>For all doing these are an abomination to Yahweh, and on account of these abominations Yahweh your God is dispossessing them from before your face.

<sup>13</sup>You will be perfect with Yahweh your God,

<sup>14</sup>For these nations, which you are to dispossess, listen to soothsayers and divinations; but [as for] you, God has not permitted the same to you.

#### Context

The pericope follows an admonition that the Israelites respect "the Levitical priests" (vv. 1-8) as ones whom Yahweh

has called to minister on His behalf (v. 5). It also precedes an admonition that the Israelites embrace the words of Moses' prophetic successor (vv. 15-19), whom Yahweh will appoint to speak on His behalf (vv. 18-19). Immediately following is a condemnation of false prophets (vv. 19-22), identified as those who "speak in the name of other gods," or presume "to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak" (v. 20), whose predictions fail (v. 22).<sup>50</sup>

Of note, vv. 14-15 contrasts two of the classes of practitioners catalogued in vv. 10-11 (*mē'ōnēnîm* and *qōsēmîm*) with the prophetic successor to Moses in vv. 14-15. The contrast casts the condemned practitioners as (1) diviners, like prophets,<sup>51</sup> and as (2) *foreign* elements to be rejected in favor of the native Israelite institution of the "prophet." Consequently, the divinatory specialists catalogued in vv. 10-11 are, like false prophets, antitheses of a true prophet<sup>52</sup>; the only difference between them is that false prophets claim the office of *nābî'*, whereas the specialists listed in vv. 10-11 claim other offices and institutions. The entire chapter thereby

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50. Nelson, 232.

51. André, 364.

52. Von Rad, 123; Zevit, 515.

distinguishes between those avenues of revelation and worship established by Yahweh, and those He proscribes:

The necromancer. . . infringed on the sole sovereignty of YHWH. He usurped YHWH's exclusive authority to direct Israel's agents, the prophets, and it is no accident that the wholesale ban against all mantic practitioners (Deut. 18:10-14) is followed by a designation of the prophet as the only legitimate carrier of YHWH's message (18:15-22; cf. 13:2-6 [ENG 1-5]).<sup>53</sup>

Instead, as Von Rad concludes:

Yahweh has made known to Israel a quite different possibility of communicating with him, namely the office of the prophet. . . . It is now possible to sweep aside, as with a wave of the hand, the motley arsenal of mantic and occult practice, all the attempts to obtain a share of the divine powers or of divine knowledge. A different possibility has been disclosed to Israel, namely the Word of its prophet.<sup>54</sup>

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53. Milgrom, 251.

54. Von Rad, 123.

## Analysis

### Vv. 9

The passage identifies the activities it proscribes as the "abominations of the nations" dispossessed from the land (*tô'ăbôt hagoyyîm*: 18:9) and those that practice them as "an abomination to Yahweh" (*tô'ăbôt YHWH*: 18:12). The first construction does not otherwise appear in Deuteronomy, though 12:29-31 relates the term "abomination" to the practices of "the nations," including the worship of false gods and human sacrifice. However, it appears intact in DtrH, where it applies to sending children "into the fire" (2 Kings 16:3), the establishment of high places and altars to other gods (1 Kings 14:23-24; 2 Kings 21:2-4), as well as the worship of astral deities, sending children "into the fire," sorcery, and divination (2 Kings 21:2,5-6). Thus all its instances address illicit cultic and divinatory practices. The second expression is common in Deuteronomy but embraces a wider sampling of activities, including: the worship of foreign gods (12:29-31; 17:4), idols and idolatry (7:25; 27:15), sending children into "the fire" (12:31), the wearing of garments appropriate for the opposite gender (22:5), illicit monetary vows (23:19), and those who cheat others financially (25:16).<sup>55</sup>

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55. Nelson, 323.

The ascription of certain practices to "the nations" suggests they are originally foreign to Israel. This point is made explicit in v. 9, which assumes Israel will learn to imitate these practices from nations already established in Canaan. Instead, v. 13 instructs the Israelites to "be perfect [*tāmîm*] with Yahweh your God." In this passage, *tāmîm* apparently denotes the orthopractic Israelite, being applied to those who reject illicit divinatory activities, following the command of Yahweh. A similar usage is apparent in Josh 24:14, where the term is applied to those who reject foreign gods.

Vv. 10-11

As noted earlier, several specialized terms appear in the catalogue, describing a variety of divinatory practitioners, some of whom qualify as necromancers. Insofar as these terms never receive significant elaboration, their referents are difficult to determine.<sup>56</sup> Thus the interpretation of many of these terms is largely dependent upon proposed etymologies and the identification of potential cognates in other languages.<sup>57</sup> The suggestion that these institutions find parallels in other cultures is proposed in the text itself (vv. 9,14).

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56. Van Dam, 115.

57. André, 361.

The first practitioner mentioned in this passage causes his “son or daughter to pass through the fire” (v. 10). Though many scholars recognize an allusion to child sacrifice in this text,<sup>58</sup> a few suggest a form of divination is actually in view.<sup>59</sup> However, a full exploration of this issue, and the practice entire, lies outside the limits of the present study.

Immediately following is a reference to the *qōsēm q<sup>o</sup>sāmîm*. As a root, *qsm* appears to embrace a wide range of magical and divinatory practices.<sup>60</sup> In some instances, the term is used as a general term for divination (1 Sam. 15:23; 2 Kings 17:17; Isa. 44:25; Micah 3:7).<sup>61</sup> In others, however, it is associated with specific practices, including: necromancy (1 Sam. 28:8), as well as lot oracles involving arrows, *t<sup>o</sup>rāpîm*, and hetacoscopy (Ezek. 21:26).<sup>62</sup> Its priority in the catalogue may follow Deuteronomy’s

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58. Defenses of this view appear in: Stavrakopolou, 145-7.

59. Stavrakopolou, 143-5; Jeffers, 123-4. Contextually, the practice is often joined to obvious allusions to divinatory practices, as in this passage (cf. 2 Kings 17:17; 21:26 || 2 Chr. 33:6) (Nelson, 233; Stavrakopolou, 144).

60. Van Dam, 115.

61. Kuemmerlin-McLean, 468; Nelson, 233.

62. Van Dam, 115; Nelson, 233. Fritz lists several of the “best-known forms” of telling “the future through oracles” in

tendency to place general terms earlier in series, with subsequent terms providing clarification, detail, and nuance.<sup>63</sup>

Of note, positive references to *qsm* appear in various biblical passages. Prov. 16:10, for instance, praises the king's possession of a *qesem* on his lips. Micah 3:6-7,11 lists *qsm* beside "prophets" as parties seeking revelation from Yahweh.<sup>64</sup> Isa. 3:2 also lists the *qōsēm* beside the "judge," "prophet," and "elder" as pillars of Jerusalem society,<sup>65</sup> though in a context of judgment.

*Mə'ōnēn*, perhaps the first specialized term in the catalogue, is always connected to foreign divinatory practices, mostly Canaanite and Philistine (Deut 18:11,14; Lev. 19:26; Judg. 9:37; 2 Kings 21:6 || 2 Chr. 33:6; Isa. 2:6; Micah 5:11; Jer. 27:9; Isa. 57:3), and described as "eastern" in Isa. 2:6.<sup>66</sup> (As noted earlier, the contrast between the *mě'ōnēnîm* and the prophetic successor to Moses in vv. 14-15 suggests the term

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Ancient Israel, including "the ephod," "the Urim and Thummim," "dream oracles, casting lots, observing the flight and calls of birds, and augury from a liver" (Fritz, 391).

63. Kuemmerlin-McLean, 468.

64. Schmidt 2001, 250.

65. Zevit, 515; Schmidt 2001, 250.

66. Jeffers, 78; André, 365.



refers to a class of diviners.<sup>67</sup>) Possible etymologies include an Arabic root for "hoarse sound," linked to a humming sound associated with necromancers. The term could also be a denominative from 'ānān ("cloud"), and associated with aeromancy.<sup>68</sup>

*Měnaḥēš* is also of uncertain derivation, identified with the roots *nhš* and *lhš*,<sup>69</sup> which may be dialectical varieties of the same root.<sup>70</sup> Those interpreting the term through the root *nhš* identify *měnaḥēš* as a denominative form of *nāḥāš* ("snake"), and recognize it as a reference to a form of divination practice involving serpents (cf. Jer. 8:17; Eccl. 10:11): perhaps reading omens from the movements of serpents.<sup>71</sup> Unfortunately, Jeffers recognizes the lack of "proof for a method of divination directly involving snakes in ancient Israel."<sup>72</sup> Other suggested etymologies consider the Arabic root *naḥiša* ("unlucky"),<sup>73</sup> which Robertson Smith believes narrows the purview of the *měnaḥēš* to

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67. André, 364, 366.

68. Jeffers, 78; Kuemmerlin-McLean, 468.

69. Kuemmerlin-McLean, 468.

70. Jeffers, 70 (no. 184); André, 361.

71. Jeffers, 75.

72. *Ibid.*, 75.

73. André, 361.

unlucky omens.<sup>74</sup> Significantly, several positive assessments of *nḥš* appear in the Bible (Gen 30:27; Gen 44:5,15; Num. 24:1; 1 Kings 20:33).<sup>75</sup>

By contrast, those identifying *mēnaḥēš* with *lḥš* (enchanted “whispering”<sup>76</sup>) associate it with the use of charms or enchantments (cf. Isa. 3:20; 26:16).<sup>77</sup> Ps. 41:3-8 arguably describes the threat posed by a spell “whispered” (*yitlaḥāšû*) against the Psalmist by his enemies (v. 7), which apparently intends to produce illness.<sup>78</sup> Of note, the root also appears in contexts referring to the enchantment of serpents (Ps. 58:6; Eccl. 10:11; also, KTU 1.100.1.5, examined by Jeffers<sup>79</sup>), strengthening the likelihood that *nḥš* and *lḥš* are cognates. “Whispering” may have evoked the “hissing” sound of serpents; the enchanter would have whispered to gain power over serpents or place himself in “sympathy” with the creature.<sup>80</sup>

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74. Jeffers, 75. Robertson Smith (1884), 114.

75. André, 365.

76. *Ibid.*, 361.

77. Kuemmerlin-McLean, 468.

78. Dahood, 60; Jeffers, 73.

79. Jeffers, 71-72.

80. *Ibid.*, 72.

The term *m<sup>o</sup>kaššēp* is a probable cognate to the Akkadian *kaššāppu/kaššaptu*, "magician, witch," a nominal derivative of *kašāpu, kuššupu*, "bewitch, enchant,"<sup>81</sup> suggestive of malevolent magic.<sup>82</sup> Jeffers identifies these practitioners as herbalists, noting the preference for *phamarkos* as a translation of the term in the Old Greek,<sup>83</sup> and comparing Micah 5:11 to Ugaritic texts.<sup>84</sup> The term appears in both male (*m<sup>o</sup>kaššēp*) and female (*m<sup>o</sup>kaššēpâ*) forms, perhaps suggesting the existence of both male and female practitioners of *kesep*. McLean, however, observes that Ex. 22:18 enjoins the execution of *m<sup>o</sup>kaššēpâ*, while Deut. 18:10 fails to suggest such a penalty for a *m<sup>o</sup>kaššēp* (Deut. 18:10; other texts anticipate the divine punishment of the latter: cf. Jer. 27:9; Mal. 3:5). This inconsistency has led some to suggest that two varieties of practitioners are in view,<sup>85</sup> though one could attribute the disparity of forms and punishments to the varying legal traditions of P and D.

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81. André, 361.

82. *Ibid.*, 361.

83. Jeffers, 66, 69.

84. *Ibid.*, 69-70.

85. Kuemmerlin-McLean, 468.

*Hōbēr hābēr* is derived from the root *hbr* ("to join"; cf. Gen 14:3; Ez. 1:9).<sup>86</sup> Some associate this root to the use of spells or charms "to the practice of tying or wrapping magical knots around people or objects."<sup>87</sup>

The remaining terms are definite references to necromancer. The meaning of the first and second—*šō'el 'ōb wěydd°'ōnî* (i.e., "one who asks of a revenant and knower")—hinges on the interpretation of the elusive terms *'ōb* and *'ydd°'ōnî*, already addressed in our discussion of Leviticus 19:31. The final term associated with necromancy in Deut. 18:11—*dōrēs 'el-hammētîm*—is literally translated, "one who seeks the dead." A clear reference to necromancy, its relationship with the former two words nonetheless remains vague.<sup>88</sup> However, 1 Chr. 10:13 uses the parallel expression *dōrēs el-ha'ōb* (derived from *'ōb*) to refer to necromancers; "*dōrēs 'el-ha'ōbôt*" (pl.) occurs in Isa. 8:19. This suggests a direct correspondence between *'el-hammētîm* and *ha'ōbôt*, strengthening the belief that the latter term primarily denotes the consulted dead.

Vv. 12-13

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86. BDB, 287-8.

87. Kuemmerlin-McLean, 469; BDB 288.

88. Kuemmerlin-McLean, 469.

We have already explored many elements in the final verses of this pericope; still, one remains of possible import to this study. According to v. 12, other nations have been judged for participating in such practices; in a certain sense, their condemnation is not only applicable to Israelites. Any and all who participate in these illicit divinatory activities offend Yahweh to the point of judgment.

## CHAPTER 6:

### 2 KINGS 21:6

#### Translation

<sup>2</sup>And he did evil in the eyes of Yahweh, according to the abominations of the nations that Yahweh dispossessed from the presence of Israel.

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<sup>6</sup>And he made his son pass through the fire, and divined, and charmed, and dealt with revenants and knowers, and he caused evil to be done in the sight of Yahweh, to provoke him.

#### Context

2 Kings 21:1-9 catalogues the sins of Manasseh, king of Judah, which precipitate the eventual destruction of Jerusalem (vv. 13-14). All sins except those mentioned in v. 6 and 16 are cultic in nature. For instance, the passage credits Manasseh with the restoration of "the high places," "altars for Baal," the construction of an 'ăššērāh, the worship of the host of heaven (v. 3). It also credits him with various desecrations of the Jerusalem Temple, including: the installation of an 'ăššērāh and additional altars in the temple (v. 7, 4), as well as the

construction of altars in the courtyard for “the worship of the hosts of heaven” (v. 5). Nestled among these in v. 6, however, are references to the divinatory activities condemned in Deut. 18:10-11; v. 16 also credits Manasseh with the shedding of innocent blood.

### Analysis

Significantly, “every cultic practice that is prohibited in the legal code of the book of Deuteronomy is here attributed to Manasseh”<sup>89</sup> (cf. Deut. 16:21; 17:3; 18:9-11; 19:10). There are particularly significant structural and linguistic parallels between 2 Kings 21:6 and Deut. 19:10b-11:

2 Kings 21:6	Deut. 18:10b-11
<i>wh<sup>ə</sup> 'e<b>ḇ</b>îr-'et <b>b</b><sup>ə</sup>nô bā'ēs</i>	<i>ma' <b>a</b>ḇîr <b>b</b>eno-ûbittô <b>b</b>ā'ēs</i>
	<i>[qōsēm q<sup>ə</sup>sāmîm]</i>
<i>w<sup>ə</sup> 'ô<b>n</b>ēn</i>	<i>m<sup>ə</sup>e 'ô<b>n</b>ēn</i>
<i>w<sup>ə</sup> <b>n</b>i<b>ḥ</b>ēs</i>	<i>ûm(°) <b>n</b>aḥēs</i>
	<i>[ûm(°) haššēp w<sup>ə</sup>ḥōbēr ḥāber]</i>
<i>w<sup>ə</sup> 'ā<b>s</b>āh 'ô<b>b</b> w<sup>ə</sup>yidd<sup>ə</sup> 'ô<b>n</b>î(m)</i>	<i>w<sup>ə</sup>šō'ēl 'ô<b>b</b> w<sup>ə</sup>yidd<sup>ə</sup> 'ô<b>n</b>î</i>
	<i>[w<sup>ə</sup>dōrēs 'el hammētîm]<sup>90</sup></i>

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89. Fritz, 390; Römer, 159.

90. Reproduced from Schmidt, 182.

Thus, 2 Kings 21:6 represents Manasseh as one particularly condemned by the prohibitions in Deut. 18:10b-11.

Scholars believe this passage was also formed, and should be interpreted, in relation to the description of Josiah's reform (2 Kings 22:1-23:30).<sup>91</sup> Indeed, "the long enumeration of Manasseh's cultic failures in 21.1-3, 5-9, 16-18 prepares of course for Josiah's tremendous reform."<sup>92</sup> Also, insofar as every cultic practice prohibited in Deuteronomy is attributed to Manasseh, Josiah performs every good by ordering their eradication. Thus, "Manasseh is the ultimately evil king, whereas Josiah is the ideal king," who "reverses the development that Manasseh promoted in 2K 21."<sup>93</sup>

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91. Pakkala, 169.

92. Römer, 159.

93. Pakkala, 169.



CHAPTER 7:

ISAIAH 8:19-20

Translation

<sup>19</sup>And when they say unto you: "Seek the revenants and the knowers, the chirping ones and the muttering ones!" Does not a people seek unto their gods, to the dead on behalf of the living

<sup>20</sup>for instruction and testimony? If they do not speak to you according to this word, in which there is no sorcery, {and} they will pass on through it oppressed and hungry, And it shall be, when they are hungry, they enrage themselves, and will curse by their king and their gods, and turn upwards

<sup>21</sup>or look to the earth, behold, trouble and darkness, dimness of anguish, and they shall be driven to darkness.

Context

V. 16

Verse 16 contains parallel imperatives: "shut up the *tě'udā*; seal the *tôrāh*" (v. 16). These imperatives, like the verbs in vv. 12-15, are likely dependent upon the introduction

of Yahweh's speech to Isaiah in v. 11.<sup>94</sup> Accordingly, one should also attribute them to Yahweh, and recognize Isaiah as their addressee.

Earlier chapters apply the term *tôrāh* to the prophetic message of Isaiah (1:10; 2:3; 5:24; 30:9).<sup>95</sup> It is paralleled by *tě'udā* twice in this passage (vv. 16; 20), suggesting the association of both words, where both likely refer to Isaiah's message. Blenkinsopp identifies *tě'udā* as "a text validated by witnesses," following Ruth 4:7, where the term refers to the attestation of a levirate marriage.<sup>96</sup> Here, *tě'udā* may correspond to the "great tablet" inscribed with the prophetic name "*Mahershalal-hah-baz*" before "faithful witnesses" (*'eydim*) (8:1-2; cf. 30:8-11).<sup>97</sup> Isaiah's mention of his own children as "signs and

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94. Wieringen argues, "both the prepositional phrase *to me* in verse 11a and the suffix to the verbal form *and he taught me* in verse 11b suppose a second person singular within the direct speech, as the second person singular is present in the imperatives [of v. 16]." The imperatives themselves are connected to the moral *yiqtol* forms in verses 12a-15e. (Wieringen, 99).

95. Blenkinsopp, 243.

96. *Ibid.*, 243. Cf. Sweeney, 181.

97. Sweeney, 179, 181; Wolf, 452.

portends" in v. 18 seems to set 8:16-18 against the backdrop of 8:1-4 (and, perhaps, 7:14<sup>98</sup>). Accordingly, the *tôrāh* and *tě'udā* would primarily relate to the meaning of the names of Isaiah's children,<sup>99</sup> which foretell the Assyrian conquest of Israel.

Granted a literal text is in view, one may also interpret the commands to "seal" and "secure" the *tôrāh* and *tě'udā* literally. The "sealing" of the *tě'udā* would have been observed by the "witnesses" confirming it (cf. Jer. 32:10-12), perhaps, "the priest Uriah and Zechariah son of Jeberechiah" (Isa. 8:2), here identified as "my disciples" (8:16). The act would emphasize the validity of the prophecy therein contained.<sup>100</sup> The prophecy was sealed so it could be opened later, and its message confirmed as both authentic and true.<sup>101</sup> The act of "sealing" may also introduce a theme of concealment to the passage; the "sealing" of a book in Isa. 29:11 prevents all, even the learned, from reading it.

#### Vv. 17-18

Isaiah, the first person speaker of v. 11, returns in v. 17, to typify the ideal response to the events foretold in vv.

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98. See Wolf, 449-456. Gottwald, 36-47.

99. Wolf, 452.

100. Wildberger, 369.

101. Lewis 1989, 129.

12-16.<sup>102</sup> The prophet affirms he will "wait for Yahweh" while He "is hiding his face" from Israel, and will "look for Him" (v. 17). This divine concealment may evoke the concealment of the *tôrāh* and *tě'udā* in v. 16. In other texts, the idiom denotes Yahweh's rejection (88:15), disfavor (Ps. 30:8; Isa. 64:7), or failure to intervene in distress (Pss. 13:2; 44:25; 10:1; Job 34:20). Here, it likely invokes the period during which Israelites and Judahites "will fall and be broken; they will even be snared and caught" (vv. 14b-15). "Waiting" for Yahweh, therefore, demands patience through the time of His concealment, in expectation of the return of His favor.<sup>103</sup> It also parallels those acts already demanded of the righteous during the time of "stumbling," namely: regarding Yahweh as holy, and making Him a fear, dread, and sanctuary, in the time of trouble (vv. 13-14a). In this light, then, the "sealing" of v. 16 is best read against the failure of Yahweh to intervene on behalf of the Israelites as various regional powers overwhelmed those territories. The failure of optimistic prophecy is cast as the emergence of a divine silence. However, Isaiah further affirms that in that period of divine concealment, he and his children will stand as "signs and wonders in Israel from Yahweh of hosts" (v. 18).

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102. Wieringen, 99.

103. Kaiser, 197.

Apparently, Isaiah's prophetic gestures will speak during this period.

### Analysis

#### Vv. 19-20

The next pericope, encompassing vv. 19-23, represents a distinct literary unit.<sup>104</sup> Again, the lack of an appropriate antecedent for the verb *yō'm<sup>ə</sup>rû* in vv. 16-18, and the secondary allusion to *tě'udā* and *tôrāh* v. 16, suggest redactive activity.<sup>105</sup>

The inverted reference to *tě'udā* and *tôrāh* in v. 20 sets the pericope against the backdrop of vv. 16-18.<sup>106</sup> Ostensibly, the speaker of v. 17-18 resumes his speech, issuing a condemnation of those who "will" encourage his addressees to turn to "the dead for *tôrāh* and *tě'udā*" (vv. 19-20). The addressees are addressed through second person plural forms, indicating a group of people, potentially, Isaiah's disciples or readers.<sup>107</sup> The *kî*

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104. Sweeney, 181; Wildberger, 364; Schmidt 1994, 148-50.

105. Schmidt 1994, 149-50.

106. Childs, 76.

107. Wieringer, 142.

in v. 19 carries either an assertive force,<sup>108</sup> or indicates the hypothetical character of the following speech.<sup>109</sup>

The anticipatory tone of the warning and the implied occasion (i.e., the search for an alternative source of *tôrāh* and *tě'udā*) suggests its relevance to a future period<sup>110</sup> after the concealment of *tôrāh* and *tě'udā* in v. 16. Consequently, the pericope identifies and condemns the future practice of necromancy as a means to circumvent the divine concealment of revelation,<sup>111</sup> not unlike its use in 1 Sam. 28:6-7.<sup>112</sup> In the absence of revelation from Yahweh, some will seek revelation from the dead. Moreover, the text asserts that none will gain any special knowledge through necromancy beyond that which Yahweh has already revealed or obscured through his prophets. This point is also asserted in 1 Sam. 28:15-17, where Saul's engagement in a necromantic rite gives him no special knowledge he had not otherwise received through prophets.

In particular, Isaiah condemns those who seek *dir°šû el-hā'ōbôt w° el-hayyidd°'ōnîm ham°sapšpîm w°hammahgîm*. In view of

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108. Blekinsopp, 243.

109. Wieringen, 243.

110. *Ibid.*, 144.

111. Zevit, 515; Kaiser, 201.

112. Friedman and Overton, 54.

our analysis of the first few terms in Deut. 18, the translation: "seek the revenants and the knowers" seems appropriate. The latter two terms, however, require similar exploration.

Both terms, a pair of participles, appear to denote sounds associated with necromantic communication. The first term, *ham<sup>o</sup>spašîm*, is often rendered "the chirping ones" or "the peeping ones" by translators. Like the words into which it is translated, the root *.spp* (as also the root *.spr*) may have an onomatopoeic inspiration: imitating bird calls.<sup>113</sup> The second term is also considered onomatopoeic, and often translated "the muttering ones."<sup>114</sup>

When translating *yidd<sup>o</sup>'ônîm* (or according to Gesenius, *'ôbôt*<sup>115</sup>), the LXX uses the term *eggastrimúthous* ("ventriloquists"), thereby ascribing the "chirping" and "muttering" in 8:19 to the diviners, who presumably used them in necromantic rites.<sup>116</sup> In Isa. 29:4, however, the "chirping" *'ôb* emerges "from the earth" and "from the dust." This passage, which reinforces the contention that *'ôb* primarily refers to the

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113. Hays, 305-326. Gesenius, 913.

114. BDB, 211.

115. Gesenius, 20.

116. Schmidt 1994, 153; Oswalt, 237.

"ghosts" of the dead,<sup>117</sup> indicates that the dead consulted by the *dir°šû 'el-hā'ōbôt w° 'el-hayydd°'ōnîm* purportedly produce the "chirping" sounds (probably as communications, interpreted by the necromancer).<sup>118</sup> Various authors have noted the portrayal of the dead as birds in biblical texts (Ezek 13:17-23; Ps. 124:7), and most especially, in the literature of neighboring cultures.<sup>119</sup> This identification could stand behind the association of the dead with such sounds. Many commentators reconcile these views by proposing that the *yidd°'ōnîm* imitated the sounds made by the dead when communicating with them<sup>120</sup>: "the ghosts or knowing ones are called 'chirpers' and 'croakers' in derision of the noises made by them in response to the necromancer."<sup>121</sup> If, however, one simply views the LXX translation as mistaken and identifies 'ōb and *yidd°'ōnî* with the "ghost" of the dead it is easier to exclusively identify the "chirping" as an inferred detail

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117. Schmidt 1994, 153.

118. *Ibid.*, 153.

119. Saggs, 1-12; Hays, 316-318; Schmidt 1994, 153; Cheyne, 56; Oswalt, 237.

120. Gesenius, 913.

121. Cooper, *Ras Shamra Parallels*, 466



extracted from an Israelite belief in the avian character to the dead.<sup>122</sup>

Those who encourage the visitation of such figures urge, “should not a people [perhaps, “do not every people”<sup>123</sup>] ask ’*elōhāyw* (“their gods”), the dead on behalf of the living?” In this context, the term ’*elōhāyw* may refer to the dead (cf. 1 Sam 28:13) and in the estimation of Nihan, “to some kind of cultic worship of the dead.” In defense of this position, some view the (albeit reversed) references to the “living” and “dead” in v. 19c as aligned with “people” and ’*elōhāyw* in v. 19b (in this view, 19c prioritizes the “dead” “precisely because of their superior knowledge, which can be communicated to the living for their benefit”).<sup>124</sup> On the other hand, Schmidt argues that one should not identify the “dead” with ’*elōhāyw*, even though both occur in close proximity. Instead, he believes the ’*ēlōhîm* should be identified with chthonic deities, such as the ’*ilu* “invoked in Mesopotamian necromantic rituals for their ability to assist the in the retrieval of particular ghosts” (*eṭemmū*).<sup>125</sup>

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122. Schmidt 1994, 153.

123. Nihan, 45.

124. *Ibid.*, 45.

125. Schmidt 1994, 25.

Immediately following is the oath: "Surely for this word that they speak there is no *šāhar*." The root *šhr* ("dawn") has a variety of denotations, including "dawn" and "darkness."<sup>126</sup> In Isa. 47:11, however, the term appears in parallel with *kaprah* ("charm away"), so that Driver suggests *šāhar* could virtually mean "charm."<sup>127</sup> Furthermore, Schmidt finds a cognate for this root in the Akkadian *sāhiru* ("charmer, sorcerer").<sup>128</sup> In this light, the oath likely denies the magical potential of necromancy; there is no "charm" or "sorcery" in the claims of those who encourage others to necromancy.<sup>129</sup> As Nihan renders the phrase, "their word has no power" (v. 20).<sup>130</sup> The text thereby disputes the efficacy of necromancy.<sup>131</sup>

This assertion of the inefficacy of necromancy finds a likely matrix in a period of increasing distrust in purported sources of divination or revelation. This distrust likely followed the failure of optimistic prophecy in a period of widespread political upheaval, when Mesopotamian armies

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126. Sweeney, 184.

127. BDB, 1007; Wildberger, 364; Sweeney, 184; Kaiser, 199, no. 3.

128. Schmidt 1994, 149, no. 68.

129. Sweeney, 184.

130. Nihan, 45.

131. Lewis 1989, 132, no. 13.

threatened Egypt and the Levant. This upheaval, and the failure of divination before it, is asserted in Isa. 19:1-4 (albeit within an Egyptian context). It is also indirectly evinced in 8:16-18, which text asserts the impending obscuration of revelation in Israel and Judah. Isaiah survives this failure precisely by explaining the failure of other sources of revelation in this period (8:16-18) and by maintaining a pessimistic tone in his prophecies (8:11-16).

CHAPTER 8:

ISAIAH 19:3

Translation

<sup>1</sup>An oracle about Egypt: Behold Yahweh riding on a swift cloud, and he came to Egypt, and "the nothings" [i.e., idols] of Egypt were moved from before his face, and the hearts of Egypt will melt within it.

<sup>2</sup>And I will incite Egypt against Egypt, and each will fight against his brother, and each against his neighbor, city against city, and kingdom against kingdom

<sup>3</sup>And the spirit of Egypt was emptied out in the midst of it, and I will engulf its counsel, and they turned to idols, and to the ghosts of the dead, and to the revenants, and to the knowers,

<sup>4</sup>But I gave Egypt to the hand of a severe lord, and a fierce king will rule over them. Utterance of the lord, Yahweh of hosts.

Context

Isaiah 19:1-4 is the first stanza of an oracle against Egypt, extending at least 15 verses (vv. 1-15).<sup>132</sup> It is set

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132. Blenkinsopp, 314; Schmidt 1994, 154.

within a larger sequence of oracles against foreign powers, encompassing chs. 13-21.

### Analysis

#### Vv. 1-4

Couched in the imagery of storm theophany,<sup>133</sup> Yahweh appears as a rider of the clouds, whose advance upon Egypt incites civil unrest (v. 2), challenges its religious order (vv. 1), and leads to the collapse of its agricultural economy (by causing the failure of the Nile floods; vv. 5-10).<sup>134</sup> The disasters demoralize Egypt's populace (v. 1, 3a "heart of Egypt will melt"; "spirit of Egypt was emptied"), political leaders (vv. 11-15) who are helpless to prevent the crisis.<sup>135</sup> In their attempts to avert disaster, they turn to their idols, necromancers, and the dead (*hā'ōbôt* and *hayyidd°'ōnîm*), ostensibly for guidance or protection (v. 3). However, these prove of no avail (v. 4).

Precisely by highlighting the Egyptians' failure to avert disaster by such means, the writer presents an implicit polemic against (his representation of) Egyptian religion and magic. However, the passage's links to 8:19 (including another mention of *hā'ōbôt* and *hayyidd°'ōnîm*) suggests it attempts to further

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133. Blenkinsopp, 314.

134. Blenkinsopp, 314; Schmidt 1994, 154.

135. Blenkinsopp, 314.

discourage *Israelite* experimentation with various forms of divination. Depicting the futility of turning of *hā'ōbôt* and *hayyidd°'ōnîm*, the writer might hope to discourage those Israelites who would make recourse to the same in times of crisis. Additionally, the assignment of such practices to the Egyptians also reinforces their purportedly "foreign" character, perhaps to further discourage their execution in Israel.

The Egyptians are also depicted consulting *hā'elîlîm* and *hā'iṭṭîm*. The latter term, a hapax legomenon, appears to be the cognate of the Akkadian *eṭemmū*, the numen invoked in Mesopotamian necromantic incantations of the first millennium B.C.E.<sup>136</sup> If so, its appearance in 19:3 suggests the Mesopotamian origin of certain aspects of Israelite necromancy.<sup>137</sup> Like *hā'ōbôt* and *hayyidd°'ōnîm*, it refers to the dead consulted in necromantic rites. Schmidt further suggests that "*hā'ōbôt* and *hayyidd°'ōnîm* in 19:3b comprise specific subcategories within the class of beings designated '*iṭṭîm*," though he offers no evidence to support this proposition.<sup>138</sup> Alternatively, some have

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136. Cohen, 42; Schmidt 1994, 157; Lewis 1999, 230. Lewis does not believe the doubled *t* in the Hebrew term is sufficient reason to disassociate the two.

137. Schmidt 1994, 157.

138. *Ibid.*, 158.

connected *'ittîm* to the Arabic *'atta*, "to emit or utter a sound or noise,"<sup>139</sup> though this option is linguistically less likely than the Akkadian etymology.<sup>140</sup> (Connections to the Ugaritic *'utm* are also difficult to sustain, since the term appears only once in the extant literature, and is therefore, more uncertain in meaning.<sup>141</sup>)

The former term (*'elîlîm*) appears frequently in the Old Testament, most often in references to idols. It appears to have been created precisely to scorn idols, being (intentionally) evocative of the adjective *'elîl*, "weak," and a likely pun on, and diminutive of *'êl* or *'êlôhîm*.<sup>142</sup> Its association with three other terms denoting necromantic numina in 19:3 is curious. However, the Josainic reform rooted out *ha'ôbot* and *hayydd'ônîm*, as well as such images as the *t'râpîm* and *gilulim* (2 Kings 23:24), either of both of which may be encompassed in the reference to *'elîlîm*. *T'râpîm* appear to have played a role in cults of the dead, as ancestral images.<sup>143</sup> Also of note, the

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139. del Olmo Lete, 524; Schmidt 1994, 158.

140. Schmidt 1994, 158.

141. *Ibid.*, 158. Of note, del Olmo Lete recognizes *utm* as a cognate to the Arabic *atta* (del Olmo Lete, 524).

142. Preuss, 285.

143. Kennedy, 106.

couplet *ilānu* ("gods") // *eṭemmū* ("ghosts of the dead") appears in cuneiform sources, and may lie behind the pairing of 'e*lîlîm* // 'i*ṭṭîm* in this passage, as puns or cognates. The former term in each couplet could refer to chthonic deities, and the latter to the dead.<sup>144</sup>

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144. Schmidt 1994, 158.



## CHAPTER 9:

### SYNTHESIS AND CONCLUSIONS

In light of the above analyses, it is possible to critically examine several suggested rationales for the condemnation of necromancy.

#### I. Arguments of Inefficacy

##### A. Inefficacy of Necromantic Rites

One could argue that the biblical polemic against necromancy assumes its inefficacy. However, the account of Saul's visit to En-Dor assumes that Saul truly communicated with Samuel, consistently referring to the 'ēlōhîm raised by the medium as "Samuel" (1 Sam. 28:12, 14-16, 20). Accordingly, one cannot assume the inefficacy of a practice from its condemnation. As Friedman and Overton observe, "the Torah forbids Israelites to practice magic, but it still depicts Egyptian magicians as able to turn sticks into snakes and water to blood" (cf. Ex. 7:11, 22; 8:7).<sup>145</sup>

Nevertheless, two of the texts considered in previous chapters potentially intimate the inefficacy of necromantic practices (e.g., Isa. 8:20; 19:3). The latter assumes that any

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145. Friedman and Overton, 46.

knowledge sought by necromancers will prove useless to defend the nation against military threats ordained by Yahweh. This assertion of the futility of resorting to necromancy in times of crisis, however, does not necessarily indicate the inefficacy of the practice. In 1 Sam 28, Saul succeeds in contacting Samuel; however, Saul cannot avert his impending doom thereby. Samuel confirms the inevitability of Saul's death in the impending battle against the Philistines (1 Sam. 28:17-19). The former text, however, appears to deny the presence of *shr* ("charm," "sorcery," or "power") in invitations to pursue necromancy, seemingly denying the magical potential of necromantic practices. At least that text appears to assert the inefficacy of necromancy, though it remains unclear in what sense necromantic rituals lacked magical potential. Does the text assume such rites are unable to secure the presence and power of the dead? Such questions are impossible to answer.

#### B. Rejection of an Afterlife Concept

Samuele Bacchiocchi contends that condemnations of necromancy in the Hebrew Bible eliminate the possibility of communicating with the dead precisely because they lack an afterlife concept. For instance, Bacchiocchi believes Lev. 20:6, 27 "hardly could have prescribed the death penalty for

communicating with the spirits of deceased loved ones if such spirits existed and if such a communication were possible."<sup>146</sup>

This suggestion requires a more thorough synthesis of the "afterlife" concept(s) related in the Hebrew Bible than can be provided in this paper. Suffice to say, however, no text explicitly or implicitly excludes necromancy on these grounds. Friedman and Overton further note the lack of any "criticism of any pagan society for belief in afterlife" in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>147</sup> The absence of such a criticism may be all the more conspicuous in view of the numerous condemnations of the foreign character of necromancy (a belief in an afterlife is, after all, intrinsic to necromancy).

### III. Cultic Concerns

#### A. Impurity of the Dead

Kaiser proposes that condemnations of necromancy should be interpreted in the light of Levitical purity laws: "as a consequence of. . .impurity emanating from everything connected with the dead, anyone who had traffic with the spirits of the dead also became unclean (Lev. 19.31)."<sup>148</sup> Kaiser's suggestion is possible, given that P and D discuss the dead only "in the

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146. Bacchiocchi, 168.

147. Friedman and Overton, 45.

148. Kaiser, 201.

context of prohibitions."<sup>149</sup> The consistency of this principle is noteworthy. It is, therefore, possible to see a direct relationship between condemnations of necromancy and a general aversion to the realm of the dead.<sup>150</sup>

On the other hand, no biblical text explicitly links necromancy to the threat of cultic impurity. It is, therefore, safer to assert that the impurity attached to the realm of the dead does not seem to have been a controlling concern in prohibitions of necromancy. Even the juxtaposition of a prohibition of necromancy (Lev. 20:27) with a discussion about the defiling nature of "the dead" for Levites (Lev. 21:1-5) is insufficient to establish a connection. The two passages are dissimilar: the latter (where the defiling nature of the dead is an explicit concern [v. 1,4]) is addressed to the Levites alone (v. 1). Furthermore, Lev. 20:27 is more closely related to 20:1-6 than 21:1-5.

Moreover, not all practices surrounding the dead were necessarily forbidden the Israelite. For instance, although Deut. 26:14 prohibits the offering of tithed food to the dead,<sup>151</sup> Bloch-Smith observes: "this injunction specifies only tithed

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149. Friedman and Overton, 48.

150. *Ibid.*, 48.

151. *Ibid.*, 40.

food; this is not a general injunction against feeding the dead."<sup>152</sup> Accordingly, this text may, in fact, indicate the *legitimacy* of offering of other foods to the dead.<sup>153</sup>

#### B. Worship of the Dead

Kaufman assumed that "the ban on necromancy. . . is understandable as falling under the prohibition of worshipping the dead."<sup>154</sup> "In the ancient Near East. . . necromancy is closely related to the worship of dead ancestors."<sup>155</sup> One observation may be particularly enlightening in this context: "apart from extracting knowledge about the future, necromancy was also used to placate wandering spirits who were potentially harmful."<sup>156</sup> Kaiser shares this general opinion, arguing, "to the

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152. Bloch-Smith, 123.

153. Kennedy observes a tone of compromise (Kennedy, 107). Furthermore, the "impurity" gained by contact with a dead corpse, for instance, seems an unlikely analogy to the concerns surrounding the practice of necromancy. The former was cleansed by a series of ritual ablutions in Num. 19:11; the latter, on the other hand, demanded the execution of the practitioner (Lev. 20:6, 27).

154. Kaufmann, 88.

155. Nihan, 25.

156. Fritz, 391.

ears of later generations, the way in which spirits of ancestors were designated 'gods,' as in I Sam 28.13, may have also seemed an offence against the first commandment of the Decalogue, against the 'Yahweh alone'" principle.<sup>157</sup>

Unfortunately, no text explicitly excludes necromancy from monotheistic or monolatrous concerns. Though necromancy is depicted as an act of disloyalty to Yahweh (cf. Deut. 18:13; for instance, as an attempt to circumvent the limits he places on revelation cf. Deut. 18; Isa. 8:16-20), this disloyalty could be a matter of mere disobedience, and not necessarily false worship. Other rationales (e.g., cultic rivalry) seem of more immediate concern in these passages.

Of course, condemnations of necromancy are often juxtaposed with condemnations of the worship of other gods in the texts we studied. The application of the expression "to whore after" to necromancy may cast the practice as an instance of false worship. Other pejorative terms applied to necromancy (for instance, "abominations of the nations"), however, do not exclusively refer to offenses against monolatry.

Furthermore, no condemnation of necromancy highlights a cultic aspect within necromantic ritual. No doubt, the application of the term 'ēlōhîm in 1 Sam. 28:13 to the consulted

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157. Kaiser, 201.

dead is problematic. Nevertheless, an overt polemic against the use of the term is lacking in direct condemnations of necromancy; no text explicitly objects to the use of this term, or the theology inspiring it (frustrating attempts to reconstruct the theology essential to it). On the other hand, the term is placed upon the lips by figures cast in a negative light, both in 1 Sam 28:13 and Isa. 8:19. It may also be significant that no biblical writer uses the term, though other specialized terms for the consulted dead (for example, *'ôb* and *yiddê 'ônî*) appear in condemnations of necromancy.<sup>158</sup>

### C. Astral Worship

Barrick suggests that "a contributing factor could have been the theological and functional nexus between necromancy and astral phenomena, especially the sun, which may well have existed in the west as in the east. . ."<sup>159</sup> Evidence that Mesopotamians and Ugarites credited the sun with facilitating access between the living and the dead appears in several discussions of these religions. Unfortunately, none of the

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158. This could possibly stem from a confusion of the term *'êlôhîm* if applied to both God and the dead—the kind of confusion one might expect from a biblical writer working from a monotheistic standpoint, though not exclusively.

159. Barrick, 167.

passages discussed in this paper draw similar associations. Only one, 2 Kings 21:4-6, juxtaposes references to the worship of astral powers and necromancy. However, this juxtaposition is as readily explained by the observation that "every cultic practice that is prohibited in the legal code of the book of Deuteronomy" is attributed to Manasseh in that passage.<sup>160</sup> A list so comprehensive cannot demonstrate the relationship of any one practice with another: of note, the original condemnations of astral worship and necromancy in Deuteronomy are neither juxtaposed, nor associated one with another. Furthermore, many practices listed in the 2 Kings 21:1-9 bear no essential relationship with one another.

In support of this suggestion, Barrick cites Jer. 8:1-2 as an example of "the juxtaposition of astral praxis and the desecration of corpses"<sup>161</sup>:

At that time, says the Lord, the bones of the kings of Judah, the bones of its officials, the bones of the priests, the bones of the prophets, and the bones of the inhabitants of Jerusalem shall be brought out of their tombs; and they shall be spread before the sun and the moon and all the host of heaven, which they have loved and

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160. Fritz, 390.

161. Barrick, 167, no. 107.



served, which they have followed, and which they have inquired of and worshipped; and they shall not be gathered or buried; they shall be like dung on the surface of the ground.

First, the lack of an obvious reference to necromancy in this text (which excluded it from consideration in the body of this study) severely limits its usefulness in the present discussion. Certainly, its reference to Judahites "inquiring" of the astral powers demonstrates the existence of certain divinatory practices dependent upon them. However, there is no consultation of the dead (cf. *dōrēs*, *'ōbôt* or *miṭṭim*) in this passage; the passage merely identifies a form of astrology—not necromancy. Reference is made to classes of the dead only to underscore Yahweh's hatred of those who worship the heavenly bodies. The exhumation and desecration of their bones (a common biblical motif: cf. Deut. 28:26) profoundly represents the ignominy Yahweh attaches to these individuals, and the ability of Yahweh to transcend time, and reverse even past honors paid them in the execution of his judgment.<sup>162</sup> It hardly suggests a necromantic context or application.

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162. Brueggemann, 82-3.

## II. Partisan Concerns

### A. Cultic Rivalry

Friedman and Overton believe cultic rivalry might have inspired condemnations of necromancy, as well as a relative silence regarding the afterlife, in texts edited by the various priestly writers (e.g., E, P, D<sup>163</sup>):

Local ceremonies for dead ancestors did not require a priest, brought no income to the priesthood, and could even compete with priests' income and authority. The priest's livelihood was dependent upon sacrifices to YHWH, and the priestly laws were designed in such a way as to ensure that all aspects of interaction with the divine were conducted only through priests. If a belief in the afterlife was encouraged, and necromancy was given legitimacy, as a means for knowing the divine will, then the priests would be ceding a portion of the control of the religion.<sup>164</sup>

As stated earlier, Deut. 18 is filled with evidence of cultic rivalry, distinguishing between approved and unapproved mediators of revelation. The chapter directly contrasts the prophets appointed by Yahweh to two classes of diviners (v. 14-

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163. Friedman and Overton, 50-1.

164. *Ibid.*, 53.

15), paired with, and potentially including, necromancers (vv. 10-11). The passage's juxtaposition to an endorsement of the Levitical priesthood in vv. 1-8 also appears to contrast these illicit diviners with the established priesthood.

#### B. Monarchical Interests

Commenting upon 1 Sam. 28:3b ("Saul had expelled the revenants and the knowers from the land"), van der Toorn writes:

Necromancy being intimately related with the cult of the dead (it is conceived of as a consultation of the *'ōbôt*, the departed fathers, in 1 Samuel 28:3), it could be seen as a form of divination legitimized by the ideology of family religion. In that capacity, necromancy was a potential threat to the stability of royal rule. The ancestors might inspire resistance to the leadership of the national administration, or even foment revolution. The suppression of necromancy was not an act of disinterested piety on the part of Saul, but an attempt to secure the state monopoly on divination.<sup>165</sup>

The coincidence of the expulsion of the *'ōbôt* with the rise of Israel's first king is noteworthy. Furthermore, if accurate, even the absence of this rationale in any biblical text is understandable, insofar as it is a secular cause. However, it is difficult to cast necromancy as a likely anti-monarchical

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165. van der Toorn, 318-9.

practice. A scenario under which "the ancestor" would "foment revolution" is difficult to envision. If anything, the suppression of these rites would have been far more likely to inspire revolution among those attached to them. Also, other forms of "family religion" were respected under Saul's reign (1 Sam. 20:6). Further compounding these difficulties is the fact that the approved form of divination (the *nābî'*) was not consistently pro-monarchical. Particularly in the story of Saul, prophets challenged royal authority (1 Sam. 15:28; 16:1).

### C. Nationalism

The most common rationale for the condemnation of necromancy in biblical literature is the allegedly foreign character of those practices. This charge is explicitly leveled in Deut. 18:9; 2 Kings 21:2, and implicitly leveled in Isa. 19:14 (and perhaps, 8:19). Whether or not Israelite necromancy was a foreign phenomenon in origin or character, its suppression was certainly driven by nationalistic rhetoric.

### Summary

An analysis of the biblical literature underscores the role of cultic rivalry, nationalism, and a belief in the inefficacy of necromantic rites, in the condemnation of necromantic rites. Of these, cultic rivalry has the likeliest priority. It is easy to envision a scenario in which certain classes of Israelite religionists (e.g., *nābî'* and priests), driven by a desire to

secure or consolidate their position in Israelite society, or inspired by a self-assurance of orthopraxy, positioned themselves as the exclusive avenues of divination.

Their fundamental argument asserted that Yahweh forbade certain avenues of divination (including necromancy), and ordained others, thereby defining an orthopraxy. This argument is inherent in every biblical condemnation of necromancy. However, to bolster this claim, several texts secondarily cast necromancy as an un-Israelite and inefficacious practice. The first contention aligns with a nationalistic principle exhibited throughout the Hebrew Bible, which exalts the uniqueness of Israelite religious identity. The second is much rarer (appearing only in Isaiah) and is likely later, emerging in a matrix of increasing distrust in purported sources of divine revelation.<sup>166</sup>

At best, only an indirect appeal to monotheistic or monolatrous sentiments appears in the texts previously studied. Finally, though some sources hostile to necromancy manifest a general aversion to the dead (as sources of defilement) and

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166. Again, as a foil, 1 Sam. 28 assumes the efficacy of such practices despite its similarly negative portrayal of necromancy (as a practice Saul previously condemned, but to which he resorts once in a state of desperation and damnation).

afterlife speculations, they fail to highlight any such concerns in their rhetoric.

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