

Necromancy

1. The Hebrew Bible and ancient Israelite religion

As with all religious literature, the Hebrew Bible can be approached from a variety of different perspectives, including:

1. **Confessional:** Readers within traditions (e.g., Judaism, Christianity) that accept the Hebrew Bible as Scripture (i.e., for Jews, as the Tanakh, which is the whole of the Written Torah; and for Christians, as the Old Testament) typically read these books as inspired writings that present a single coherent message that speaks not only to the past but also to the present and the future.
2. **Intellectual history:** One of the academic approaches to the Hebrew Bible is to read it as a collection of books, which were composed by specific people for specific purposes at a specific time, such that we can learn from them the beliefs, practices, and concerns of their authors and audiences.
3. **Social and political history:** Another academic approach is to approach it as a group of documents, each of which comes from a specific time and place. A biblical text can thus serve as a source for reconstructing the history, religion, and culture of its own time and place—together with archaeological evidence and other writings from the same time and place.
4. **History of interpretation:** Yet another approach is to focus on the people who chose to collect and preserve these texts and on the communities that were shaped by them. From the perspective of the history of interpretation, the Hebrew Bible is a set of texts that, by virtue of their transmission and reception as Scripture, had a seminal influence on later traditions.

Divination: Category of practices to seek knowledge of the future. In the ancient world, these were widespread and involved a variety of means, including the consultation of divinities via sacred oracles and dreams, consultation with the spirits of the dead (i.e., **necromancy**), and the interpretation of patterns in the natural world, esp. with regard to the stars (i.e., astrology), flights of birds, and entrails of animals. Already within the Hebrew Bible we find attempts to distinguish divination from **prophecy**, which is here defended as the proper means of contact with the divine to learn the future. The critical difference is the source: the God of Israel is stressed to be the source of prophecy. Interestingly, even practices otherwise condemned as divination (e.g., dream-interpretation) are treated positively within the Hebrew Bible when it's stressed that the God of Israel is the source of the knowledge about the future. It is sometime appropriate, then, to use the more neutral term "**mantology**" (or "**mantic practices**") in place of "divination"

Since we are working within a non-confessional and academic context in this course, we will concern ourselves with #2 (what does the Hebrew Bible say about death and the afterlife?), #3 (what does this tell us about beliefs about death and the afterlife in ancient Israel?), and later, as we continue in the weeks to come, with #4 (how are biblical ideas about death and the afterlife interpreted and reinterpreted by later Jews and Christians?).

- When reading these books from an academic perspective and in historical context, we cannot speak of a single "biblical" view of things, but must rather approach "the Hebrew Bible" as a collection of texts that date from different times. Notable for our present purposes are:
 - the Pentateuch—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy—which describe the creation of the world and early human history; the age of the Patriarchs; Israel's enslavement and Exodus from Egypt; and Israel's travels in the wilderness en route to the Promised Land; these books preserve a variety of traditions, some of which may date from the times described, but in their present form the books date from the decades surrounding the Babylonian Exile.
 - the Deuteronomistic History, the scholarly term for the account of early Israelite history in Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings. Shared theological and literary features suggest that these books were redacted (i.e., edited) by the same school and comprise a single historical work, dating from around the same time—namely in the decades surrounding the Babylonian Exile, with the first edition in the reign of King Josiah (640-609 BCE) and a final edition made during the Exile (ca. 550 BCE).
 - Writings of pre-exilic and exilic prophets such as Hosea, Joel, Jonah, Amos, Obadiah, Micah, Nahum, Zephaniah, parts of Isaiah
- It is important to note the difference between #2 and #3. The books in the Hebrew Bible are religious texts that were composed, not for the purpose of simply documenting events or describing what life was like at the time that they were written, but rather to exhort their readers/hearers to adopt certain beliefs and practices. Stories about the past are here used to explain why such beliefs and practices are important and, in the process, to explore the on-going relationship between humankind and God.

- As a result, there is sometimes a difference between #2 and #3. In the case of prescriptive texts or passages (i.e., those that talk about what someone should and shouldn't do), we can often assume a gap between the ideal that it outlines and the reality that it seems to assume (i.e., what it's trying to get its audience to stop doing) and/or which other sources (literary or archaeological) confirm.
- In the case of historical texts or passages, material is often schematized better to demonstrate a lesson, such that it tells only part of the story. The Deuteronomistic History, for instance, presents God as active in history, interprets Israelite history in terms of God's will, and suggests that the adoption of certain Canaanite practices (including necromancy) was what caused disaster to come to Israel: the Babylonian Exile was punishment for deviance from the proper worship of the One God.
- Across a variety of genres, we also find the imposition of external evaluative categories on beliefs and practices are otherwise quite similar—e.g., divination vs. prophecy, two ways of discerning the future.

3. Biblical References to Necromancy & the Israelite Adoption of Canaanite Practices

- In the Deuteronomistic History and prophetic writings from around the same time (i.e., decades surrounding the Exile), improper religious practice is defined in terms of the practices of the Canaanites and other past inhabitants of the Land now belonging to the Israelites (such that Canaanites, etc., are their neighbors). It is alleged that improper worship is the reason that the Canaanites, etc., were “vomited up” from the land, and conversely, that if Israelites too do not worship God correctly, they will be punished with exile.
- Specific practices condemned include: idolatry, child sacrifice (“giving your seed to Moloch”), worship of Canaanite god Baal, erection of *asherot* (sacred poles and trees to the Canaanite goddess Asherah), but also a variety of mantic (=divinatory) practices: consulting soothsayers, mediums, necromancers, and the spirits of the dead.
- What is striking, however, is that it is assumed that necromancy worked! Note esp. the story of the Saul and the witch of Endor, where Saul has a witch call up the ghost of the prophet Samuel. We may find a hint that Israelites had similar ideas about the afterlife as their neighbors, but the biblical authors/redactors may have just discouraged speculation about it to discourage Israelites from seeking active congress between living and dead in any manner akin to the Canaanite cult of the dead.



5. A cult of the dead in Ancient Israel? Rhetoric vs. Reality

Marzeah

- Marzeah = A feast practiced by Canaanites as part of funerary practice and cult of the dead, whereby a group of mourners feasted for days and drank to excess; the cultic meal and drinking party were, apparently, conceived as “feeding” not only the living and their dead ancestors. See further Segal pp. 115-18.
- Jeremiah seems to warn more pointedly against participation in a marzeah feast – thus suggesting that some Israelites may have seen this as an acceptable practice!

Teraphim

- Further evidence for the continuance of ancestor worship in Israel may be found in the tradition about Teraphim (often translated “household gods”; apparently small statues). They are mentioned frequently in the Hebrew Bible (see attached). They were apparently used for divination and connected with ancestral worship long practiced in Israel alongside worship of YHWH as the One God.
- The Pentateuch depicts this as an ancient tradition, associated with the Aramean relatives of Abraham's family (e.g., Jacob's wife Rachel steals the Teraphim of her father Laban; see attached; notably Laban also engages in divination in Gen 30:27).
- Elsewhere, Teraphim are listed alongside religious objects associated with Canaanite religion, such as *asherot* (sacred poles to the goddess Asherah).

ADDITIONAL SOURCES

1. Biblical polemics against divination, necromancy, and other elements of Canaanite religious practice

i. Pentateuch

Lev 19:31 Do not turn to mediums or wizards; do not seek them out, to be defiled by them: I am the LORD your God.

Lev 20:1 The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: 20:2 Say further to the people of Israel: Any of the people of Israel, or of the aliens who reside in Israel, who give any of their offspring to Molech shall be put to death; the people of the land shall stone them to death. 20:3 I myself will set my face against them, and will cut them off from the people, because they have given of their offspring to Molech, defiling my sanctuary and profaning my holy name. 20:4 And if the people of the land should ever close their eyes to them, when they give of their offspring to Molech, and do not put them to death, 20:5 I myself will set my face against them and against their family, and will cut them off from among their people, them and all who follow them in prostituting themselves to Molech. 20:6 If any turn to mediums and wizards, prostituting themselves to them, I will set my face against them, and will cut them off from the people. 20:7 Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy; for I am the LORD your God.

ii. Deuteronomistic History

Deut 18:9 When you come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you, you must not learn to imitate the abhorrent practices of those nations. 18:10 No one shall be found among you who makes a son or daughter pass through fire, or who practices divination, or is a soothsayer, or an augur, or a sorcerer, 18:11 or one who casts spells, or who consults ghosts or spirits, or who seeks oracles from the dead. 18:12 For whoever does these things is abhorrent to the LORD; it is because of such abhorrent practices that the LORD your God is driving them out before you. 18:13 You must remain completely loyal to the LORD your God. 18:14 Although these nations that you are about to dispossess do give heed to soothsayers and diviners, as for you, the LORD your God does not permit you to do so.

2 Kings 21:1 Manasseh was twelve years old when he began to reign; he reigned fifty-five years in Jerusalem... 21:2 He did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, following the abominable practices of the nations that the LORD drove out before the people of Israel. 21:3 For he rebuilt the high places that his father Hezekiah had destroyed; he erected altars for Baal, made a sacred pole, as King Ahab of Israel had done, worshiped all the host of heaven, and served them.

21:4 He built altars in the house of the LORD, of which the LORD had said, "In Jerusalem I will put my name." 21:5 He built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of the LORD. 21:6 He made his son pass through fire; he practiced soothsaying and augury, and dealt with mediums and with wizards. He did much evil in the sight of the LORD, provoking him to anger. 21:7 The carved image of Asherah that he had made he set in the house of which the LORD said to David and to his son Solomon, "In this house, and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, I will put my name forever; 21:8 I will not cause the feet of Israel to wander any more out of the land that I gave to their ancestors, if only they will be careful to do according to all that I have commanded them, and according to all the law that my servant Moses commanded them."

21:9 But they did not listen; Manasseh misled them to do more evil than the nations had done that the LORD destroyed before the people of Israel. 21:10 The LORD said by his servants the prophets, 21:11 "Because King Manasseh of Judah has committed these abominations, has done things more wicked than all that the Amorites did, who were before him, and has caused Judah also to sin with his idols; 21:12 therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, I am bringing upon Jerusalem and Judah such evil that the ears of everyone who hears of it will tingle. 21:13 I will stretch over Jerusalem the measuring line for Samaria, and the plummet for the house of Ahab; I will wipe Jerusalem as one wipes a dish, wiping it and turning it upside down. 21:14 I will cast off the remnant of my heritage, and give them into the hand of their enemies; they shall become a prey and a spoil to all their enemies, 21:15 because they have done what is evil in my sight and have provoked me to anger, since the day their ancestors came out of Egypt, even to this day."

iii. Prophets

Isa 8:18 See, I and the children whom the LORD has given me are signs and portents in Israel from the LORD of hosts, who dwells on Mount Zion. 8:19 Now if people say to you, "Consult the ghosts and the familiar spirits that chirp and mutter; should not a people consult their gods, the dead on behalf of the living, 8:20 for teaching and for instruction?" Surely, those who speak like this will have no dawn! 8:21 They will pass through the land, greatly distressed and hungry; when they are hungry, they will be enraged and will curse their king and their gods. They will turn their faces upward, 8:22 or they will look to the earth, but will see only distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish; and they will be thrust into thick darkness.

Isa 19:1 An oracle concerning Egypt. See, the LORD is riding on a swift cloud and comes to Egypt; the idols of Egypt will tremble at his presence, and the heart of the Egyptians will melt within them. 19:2 I will stir up Egyptians against Egyptians, and they will fight, one against the other, neighbor against neighbor, city against city, kingdom against kingdom; 19:3 the spirit of the Egyptians within them will be emptied out, and I will confound their plans; they will consult the idols and the spirits of the dead and the ghosts and the familiar spirits; 19:4 I will deliver the Egyptians into the hand of a hard master; a fierce king will rule over them, says the Sovereign, the LORD of hosts.

2. References to Marzeah and Teraphim in the Hebrew Bible

i. Pentateuch

Genesis 31:19 Laban had gone to shear his sheep, and Rachel stole her father's Teraphim. 31:20 And Jacob outwitted Laban the Aramean, in that he did not tell him that he intended to flee. 31:21 He fled with all that he had, and arose and crossed the Euphrates... 31:25 And Laban overtook Jacob. Now Jacob had pitched his tent in the hill country, and Laban with his kinsmen encamped in the hill country of Gilead. 31:26 And Laban said to Jacob, "What have you done, that you have cheated me, and carried away my daughters like captives of the sword? 31:27 Why did you flee secretly, and cheat me, and did not tell me, so that I might have sent you away with mirth and songs, with tambourine and lyre? 31:28 And why did you not permit me to kiss my sons and my daughters farewell? Now you have done foolishly. 31:29 It is in my power to do you harm; but the God of your father spoke to me last night, saying, —Take heed that you speak to Jacob neither good nor bad.' 31:30 And now you have gone away because you longed greatly for your father's house, but why did you steal my gods?" 31:31 Jacob answered Laban, "Because I was afraid, for I thought that you would take your daughters from me by force. 31:32 Any one with whom you find your gods shall not live. In the presence of our kinsmen point out what I have that is yours, and take it." Now Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen them. 31:33 So Laban went into Jacob's tent, and into Leah's tent, and into the tent of the two maidservants, but he did not find them. And he went out of Leah's tent, and entered Rachel's. 31:34 Now Rachel had taken the household gods and put them in the camel's saddle, and sat upon them. Laban felt all about the tent, but did not find them. 31:35 And she said to her father, "Let not my lord be angry that I cannot rise before you, for the way of women is upon me." So he searched, but did not find the household gods.

ii. Deuteronomistic History

Judges 17:1 There was a man of the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Micah. 17:2 And he said to his mother, "The eleven hundred pieces of silver which were taken from you, about which you uttered a curse, and also spoke it in my ears, behold, the silver is with me; I took it." And his mother said, "Blessed be my son by the LORD." 17:3 And he restored the eleven hundred pieces of silver to his mother; and his mother said, "I consecrate the silver to the LORD from my hand for my son, to make a graven image and a molten image; now therefore I will restore it to you." 17:4 So when he restored the money to his mother, his mother took two hundred pieces of silver, and gave it to the silversmith, who made it into a graven image and a molten image; and it was in the house of Micah. 17:5 And the man Micah had a shrine, and he made an ephod and teraphim, and installed one of his sons, who became his priest. 17:6 In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes.

2 Kings 23:24 Moreover Josiah put away the mediums and the wizards and the teraphim and the idols and all the abominations that were seen in the land of Judah and in Jerusalem, that he might establish the words of the law which were written in the book that Hilki'ah the priest found in the house of the LORD. 23:25 Before him there was no king like him, who turned to the LORD with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; nor did any like him arise after him.

iii. Prophets

Hosea 3:1 And the LORD said to me, "Go again, love a woman who is beloved of a paramour and is an adulteress; even as the LORD loves the people of Israel, though they turn to other gods and love cakes of raisins." 3:2 So I bought her for fifteen shekels of silver and a homer and a lettech of barley. 3:3 And I said to her, "You must dwell as mine for many days; you shall not play the harlot, or belong to another man; so will I also be to you." 3:4 For the children of Israel shall dwell many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or pillar, without ephod or teraphim. 3:5 Afterward the children of Israel shall return and seek the LORD their God, and David their king; and they shall come in fear to the LORD and to his goodness in the latter days.

Zechariah 10:1 Ask rain from the LORD in the season of the spring rain, from the LORD who makes the storm clouds, who gives men showers of rain, to every one the vegetation in the field. 10:2 For the teraphim utter nonsense, and the diviners see lies; the dreamers tell false dreams, and give empty consolation. Therefore the people wander like sheep; they are afflicted for want of a shepherd. 10:3 "My anger is hot against the shepherds, and I will punish the leaders; for the LORD of hosts cares for his flock, the house of Judah, and will make them like his proud steed in battle.

Jer 16:5 For thus says the LORD: Do not enter the house of mourning (*bet marzeah*), or go to lament, or bemoan them (i.e., the dead); for I have taken away my peace from this people, says the LORD, my steadfast love and mercy.