MANTIC WISDOM IN THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS

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Introduction

In biblical studies and related areas the term wisdom calls to mind primarily the contents of books such as Proverbs, Job, Wisdom, and Sirach. One often gets the impression that wise sayings and extended discourses on practical and, at times, weighty themes were the essence of ancient wisdom in the biblical and post-biblical periods. If one surveys the entire ancient Near East, however, the picture is considerably different. There is widespread evidence from Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Syria that another form of wisdom—mantic wisdom or divination—was widely practiced. Its learned lore was deposited in a voluminous literature, a large amount of which has survived. There is extensive documentation for the mantic arts not only in the other cultural areas of the ancient Near East but also in Israel, as many passages in the Hebrew Bible show. F.H. Cryer concluded from his recent study of the subject that “Israelite divination corresponded broadly in the range of its uses to the utilisation of divination in Mesopotamia and elsewhere in the Near Eastern environment.”¹ In his summary of the biblical passages that deal with divinatory techniques, Y. Kaufmann divided the evidence into two categories: the types of divination that are approved and the types rejected in the Hebrew Bible. The legal means for making inquiry of God were: the urim and tummim, the ephod, the lot, dreams, prophecy, and some temporary signs such as Gideon’s fleece. Forbidden means or ones considered to be the ways of the nations were types that fell within the range of the cover terms וָנָכָה and לְשׁוֹנָה; thus, the Bible forbids divining, practicing magic, and making inquiry of a medium, a soothsayer (wizard), or the dead. Kaufmann also noted the references to pagan forms of divination such as divining with a cup

(using water and oil), teraphim, livers, heavenly signs, idols, movements of animals, rustling of trees, and divining by spring waters or the waters of rivers.\(^2\) The result is that while certain passages condemn divinatory practices in no uncertain terms (see Deut. 18:9-14; cf. Num. 23:23), elsewhere other types of mantic procedures were considered acceptable within the religion of Yahweh. As Kaufmann argued at length, however, the biblical view is that there is nothing above the one God, nothing to whose power he was subject, while a fundamental presupposition of divination was precisely that there was a mantic force to which the gods were also subject.

Although divination has probably not received as much attention as other types of ancient Near Eastern and biblical wisdom, one field of research in which it has figured prominently in recent decades is in the debate about the origins of apocalyptic thought. Prophecy has long been regarded as the chief source from which the apocalyptists drew their concepts, but no less a scholar than G. von Rad vigorously opposed this conclusion. In fact, he excluded prophecy as the primary source, ruling it "completely out of the question."\(^3\) He highlighted knowledge as the "nerve-centre of apocalyptic literature"\(^4\) and found its primary inspiration in the wisdom traditions of Israel. Later, he was to limit the kinds of wisdom that he considered the principal influences to the sciences of dream interpretation and the interpretation of oracles and signs.\(^5\) H.P. Müller further clarified matters by showing that mantic wisdom exercised a decisive influence on the development of apocalyptic ways of thinking. He argued that one could explain four non-prophetic features in the apocalypses on this basis: determinism, claims to inspiration, the use of symbolic imagery, and pseudonymity.\(^6\) As von Rad and others have noted, it must be significant that the earliest apocalyptic figures in Judaism—Enoch and Daniel—are pictured in vivid mantic colors. Enoch, who is a Jewish embodiment of Enmeduranki, the Mesopotamian founder of the bārû-diviners, studied the signs of the sky and learned lessons from them; he also comprehended the


\(^4\) *Old Testament Theology*, 2.306.
