

DIVINATION IN THE BIBLE

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In the Bible, we find injunctions against aspects of the practice of divination – the use of various means to foresee future events, truth, or the discovery of hidden knowledge. This term may be distinguished from other associated terms such as:

1. *Sorcery*: The use of supernatural power over others through the assistance of evil spirits, synonymous with *witchcraft*, *wizardry*, *black magic*.

2. *Magic*: The art that purports to control or forecast natural events, effects or forces by invoking the supernatural, often using charms, spells or rituals.

3. *Enchantment*: The ability to cast a person under a spell, or into a bewitched state.

4. *Charm*: Employing spells or any action or formula thought to have magical power.

5. *Spell*: An incantational word or formula or a fascination, also synonymous with *a bewitched state*.

6. *Familiar* or *familiar spirit*: An attendant spirit which often takes the form of an animal.

7. *Soothsaying*: A general term for claiming to be able to foretell events, akin to prophecy.

The biblical injunctions tend to focus on the following:

1. Forbidding the practice outright, as in Leviticus 19:26, 31, on divination, soothsaying, ghosts and familiar spirits; Deuteronomy 18:10,11,14 which, in addition, includes enchanters, charmers, and necromancers; and I Samuel 28:3, where Saul tries to drive necromancers out of the country after the death of Samuel.

2. Stressing God's sole role in divination, as Joseph does (Gen. 40:8), or showing God as superior to Pharaoh's magicians as in Exodus 7:11, and Daniel 2:27 and 5:24, where Daniel's hand is disembodied in order to write the dream interpretation.

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3. Concern about false prophets, diviners and dreamers, as in Deuteronomy 13:2, 3,4,5, and Jeremiah 27:9, 29:8.

4. Denigration of other peoples who indulge in such practices, as in Numbers 22:7 on the Moabites, Isaiah 2:6 on the Philistines, and using invidious comparisons as in I Samuel 15:23: *For rebellion is as of the sin of witchcraft.*

5. Emphasizing the consequent punishments if the injunction is disobeyed, as in Leviticus 20:6, Deuteronomy 13:6, II Kings 17:17, when Samaria was captured by Assyria in the reign of Hoshea because of the use of divinations and enchantments, and II Chronicles 33:6, where King Manasseh was carried off to Babylon for similar reasons, although after repentance before God he was restored to his throne.

Among the many methods of biblical divination we find the following:

1. *Hydromancy* (from Greek *hydro* [water] and *mantia* [diviner])¹ – the use of water, whose modern name is the Magic Mirror.

2. *Lithomancy* (from Greek *lithos* [stone]) – the use of precious stones, such as the *Urim* and *Thummim* in the high priest's breastplate of judgment (Ex. 28:30), and as a negative reference in I Samuel 28:5,6: *And when Saul saw the host of the Philistines he was afraid And when Saul enquired of the Lord, the Lord answered him not, neither by dreams, nor by Urim, nor by prophets.*

3. *Aleuromancy* (from Greek *aleuron* [flour]) – using dough, from whence we get our modern-day fortune cookies.

4. *Necromancy* (from Greek *necros* [death]) – conjuring up spirits of the dead and communing with them; also known as *nigromancy* (from Latin *niger* [black] – black magic, and *psychomancy* (from Greek *psyche* [spirit]) – spirit-raising, as in I Samuel 23:7,8,11,19 where the woman of En-dor brings up the spirit of Samuel for Saul who seems to have succumbed despite his previous repudiation of divination.

5. *Belomancy* (from Greek *belos* [arrow]) – divination by means of arrows, as in Ezekiel 21:21,22: *For the king of Babylon stood at the parting of the way, at the head of the two ways, to use divination; he made his arrows bright, he consulted his images, he looked in the liver.*

JOSEPH INTERPRETS DREAMS

Joseph practised *oneiromancy* (from Greek *oneiros* [dream]) – the discovery of the future or truth through dreams. His father had been a dreamer, then he himself became a dreamer and later an interpreter of dreams. In the entire Bible, only two Israelites engage in the interpretation of dreams – Joseph and Daniel. Each serves a pagan monarch, one in Egypt and the other in Mesopotamia, lands in which oneiromancy flourished. It is interesting to note that dreams in Joseph's biography always come in pairs to prove their seriousness compared to so-called idle dreams, as Nahum Sarna suggests.²

With this in mind, I would first like to address the circumstances surrounding the dreams that Joseph is asked to interpret by Pharaoh's chief butler and chief baker respectively, the outcomes of which have such vastly different conclusions.

The text begins:

And Joseph came unto them in the morning, and saw them, and, behold, they were sad [or "distraught" – zo-a-feem]. And he asked Pharaoh's officers that were with him in the ward of his master's house, saying: 'Wherefore look ye so sad [or "downcast" – ra-eem] today?'. (Gen. 40:6-7)

First, Joseph notices that they are *zo-a-feem* (from *za-af* meaning "anger" and *za-off* meaning "to be angry") which may be considered a general state of being aggrieved, presumably at being imprisoned. This is what Joseph initially observes, partly because he has been seeing them in this state for some time; but we know that he also feels the same way about his unjust imprisonment when he later complains to the butler about his own situation. Then he observes a sadness on their faces, this time using the word "*ra-eem*" (cf. Neh. 2:2 – *madu-a panekha ra-eem – Why is thy countenance sad?*), and adds the word "today" implying that there is something different happening at this time. Why are they sad-looking? Is it because, as they say, there is no one to interpret their dreams or does it indicate to Joseph that, perhaps they both hoped and feared what their dreams might portend?

Further, when he sees the butler and the baker *zo-a-feem*, he identifies with them and then when he sees them *ra-eem* he identifies even more, for he would also like to know what the future holds for him. However, this desire is for him fraught with the possible danger of an unpleasant forecast, so he

may have dealt with the conflict by the mental mechanism of "projective identification" and its associated mechanism of splitting the dreamers into good and bad. These defenses may have paved the way for Joseph to feel impelled to attempt interpretations of the dreams.

THE DREAMS OF THE BUTLER AND THE BAKER

When it comes to relating their actual dreams to Joseph, the butler offers to go first and he describes a dream about increasing abundance: '*. . . on the vine were three branches. It had barely budded, when out came its blossoms, and its clusters ripened into grapes*' (40:10,11). To this dream, Joseph attributes a favorable outcome.

Only then, when the baker hears this optimistic outcome, does he present his dream about diminishing abundance: '*In my dream . . . there were three openwork baskets on my head. In the uppermost basket were all kinds of food for Pharaoh . . . and the birds were eating it out of the basket above my head*' (40:16,17).

It is interesting that in much later times we read of wine associated with truth (*in vino veritas*) and bread with falsehood (*Bread of deceit is sweet to a man: but afterwards his mouth shall be filled with gravel* [Prov. 20:17]). Is it possible that Joseph unconsciously made similar associations in determining guilt or innocence on the part of the two dreamers? Let us look more closely at these dreams to try to discern what it was in Joseph or in the dreams themselves that inspired him to predict their respective outcomes. Was it only in the content or in the manner of presentation or was Joseph responding to more unconscious feelings and motivations?

In the butler's dreams there are three vines which produce grapes '*. . . and Pharaoh's cup was in my hand; and I took the grapes, and pressed them into Pharaoh's cup and I gave the cup into Pharaoh's hand*' (40:11). What is the significance of the butler and the cup? It is likely that Joseph during his stay in Egypt had learnt the art of divination from the Egyptians. After all, it was his divining cup which was found in Benjamin's sack: '*Is not this [the cup] it from which my lord drinketh, and whereby he indeed divineth?*' (44:5). Hertz³ describes the butler as "scribe of the sideboard," whose job was to taste food, but in a document from the time of Ramses III (12th Century BCE) we find

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butlers sitting as judges, that is, as diviners of truth.⁴ The cup in the dream may, in fact, represent a cup used for divination.

In the concurrent dream of the baker, there are three baskets of bread which are eaten by birds. As a result, the Pharaoh does not get any bread. In the butler's case, the cup and grape juice were required for hydromancy. In the baker's case, the bread and baked goods were required for aleuromancy. In each instance divination was the basic implication of the dream. It seems to me that the butler and baker had been imprisoned not because of plots to poison Pharaoh or, as the Midrash suggests, a fly in the wine or a pebble in the bread, but rather because of divinations they had made. It is likely that the baker's forecast was somewhat less sanguine and so resulted in a more extreme sentence.

PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS

In order to attempt to understand the possible sources of and influences on Joseph's ability to divine dreams, it might be helpful to consider two presumed factors: (1) the significant traumatic events in his life, and (2) a particular aspect of his character. The traumas include being cast into the pit without food while his brothers ate outside, and the advances of Potiphar's wife with the worrisome risk of losing his position and being imprisoned as a result of her accusation. The characterological factor involves a tendency to be a tattletale. We read that Joseph brought an evil report about the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah to their father, Jacob. Then when Joseph is brought to Egypt, is bought by Potiphar, finds favor and is appointed overseer of Potiphar's house, is this because he has reported on others? Finally, when he is put into prison and the keeper makes him a trusty over the other prisoners, is this because he will report on them? It seems that Joseph's propensity for currying favor by possibly being a tattletale may have enabled him to get on with such authority figures as his father, Potiphar, the keeper of the prison and Pharaoh.

From a psychoanalytic point of view and classical dream interpretation methodology⁵ the latent content of the butler's dream (like the concurrent baker's dream) contains a number of symbols which disguise the underlying sexual or other human urges or desires. Thus we find the female symbols of cup and baskets, and male symbols of birds, vines, the number three, and buds turning to blossoms and then producing grapes which are squeezed into the cup. (One

might add at this point that dreams involving human needs such as sex, hunger or thirst are not unusual during the deprivations of imprisonment. Here, however, we are more interested in how Joseph resonated with what he heard.)

In view of his traumatic encounter with Potiphar's wife, he may have unconsciously identified the dream symbols as cup = Potiphar's wife; vine and three branches = Joseph (and his possible repressed desires blossoming when aroused by Potiphar's wife), and Pharaoh = Potiphar. The dream ends with the cup being given back to Pharaoh (i.e., Potiphar's wife returns to Potiphar), thus relieving Joseph of the potential conflictual feelings aroused by the advances of Potiphar's wife. Does Joseph then see this as a reassuring and good outcome of the dream and so is able to predict a favorable outcome for the butler?

When the butler and the baker ask Joseph to interpret their dreams, he says to them: *'Do not interpretations belong to God?'* (40:8), implying that God who sent the dreams would give him the interpretations of them and thus establishing the supremacy of God's divinations over the various divinations and divining devices of the Pharaoh and the Egyptians.

The story of Joseph is the precursor of the account of the Exodus, which gave rise to the rite of the Passover Seder. On the Seder table, to this day, we find an often ornate cup containing wine from which we do not drink. This is the cup of Elijah the prophet, a judge who makes decisions and is the herald of the Messiah. Could this cup of wine also be a vestige of a divining cup into which we look in the reflective surface of the wine for a sign of the coming of the Messiah and final redemption?

NOTES

1. *Encyclopaedia of Superstitions, Folklore, and the Occult Sciences of the World*, Vol. 3, eds. C.L. Daniels and C.M. Stevans (Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1971), facsimile of :J.H. Yewdale and Sons Co., Chicago, 1903.
2. N.M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York: Schocken Books, 1966) p. 213.
3. J.H. Hertz, *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs*. 2nd ed. (London: Soncino Press, 1968) pp. 149-150.
4. Sarna, p. 218.
5. E.A. Gutheil, *The Handbook of Dream Analysis* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1951) pp. 135, 400, 413.