

MINISTRY OF NATIONAL EDUCATION  
“1 DECEMBER 1918” UNIVERSITY OF ALBA IULIA  
FACULTY OF ORTHODOX THEOLOGY

# **DOCTORAL THESIS**

## **SUMMARY**

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Alba Iulia

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PROPHETHOOD  
COMUNION AND COMUNICATION  
IN A RELIGIOUS COMPARATIVE  
ANALYSIS

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### Keywords

Divination, prophet, inspiration, ecstasy, magic, oracle, Old Testament, New Testament, Mani, Zoroaster, Mohammed, John the Baptist.

Divination, which is a way of exploring the unknown, has been practised worldwide for millennia. It involves complementary modes of cognition associated with representational and presentational symbolism. Wherever a theory of divination has been carefully elicited from practitioners of the art, there is a recognition of overlapping inductive, intuitive and interpretative narrative techniques and ways of knowing. In any society in which mechanical divinatory procedures are combined with visualisation or bursts of intuition, researchers should be able to empirically investigate this cognitive-embodied field of practical mastery. This investigation, in turn, ought to enable them to develop meditative empathy towards acts of divination as well as a sophisticated theory of divinatory practice.

Divination is the art or practice of discovering the personal, human significance of future or, more commonly, present or past events. A preoccupation with the import of events and specific methods to discover it are found in almost all cultures. The culture possibly least interested in divination is that of the traditional Australian Aborigines, yet even they hold divinatory inquests at funerals to discover the identity of the sorcerers responsible for the deaths.

Much of science itself has evolved from forms of divination and may be said to continue certain aspects of it. Astronomy, for example, is deeply indebted to ancient Near Eastern and Hellenistic astrological researches; mathematics and physics were advanced by Indian, Pythagorean, and Arabic divinatory cosmological speculations. Yet it would be incorrect to label divination a mere infantile science or pseudoscientific magic, for modern science and traditional divination are concerned with essentially distinct goals. This helps to explain the continuing fascination with divination even today on the part of well-educated people, notably in regard to astrology and spiritualism or necromancy. Divination involves communication with personally binding realities and seeks to discover the ought addressed specifically to the personal self or to a group. Science, however, if faithful to its own axioms, cannot enunciate any oughts because of its methodological, cognitive, and moral neutrality: it only offers hypotheses about reality and is concerned with general statistical regularities, not with unique persons or events. The existential situation and binding transcendental realities are beyond its concern. It may be argued that, precisely to the degree that such modern disciplines as psychotherapy and Marxist theory leave science behind, they take on divinatory (and therefore religious) functions, and represent modern contributions to the history of divination.

Anything can be used to divine the meaning of events. It is very common to assign spontaneous and arbitrary meaning to signs or omens when one is deeply anxious about the outcome of a personal situation. But the cultural form of divinatory methods and signs is seldom entirely random: each one expresses a specific logic. A full list of divinatory agents, therefore, would amount to a catalog of both nature and culture. The most common means used to obtain insight as follows: dreams (oneiromancy); hunches and presentiments; involuntary body actions (twinges, sneezes, etc.); ordeals; mediumistic possession; consulting the dead (necromancy); observing animal behavior (e.g., ornithoman-cy, interpreting the flight of birds); noting the form

of entrails of sacrificial victims (extispicy or haruspicy), or the victims' last movements before death; making mechanical manipulations with small objects such as dice, drawing long or short stalks from a bundle, and so on (sortilege); reading tea leaves (tasseography), or using playing cards (cartography), etc.

It would be more useful to establish what the indigenous theory of divination is, rather than to attempt to assay the states of mind actually experienced by diviners in different cultures and periods. The same conscious experience of heightened awareness can be interpreted in one culture as deep wisdom and in another as spirit possession. Under the influence of such interpretations, in fact, an individual diviner might permit himself to drift into a deeper mediumistic trance, or on the contrary strive toward a more intense lucidity. How a condition is interpreted influences the way it unfolds and realizes itself. Stressing the indigenous theory of divination also directs us to the cosmological assumptions and the attitudes toward the self that unite various seemingly unrelated methods. For example, cultures that stress mediumistic interpretations of trance usually also explain the casting of lots or the conformations of entrails in terms of spirit possession: divination, according to this overarching viewpoint, consists of the forms of communication developed by invisible beings to instruct humanity on the meaning of events. But cultures that have developed a concept of a decodable impersonal and elemental divine order would see the entrails or the sortilege in terms of microcosmic echoes of vaster harmonies. In general, then, we may distinguish three general types of divination, based on indigenous meanings: those based on the immediate context when interpreted by the spiritual insight of the diviner (intuitive divination); those based on spirit manipulation (possession divination); and those reflecting the operation of impersonal laws within a coherent divine order (wisdom divination).

Intuitive divination is perhaps the elementary form out of which, through various interpretations, the other two developed. It is seldom much stressed, although its distribution as hunches and presentiments is universal. The reliability of amateur intuitions is not usually considered very great, yet in many cultures extraordinary spiritual masters are often credited with this type of divinatory insight, which then has more prestige and credence than any other.

Possession divination. There are many varieties of possession divination. The most common is augury: divining the message sent by spiritual beings through nonhuman creatures or



things. The classic form of augury, much used in ancient Greece and Rome, consisted of attending to the flight of birds, which were thought to be seized by the gods or spirits and directed according to a code known to the diviner. But all other forms of interpreting supposedly objective spirit messages were also included in the Latin term *augurium*. Even when human agents are seized by the spiritual beings, this does not always imply trance: a popular form of divination in ancient Near Eastern, medieval European, and even modern societies such as Mexico, is to pose a question and then attend to the first chance words one overhears from passing strangers on the street. Another almost universal method whereby spirits or divinities communicate with a person is to induce twitches or sudden pains in the body. Quite explicit meanings can be derived from this, depending on the part of the body affected and other indications, and of course varying according to the specific cultural context. The divinatory interpretation of dreams is another very widely used method; here manipulation by spiritual beings begins to require outright alteration of consciousness, although only when the ego has already dimmed its awareness.

Full divinatory possession of human beings may be of several theoretical forms: prophetic inspiration, shamanistic ecstasy, mystical illuminations and visions, and mediumistic or oracular trance. They differ according to the degree of ego awareness and lucidity, awareness of the ordinary world, and the theoretical recipient of the divinatory message. The prophets of the Bible seem to retain a lucid sense of themselves and the world as they exhort their audience, although they are gripped by an overmastering sense of the integral meaning of events as illuminated by God's presence. The recipient of this revelation of temporal meaning is both the prophet and the human community. In shamanistic trance the struggle between ego awareness and the spirits is often portrayed as being so intense that it forces a displacement of the shaman from this world: the shaman may fly far away to interrogate the spirits or God, and may have to struggle with bad spirits and force them to confess their role in human events. As recipient of the divinatory communications, the shaman may later report on his conversations to an assembled audience, or may permit the audience to eavesdrop on the actual interviews or even to be directly addressed by the spirits through his mouth, but in any case he remains self-possessed and afterward can recall everything that occurred. For the mystical visionary, on the other hand, the entire ordinary world is eclipsed by the ecstatic revelations, and the mystic is the sole direct recipient of the communications. The oracular medium, however, loses all awareness, it is said, and therefore

often remains ignorant of the message that is communicated directly from the spiritual being to the audience.

The dependency in particular cultures or subgroups of a culture on "objective" augury methods, or on methods that progressively encroach on or even obliterate ego awareness, suggest differing views of the self, society, and the world. Satisfactory cross-cultural studies of divinatory theories from this point of view have not yet been made, but some points may be tentatively suggested. All kinds of possession divination assume a mysterious, arbitrary world governed by personal powers who are involved with a vulnerable humanity. The human self must learn how to submit to or cajole these capricious and often dangerous spirits. However, in loosely organized, relatively egalitarian societies with an emphasis on personal initiative, we can expect more confidence in the ability of the human ego to sustain its integrity when faced with the spiritual powers. This is what we find, for example, in circumpolar and related cultures in Europe, Siberia, and North America. Studies show that hunting-fishing cultures generally depend on short-term risks and personal initiative, so that individuals are trained from childhood to be self-reliant and self-sufficient: each adult can master all the cultural skills necessary to survive, and ego alertness is highly valued. In such societies mediumistic divination is not found; instead, individuals possess an encyclopedic knowledge of portents, and of methods for obtaining auguries of the capricious spirits' intentions. The autonomous ego can negotiate its way through a mysterious cosmos, while the shaman, able to retain ego awareness and control even in the most intimate relationship with the spirits, is the group guide.

It is perhaps inevitable that, at the center of social power, attempts are made in such cultures to master all that can be known of the arbitrary will of the gods. The court diviners frequently compile mountainous records of precedents of monster births or other omens, the results of centuries of haruspicy, and so forth, as in Babylonia, where we see the fruit of intense efforts to maintain clarity as far as is possible. The Babylonian priests noted every heavenly sign over many centuries, identifying each celestial body with a god. But no system emerged from this, for the classical Babylonian world-view was polytheistic and predicated on power, passion, and personal whims of the divinities. Yet the result was a hierarchy of divination methods: present at the courts were alert, learned priests who interpreted the will of the gods in elaborate

augury ceremonials, while among the lower classes mediumism and a much more random and confused use of omens indicated the insecurity of ego control.

When the entire social structure and even the cosmos is felt to be inauthentic, as in late antiquity, mediumistic ecstasy may tend to apocalyptic predictions of the end of the age: the muted protest becomes radical and explicit. Or mystical visions may teach the negation of the entire world. In such cases, divination merges with salvation cults.

Wisdom divination. The elaboration of divination systems based on a unified field of impersonal and universal processes that can be studied, harmonized with, and above all internalized by nonecstatic sages, is an important but rare development in the history of religion. It is most often found in complex civilizations that have been defeated by equally powerful cultures and therefore must integrate their own indigenous views with other perspectives. Wisdom divination is a syncretistic movement beyond specific cults, approaching the elemental ground from which all personal spirits and cultic gods as well as cultural groups arise. But the speculative effort must usually begin in court and priestly circles, for it depends on a cumulative effort of generations and a specialized learning of which, in most early civilizations, only centralized priesthoods are capable. Only after literacy and education become general can the sagelike diviner detach himself from court circles and apply himself to individual and non-political concerns.

In any case, divination is fundamentally directed by religious, not scientific, concerns. Its basic curiosity is not about how the world is constructed apart from the pulsing heart of the observer, but about the existential meaning of particular human lives. Above all, divination illuminates suffering and alleviates doubt. It restores value and significance to lives in crisis. But to achieve this, all systems of divination demand the submission of the inquirer to transcendental realities, whether these be divine persons (possession divination) or the underlying divine order (wisdom divination). The inquirer is made to achieve spiritual distance from the self and the immediate crisis.

All this expresses a deeper truth, that divination requires the radical submission of the diviner and indeed the client to the transcendental sources of truth, before their lives can be transformed and set straight, before they can be reincorporated harmoniously into the world. In short,

divinatory rites follow the pattern of all rites of passage. The client, having learned in the course of the rite to offer up to the divine all egocentric resistance, ends the session reoriented to the world and able to take positive and confident action in it.

Wisdom divination also often works in this way: by freeing the inquirer from customary ways of thought, it frequently reveals fresh insight into problems. The momentum of wisdom divination, in short, is to internalize the basic attitude operating in all divination; it does this by rendering the structures of the transcendent into a form in which they can be grasped consciously and autonomously. The very vagueness of the answers in most forms of wisdom divination aid in this personal appropriation, making the client participate in shaping meaning out of the session.

The term prophecy refers to a wide range of religious phenomena that have been manifested from ancient to modern times. The Greek term *prophetes* is the etymological ancestor of the English word prophet, and it has cognates in most European languages. The indigenous Greek *prophetees* was a cultic functionary who spoke for a god; that is, the *prophetes* delivered divine messages in association with a sanctuary where the god had made its presence known. However, the word *prophetes* influenced European languages primarily because early Jewish and Christian writers used the term in translations of the Hebrew Bible and in the New Testament to refer to religious specialists in Israelite, Jewish, and Christian traditions. Today comparativists use prophecy to describe religious phenomena in various contexts on analogy with the activity of ancient Hebrew prophets and other figures who had a similarly pivotal role in founding world religions in Southwest Asia.

In antiquity it was commonly believed that gods controlled events in the world and made their intentions known to human beings in various ways. The earliest written records tell of religious functionaries whose responsibility it was to interpret signs or deliver messages from the gods in order to supply information useful in the conduct of human affairs. In early tribal societies the clan leader often carried out these duties, or perhaps some other individual who used a variety of divinatory and visionary techniques to gain access to special knowledge about divine intentions. These activities usually included intercessory functions, whereby the leader or prophet petitioned spirits or a god or gods for special favors for their group.

However, this picture of such figures is only inferential. They were active in nonliterate societies that left no linguistic records of themselves except by the transmission of oral traditions that eventually were written down by later, literate generations. The groups that did leave written records had more complex forms of religious and political organization, suggesting that adepts in religious knowledge had correspondingly more specialized functions. From the records of ancient cultures in Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean region there is knowledge of a large number of religious specialists who sought out and interpreted messages from the gods. Their access to the world of the gods came through two different means. In the first place, there were diviners who practiced a variety of studied techniques to interpret symbolic messages in the natural world. Some techniques were manipulative (such as the casting of lots, the incubation of dreams, and the examination of the entrails of sacrificial animals); others were more purely observational (such as the interpretation of animal movement and the cataloguing of auspicious, often horrible, events). Second, the gods were also believed to communicate their will through oracles, that is, in human language through the mouth of an inspired person. The behavior of these divine spokesmen is often thought to have been ecstatic, frenzied, or abnormal in some way, which reflected their possession by the deity (and the absence of personal ego) at the time of transmission. Some groups used divination to test the accuracy of oral prophecies (e.g., prophecies at Mari), while others gave priority to oral prophecy, with only marginal appeal to divination (e.g., in Israelite religion).

Within general categories the nature and function of divine intermediation was diverse. Oracles and signs could appear without request; but more commonly, especially in the Greco-Roman world, cultic officials provided answers to specific questions asked to the sanctuary's god. Ecstatic oracular behavior seems to have been the most common form of intermediation among figures not connected with recognized sanctuaries (e.g., the Akkadian *muhhu*), but it was also acceptable among those who did have such official legitimacy (e.g., the Akkadian *apilu* and various Greek mantic figures).

The terminology applied to intermediaries is often ambiguous or vague, as with the Greek term *prophetes*, which at times denotes the oracular mouthpiece for divine speech and at others refers to the official interpreter of divinatory signs within a sanctuary. The diversity is immense. But it is clear from the complexity that the need for knowledge about divine activity was

perceived at various social levels; ancient societies often maintained a large and varied staff of religious functionaries to keep such knowledge alive.

The goal of my work is to present this phenomenon in its complexity. I will present several profetic traditions in order to present the superiority of biblical profecy. Also I intend to maintain an objective approach. This subject is actual, it can be obsered that prophetic movements are always reinventing themselves, on a ancient pattern. This is why it is necessary to have a correct view on the prophetic and divinatory movements.

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