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 Bi 301: The Pentateuch
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Holy Intel:
 Authorized Revelation in the Pentateuch

The narrative of the Pentateuch—once beyond the primeval history of Genesis 1-11—is largely the story of the chosen children of Abraham, and later the children of Israel in particular, juxtaposed against the wider pagan world that does not know their Creator and that practices false religion (Deut. 32:8-9). This chosen people of God was ultimately meant to bless these lost nations (Gen 12:3), and this was to be accomplished by a “centripetal” model of attraction: The holiness, uniqueness, and devotion of the people of God would effect material prosperity and miraculous power that would provoke foreign nations to recognize the true authority of Yahweh as the one true God over against their own national deities (Deut. 4:6-8; cf. Ex 12:12, Lev. 26:45).¹ One of the key aspects of Israel’s calling in this regard was their unique (and often strict) method of receiving supernatural revelation.

In the surrounding cultures throughout the Ancient Near East, particularly in Mesopotamia and Canaan, all sorts of mantic practices were employed to obtain occult knowledge. Interpretations of omens and other divinatory practices were accompanied by the even more nefarious practice of necromancy—consulting with dead spirits for the purposes of obtaining secret knowledge.² Johnston notes the “growing extrabiblical evidence that among Israel’s

¹ I owe this concept of a “centripetal” model of converting the nations in the OT (as compared with the “centrifugal” model of the NT) to Dr. Stephen Dempster.

² Eugene H. Merrill (*Deuteronomy*, vol. 4, The New American Commentary [Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994], 271–272.) explains: “The ‘medium’ (*šō’el ’ôb*, ‘asker of the pit’) was a necromancer, one who sought to communicate with the dead and thereby gain secret information.”

neighbors the dead were revered, consulted and appeased” in addition to the fact that “these practices were a constant temptation to Israel.”³

Israel, however, was unambiguously prohibited from engaging in such practices (Deut. 18:14). Yahweh considered these methods of seeking revelation to be an abomination (*tô ‘ēbâ*), for He alone was to be their source of such knowledge.⁴ Other “short cuts” to supernatural revelation were considered as nothing less than infidelity to Israel’s covenantal relationship status with their God. This is exemplified most clearly in the biblical comparison between seeking after mediums and the profane act of prostitution (Lev. 20:6).

It would be natural for the reader to ask why the prohibitions against this sort of activity were so strong, even to the point of meriting the death penalty (Ex. 22:18; Lev. 20:27). What made these rites of mantic divination so tempting for the Israelites? The answer must lie in the effective nature of these occult means of revelation. If, as some scholars suggest, these were always superstitious or deceptive rites devoid of real knowledge,⁵ the poor utility of such practices might naturally confine them to the fringes of society. The emphatic injunctions against these activities, however, point to a real power inherent within them. As Heiser notes, “The reason [for the prohibitions] was not that it couldn’t be done; it could. Rather, God insisted that he be the lone source of information from the spiritual world for his people.”⁶ As the often malcontented Israelites cooled in their devotion to Yahweh, they might have easily been tempted

³ P. S. Johnston, “Life, Disease and Death,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 536.

⁴ Cf. Isa. 8:20, which declares “To the teaching and the testimony!” immediately after condemning the mediums and necromancers.

⁵ E.g., Mark F. Rooker (*Leviticus*, vol. 3A, The New American Commentary [Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000], 263.), who writes: “The word ‘medium’ (*’ōbōt*) is used of the pit from which the spirits are called up, the spirit of the dead, or as here the necromancer. The Septuagint nearly always translates *’ōb* with the Greek word *eggastrimuthos*, ‘ventriloquist.’ This translation may indicate a deception used on the part of the necromancer to deceive others into thinking he was actually calling up the dead.”

⁶ Michael S. Heiser, *The Bible Unfiltered: Approaching Scripture on Its Own Terms* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2017), 102.

to circumvent traditional channels of revelation and sought after mediums to satisfy their spiritual lusts. These were *real* spiritual powers that could be “harnessed” by willing individuals.⁷ These practices brought about *unholy* intel, but intel nonetheless.

In contrasting the revelational methods of Yahweh with those of pagan nations, it must not be missed that some of the *media* that Yahweh employs to communicate overlap with those of pagan practice. In the Pentateuch alone, God speaks through dreams (Gen. 20:3, 6; 31:11, 24; 37:5ff.; 40:5ff.; Num. 12:6), objects of divination (Ex. 20:30; Lev. 16:8; Num. 27:21; arguably Gen. 44:5, 15⁸), and theophanies (Gen. 18; Ex. 3).⁹ This gestures towards the idea that the *method* of descrying supernatural knowledge is not as important as the *source* from which one seeks such knowledge. O’Mathúna sees the prime distinction in who has the “locus of control” in revelation: Occult divination has human beings in control, whereas God himself abets legitimate transmissions of revelation.¹⁰

Despite this array of communication methods, the eternal Law of Yahweh¹¹ and the authority of His appointed Prophet are bestowed with a status of primacy in God’s means of revelation to His people. This theme is not obvious at first, as it is progressively developed throughout the

⁷ D. P. O’Mathúna, “Divination, Magic,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, 196.

⁸ “Twice, Joseph is purported to have the ability of practicing divination using a cup. The Hebrew word used here for divination (*nachash*) is the same word used in prohibitions against sorcery: ‘There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, anyone who practices divination or tells fortunes or interprets omens (*menachesh*), or a sorcerer or a charmer or a medium or a necromancer or one who inquires of the dead, for whoever does these things is an abomination to the LORD’ (Deut 18:10-12; cf. Lev 19:26) and is elsewhere listed among various occult practices (Num 23:23; 2 Kgs 17:17, 21:6; 2 Chr 33:6). The word is similar to the Hebrew word for serpent (Gen 3:1-4; Num 21:7) and the word ‘whisper’ and ‘charm’ (*lachash*), likely referring to an incantation. The technical word used for Joseph’s form of divination is ‘screaming,’ a catchall term for divination by peering into crystals, mirrors, or other reflective surfaces.” (Merrill G. Greene, *Drunk in the Spirit: What the Bible Says about Trance, Ecstasy, and God’s Supernatural Love* [unpublished manuscript, draft Oct 11, 2022], 39.)

⁹ Although it is not a direct correlation, this manifestation of Yahweh may be juxtaposed with the apparitions generated by spiritists in the pagan world.

¹⁰ O’Mathúna, “Divination, Magic,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, 195.

¹¹ The designation “eternal” is used to distinguish the Law of Yahweh with national or universal binding authority from the acute instructions of Yahweh to individuals which are not of national or universal binding authority (e.g., Gen 20:7; 31:24).

accounts of the Pentateuch. As early as the primeval narrative, a form of the Law of Yahweh, though not yet in written form, makes an appearance immediately after the Flood, with the injunction against and penalty for murder (Gen. 9:6). Likewise, the incipient theme of an authoritative Prophet speaking for Yahweh can be discerned in the curses and blessings expressed by the patriarchs Noah (Gen. 9:25-27), Isaac (Gen. 27:27-29, 39-40), and Jacob (Gen. 49:2-27).

It is in Exodus, however, where these twin themes come to a head. Moses, appointed directly by Yahweh (Ex. 3:10), is made to be “as God” to his spokesman Aaron (Ex. 4:16) and “like God” to the antagonist Pharaoh (Ex. 7:1). His status of Prophet *par excellence* meant that to speak against him was “was tantamount to speaking against God himself.”¹² In parallel fashion, the Law of Yahweh proper emerges in Exodus upon the liberation of the people of Israel from their captors (Ex. 20). Beginning with the Decalogue and elaborated upon throughout the rest of the Pentateuch, the Law given to Israel through the hands of Moses becomes the constitution of the national people of God as they begin their journey toward the Promised Land. This *Torah* is the ultimate reference point of revelation for faithful Israelites who seek to know and obey God’s will, as the Psalmist so often reminds us.

Thus we see, amid the miscellaneous exceptions, that the Law and the Prophet comprise Yahweh’s primary means of revelation to His people in the Pentateuch. To procure knowledge from these sources is to employ “sanctioned means,” in contrast to the “unsanctioned means” employed by Israel’s pagan neighbors. By remaining on this revelational “straight and narrow” and avoiding the utilitarian approach of occult divination, Israel was to experience Yahweh’s blessing and further its mission of attracting its neighbors to the worship of the one true God.

¹² R. Dennis Cole, *Numbers*, vol. 3B, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 206.