

OLD TESTAMENT LOT-CASTING: DIVINATION OR PROVIDENCE?

by
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In Deuteronomy 18:9–14, Yahweh denies Israel the use of divination techniques borrowed from the surrounding nations: “Let no one be found among you who...practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the LORD.”² Unlike the gods of the nations, Yahweh refused to submit to divination by the manipulative whimsy of his creatures; instead, Yahweh himself would determine when and to whom he would reveal his mind, chiefly through prophets of his own choosing (so vv. 15–22).

Despite this prohibition of divination, the balance of the OT divulges that God’s people did, on multiple occasions, inquire of God to discern his mind or purposes. Most famously, the theocratic head had at his disposal the Urim and Thummim, a unique mechanism provided by God himself (and notably *not* borrowed from the nations) by which the king could “inquire of the Lord” for guidance (Exod 28:30; Lev 8:8; Num 27:21). The Urim was not properly a *means* of divination, but a vehicle for formally requesting revelation (a request that God could ignore—1 Sam 28:6); nonetheless, it represented an extraordinary means of theocratic inquiry that was not shared by the general population.³ Later in the OT, use of this mysterious medium apparently went into decline and the kings began to seek the mind of

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²Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture citations in this article are taken from the NIV, 1984 ed.

³I have used “extraordinary means of theocratic inquiry” deliberately, eschewing the designation *sacred lot* that Charles Perry uses to distinguish use of the Urim from the *general lot*, or ordinary lot-casting (“The Theory and Practice of Lot-Casting in Ancient Near Eastern Countries and Israel” [Th.M. thesis, Grace Theological Seminary, 1975], p. 28). I am not comfortable with the use of *sacred lot* for the Urim because it assumes that the use of the Urim is an instance of lot-casting. This assumption, while held by many, is likely incorrect. Unlike lots, the Urim might give an extremely complex answer (2 Sam 5:19, 23–24) or no answer at all (1 Sam 28:6); Further, the curious designation “Urim” (אֲוִרִים—“lights”) at least suggests that the mechanism may have involved something other than ordinary lot media (see esp. Cornelius Van Dam, *The Urim and Thummim: A Means of Revelation in Ancient Israel* [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997], ch. 10).

God by means of court “seers” (רֹאִים or חֹזִים—see, e.g., 2 Sam 24:11; 1 Chron 25:25; 2 Chron 35:15).⁴ Clearly, the king had special access to revelation that was not forbidden by the general ban on divination in Deuteronomy 18.

At issue in this article, however, is the more general practice of lot-casting, a procedure available not merely to kings, but to anyone. This practice, which was widespread among Israel’s neighbors, appears many times in the OT, and nearly always without censure. Terms from the *lot* word group (גֵּרַל) appear some 77 times in the OT and, besides these, the practice is implied on several other occasions (though the number and identity of the latter is disputed). Further, lot-casting is enthusiastically endorsed in Proverbs for resolving disputes (18:18) and for receiving verdicts that are “from the Lord” (16:33). What are we to make of this commendation of casting lots in view of Deuteronomy 18?

The Options

The apparent incongruity of widespread lot-casting in the face of Deuteronomy 18 has raised relatively few alarms. Some of this ambivalence is to be expected, as the bulk of serious literature on the topic of lots comes to us from the pens of scholars unconcerned about discrepancies in the OT Scriptures—we should anticipate such disparities, these contend, in view of the borrowed and evolving nature of Israel’s religion. Further, the deuteronomic prohibitions offer little tension to critical scholars who regard such prohibitions as late developments recorded long after most instances of biblical lot-casting had already occurred.⁵ But for those of us who affirm (1) that the Bible is inerrant, (2) that the book of Deuteronomy is of Mosaic origin, and (3) that Israel’s religion is a product of revelation rather than evolution, this problem cannot be so easily brushed aside. In our conservative circles three major theories of harmonization emerge. To these I will add a fourth, which the rest of this article will seek to defend.

⁴The designation *seer* is often used in a general sense as a simple synonym for *prophet* (so 1 Sam 9:9); however, it seems that in these four cases, at least, the seers in question had an exclusive function—they were the *king’s* seers.

⁵Julius Wellhausen, for instance, relegated the Urim and Thummim to an earlier period of Israel’s history, arguing that by the time the Deuteronomist made his editorial contributions, the Torah had “freed itself, in the process of time, following the general mental movement, from such heathenish media and vehicles” (*Prolegomena to the History of Israel*, trans. J. Sutherland Black and Allan Menzies [Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1885], pp. 394–95). For two of many modern examples that follow this sentiment see Solomon A. Nigosian, “Anti-Divinatorial Statements in Biblical Codes,” *Theological Review* 18 (1997): 24–28; and Frederick H. Cryer, *Divination in Ancient Israel and Its Near Eastern Environment*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 142 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), pp. 231–32.

*Lot-Casting as a General Exception to the
Prohibition Against Divination*

The first and simplest proposal is that all lot-divination, just as inquiry via the Urim, is excepted from the Deuteronomy 18 prohibition.⁶ In favor of this proposal is the fact that Moses never *specifically* denounced lots, but rather other kinds of divination: belomancy,⁷ sorcery, interpretation of various omens, witchcraft, necromancy, and the like.⁸ Since God is clearly favorable toward the use of lots elsewhere, Moses must have excluded at least this one divination technique from his general prohibition. The practice of lot-casting, thus, emerges as something of an “everyman’s Urim”—a variation of the royal divination method made available for common use.

The tension with this proposal is threefold. First, it is lexically reductionist. Most commentators recognize that the multiplication of terms for divination in Deuteronomy 18:10–12 is not a restrictive device (limiting the prohibition to, say, seven or eight specific kinds of divination), but an expansive device that connotes comprehensiveness: *every* kind of divination practiced by Israel’s neighbors was forbidden. The phrase “practices divination” (מִקְדָּשִׁים וְעִמֵּי) especially, while of etymologically narrow origin, seems to function as an “umbrella term” under which lot-casting is to be subsumed.⁹ Second, while the Urim plausibly escapes the Deuteronomy 18 prohibition because it is not one of the “detestable ways of the nations,” the same cannot be said of lot-casting—variations of lot-casting are common to nearly every known ANE culture. Third and most important, however, is the fact that a general exception to Deuteronomy 18:9–13 guts the chapter of its central message. Since (1) God’s mind cannot be known by divination (vv. 9–14), and (2) God has agreed not to communicate his will privately to individual Israelites (v. 16, cf. 5:23–28), God necessarily had to provide a public and representative means of revealing himself,

⁶So *ISBE*, rev. ed., s.v. “Lots,” by David E. Aune, 2:173; Pekka M. A. Pitkänen, *Joshua*, AOTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), pp. 178, 277–78.

⁷The phrase for divination used in Deut 18:10 (מִקְדָּשִׁים וְעִמֵּי), reduced to its etymologically most narrow referent, probably refers to divination by means of headless arrows or *belomancy* (so Ezek 21:21; BDB, p. 890; *HALOT*, 2:1115; also and esp. Ann Jeffers, *Magic and Divination in Ancient Palestine and Syria*, *Studies in the History and Culture of the Ancient Near East* 8 [Leiden: Brill, 1996], p. 96).

⁸W. Robertson Smith identifies eight distinct practices in the passage, three involving divination, two involving magic, and three involving consultation with the world of spirits (“On the Forms of Divination and Magic Enumerated in Deut. XVIII. 10, 11,” in 2 parts, *Journal of Philology* 13 [1885]: 273–87; 14 [1886]: 113–28). Smith’s taxonomy was adopted by S. Driver (*Deuteronomy*, 3rd ed., ICC [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1902], p. 223) and is still widely recognized today.

⁹So McConville, *Deuteronomy*, pp. 300–301; Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), p. 260; cf. also *HALOT*, 2:1115–16. Of particular interest in this regard is the positive use of עִמֵּי in Proverbs 16:10 (for a discussion of which see Van Dam, *Urim and Thummim*, pp. 115–16).

namely, the prophetic office (vv. 15–22). Now if, as this first proposal suggests, God’s mind *is* subject to widespread private divination, by any one and at any time, through a common ANE divining technique, then the stated reason for the prophetic office loses all of its force.

*Lot-Casting as a Restricted Exception to the
Prohibition Against Divination*

Similar to the first proposal, but with more controls, is a proposal set forth by Eugene Merrill. He argues that while lot-casting functions as a divinely approved means of supplying “infallible revelation,” it does so only when “properly administered” in “special and limited situations.”¹⁰ This restriction, he argues, addresses the “obviously rather *ad hoc*” nature of lots and gives priority to the “unambiguous” revelation supplied through the prophets.¹¹ Bruce Waltke also seems to fit into this general category, restricting the divinatory use of lots to cases (1) prior to the special coming of the Spirit in the book of Acts and especially the completion of the canon,¹² (2) in which lots were cast “in the presence of the Lord,”¹³ (3) after “other forms of wisdom had failed.”¹⁴

This proposal represents a marked advance on the first proposal, sharply limiting the divinatory use of lots. Its weakness is its arbitrariness. Merrill offers no details concerning the “special and limited situations” or the “proper administration” that render legitimate a given instance of lot-casting. And while Waltke proposes such details, his proposed conditions seem a bit contrived, and clear evidence is not forthcoming that these conditions were met on many of the lot-casting occasions scattered throughout the OT. We might further add that the endorsement of lots in Proverbs 16:33 and 18:18 seems to broker no conditions on the use of lots—these texts seem rather to offer a blanket endorsement to an everyday custom.

¹⁰Eugene H. Merrill, *Everlasting Dominion: A Theology of the Old Testament* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), p. 100.

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²*Finding the Will of God: A Pagan Notion?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 48. Interestingly, Waltke implies that the early church’s use of lots to choose Matthias to replace Judas (Acts 1:24–26) was illegitimate. Richard Hess likewise discounts lot-casting for Christians, arguing that lots were acceptable for Joshua only because God had specifically ordered him to use lots (*Joshua*, TOTC [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996], p. 238).

¹³Waltke, *Finding the Will of God*, p. 47. So, for instance, Josh 18:6, 10; 19:51. While Waltke does not clearly define his terms, it is apparent that this *coram deo* factor is what distinguishes Waltke’s “sacred” lot from the ordinary practice of lot-casting. If this is the case, he is voicing agreement with Johannes Lindblom, who explicitly uses this factor to differentiate between the “sacral” lot, used for divination, and the “everyday custom” of lot-casting, which might have had a lesser purpose (“Lot-Casting in the Old Testament,” *Vetus Testamentum* 12 [April 1962]: 169).

¹⁴Waltke, *Finding the Will of God*, p. 48.

*Lot-Casting as a Request for Revelation
That Is Less Than Divination*

A third proposal is that inquiry via lot-casting is not to be understood as true divination. Perry, for instance, argues that in order for a practice to be properly labeled *divination*, it must involve coercion of the deity and employ complex procedures that were the exclusive purview of professional diviners. Such complexities, he alleges, are intrinsic etymologically in the terms used in Deuteronomy 18 (קסם and נחש). God respects, however, the simple, non-coercive requests made by the common man. Such requests use terms such as בקר, בקש, and דרש, which capture the idea of “seeking” or “inquiring.”¹⁵ Since lot-casting fits in the latter category, it is not properly to be regarded as divination, and is for this reason an acceptable practice.

While laudable, again, for its concern for harmonization, this third proposal suffers from at least two tensions. First, it fails to recognize that biblical lot-casting by its very nature involves more than simple inquiry. Unlike the Urim, which might give no answer (1 Sam 14:36–37; 28:6), lot-casting of necessity gave an answer: an answer was inseparable from the inquiry.¹⁶ And the answer is, on “every” occasion, “from the Lord” (Prov 16:33). Second, this proposal makes much of decontextualized etymologies and raw lexical data to establish meaning, but minimizes the all-important factor of context.¹⁷ The point in vv. 9–14 is not to tease out complex and thus illegitimate methods of eliciting secret knowledge from God and contrast these with simple and thus legitimate means of eliciting secret knowledge from God. The point is to affirm that *all* methods used by God’s creatures to induce their Creator to divulge secret data are illegitimate: God is not known by discursive means but by revelation, and it by his prerogative alone

¹⁵Perry, “Theory and Practice of Lot-Casting,” pp. 54–57.

¹⁶Just as a coin flip *must* yield an answer of heads or tails and the roll of two dice *must* yield a number between 2 and 12, so also the lot, once cast, *must* yield an answer. See below under the mechanics of lot-casting.

¹⁷A stark example of dubious appeal to etymology is found in Perry’s observations concerning the two main verbs for divination used in Deut 18:10, קסם and נחש. Perry notes first that קסם (NIV “practice divination”) comes from a root that means “divide” (BDB, p. 890), and as such must point to the illegitimate practice of cutting animal entrails. In truth, BDB explains that the “division” in view is a reference to apportionment by lot, probably using headless arrows (ibid., so Jeffers). Even more fantastically, Perry goes on to note that the verb נחש (NIV “interpret omens”) shares the same root as the term for *serpent*, and must for this reason point to an illegitimate form of inquiry. In this case he makes no appeal to his copy of BDB, which recognizes no connection between the terms and suggests that the verb in Deut 18:10 points to the practice of hydromancy (so, apparently, Gen 44:5, 15; also *HALOT*, 1:690–91). Perry does admit that “the background of the נחש is not completely known,” but still concludes, based on lexical association, that the term is “considered to be a pagan and illegitimate method of receiving revelation” (“Theory and Practice of Lot-Casting,” p. 56).

that humans have the privilege of knowing anything. And this is the reason, the passage continues, that the prophetic office was necessary.¹⁸

*Lot-Casting as a Prudent Measure
That Is Other Than Divination*

It is the thesis and contention of this article that a fourth option exists—one that satisfies the central concern of Deuteronomy 18, but still vindicates lot-casting in the spirit of Proverbs 18:18. In brief, this article argues that the recommendation of lot-casting in the OT Scriptures is not as a normative means for extracting secret knowledge from the mind of God (i.e., divination) but rather as a prudent means of avoiding conflict and strife when making difficult decisions.

The Mechanics of Lot-Casting

The ancient practice of divination has a long and colorful history. Scores of techniques were used, ranging from consultation with the dead (necromancy) and spirits (sorcery), to “seeing” answers in reflective media (scrying or hydromancy), to close examination of dissected animals (augury, haruspicy, and esp. hepatoscopy), and reading the stars (astrology or astromancy).¹⁹ Divination by lot-casting is part of the broad category of *kleromancy*, or divination through the random tossing of various marked objects, such as pebbles, beans, shards of pottery, sticks, bones, or arrows.²⁰ The term *psephomancy* is more precise still, focusing on the interpretation of randomly tossed marked stones (ψηφοι), an idea suggested by the use of the Hebrew גִּזְרֵי אֲבִיבִים, or *stone*.²¹

The precise procedure for biblical lot-casting is not clear, and may not have been uniform. While some have suggested that lots may at times have been “drawn” from some sort of receptacle,²² Anne Marie Kitz has convincingly argued that the Hebrew verbs employed with גִּזְרֵי (e.g., יָרָא, שָׁלַךְ, יָדָד, נָתַן, נָפַל, and יָצָא) uniformly indicate the “tossing” or “dropping” of small objects that in turn were described as “falling” or “coming forth.”²³ Beyond this, however, few procedural

¹⁸See esp. Van Dam, *Urim and Thummim*, pp. 114–26.

¹⁹A nearly exhaustive list of such techniques, ancient and modern, can be found at <http://dewarlorx.com/divination.htm>.

²⁰See BDAG, p. 548 for the def. of the Greek κλήρος, from which the term *kleromancy* derives.

²¹So BDB, p. 174; *HALOT*, p. 485.

²²Otto Eissfeldt, “Wahrsagung im Alten Testament,” in *La Divination en Mesopotamie ancienne et dans les régions voisines*, ed. F. Wendel et al., XIVe rencontre assyriologique internationale 1965 (Paris: Presse universitaires de France, 1966), p. 142; and esp. Lindblom, “Lot-Casting in the Old Testament,” p. 169.

²³“The Hebrew Terminology of Lot Casting and Its Ancient Near Eastern Context,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 62 (April 2000): 207–14.

details emerge from the biblical text. Options arise, however, from discoveries made among Israel's ancient contemporaries. Archaeologists have found a variety of "official" lot devices, including lot "bottles" (pieces of pottery with a narrow neck) and tumblers, each fitted with a small hole, that would be shaken until a single marked stone emerged, then another, and another, such that the persons or items represented by each stone were selected in order.²⁴ In casual contexts any container—a cup, a bowl, or even a helmet—might be used to scramble the stones, which were then tossed out.²⁵ Sometimes, instead of tossing out stones one by one, the caster would throw out all the stones simultaneously and the stone or stones that landed closest to a predetermined object (often an idol) were selected.²⁶ Still other ancients used cubes remarkably similar in marking to modern dice.²⁷ The "rules" of the toss, such as they were, were predetermined by the participants, but were not uniform from culture to culture. Biblical lot-casting may have involved any of these procedures or none of them. Ultimately, this decision is ancillary to this article; what is more critical is the intended *purpose* of biblical lot-casting.

The Purposes of Biblical Lot-Casting

That lot-casting was used extensively in the ANE as a means of divination cannot be contested. That the casting of lots was *always* connected with divination (i.e., discovering the mind or will of God or the gods), however, is not so clear. W. Dommershausen argues that lot-casting "*primarily* had the character of chance and luck, even if sometimes it was believed that God was the one who made the decision in a particular case."²⁸ Instead of using lots as formal means of divination, he explains, "in everyday life, people frequently used the lot, especially if they wanted to make an impartial decision."²⁹ George Dales suggests that lots also functioned as "gaming pieces" used in

²⁴William Hallo, "The First Purim," *Biblical Archaeologist* 46 (Winter 1963): 21.

²⁵A helmet was used in Homer's *Iliad* (3.316; 7.176; 23.862). In Psalm 16:5, David's "cup" (כוס), a term used in connection with his "lot" and "portion," may reference the lot receptacle. Hallo suggests that the alternate term for lot used in Esther (פּוּר) derives from a root meaning "bowl" or "platter," and refers to the receptacle used ("The First Purim," p. 21).

²⁶Hallo, "The First Purim," p. 21.

²⁷Hallo offers photographs of several of these in *ibid.*, pp. 20, 22. Other key treatments of the use of dice include George F. Dales, "Of Dice and Men," in *Essays in Memory of E. A. Speiser* (New Haven, CT: American Oriental Society, 1968), pp. 14–23; Fritz Graf, "Rolling the Dice for an Answer," in *Mantikê: Studies in Ancient Divination*, ed. Sarah Iles Johnson and Peter T. Struck, Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 155 (Leiden: Brill, 2005), pp. 51–97.

²⁸*TDOT*, s.v. "גּוּרָל, goral," 2:451, emphasis added.

²⁹*Ibid.* This is paralleled today, perhaps, in the practice of flipping coins or resorting to "rock-paper-scissors" to make (usually trivial) decisions.

“sportive lightheartedness.”³⁰ Lottery systems were also used in martial settings where nepotism and partiality might otherwise reign (e.g., conscription for military service; dividing spoils of war, etc.).³¹ The quest for impartiality also came to dominate the ancient practice of using lots to divide property and assign work responsibilities. While in some cases the ancients were making conscious appeal for the gods to render a decision, in many cases, the emphasis was on who was *not* making the decision: the verdict was *not* being handed down by corrupt, biased, human bullies; instead, the verdict was being left to “chance.” Admittedly, the premodern culture of the ANE rendered people more disposed to see the gods at work in such situations; but we do the ancients a disservice if we imagine that they uniformly inserted gods in every gap.

In view of the fact that devices sometimes used for divining purposes were used *primarily* for other purposes (gaming, impartial decision-making, etc.), a question emerges, viz., whether the problem of Deuteronomy 18:9–14 might possibly be solved by viewing the majority of the instances of biblical lot-casting as something other than attempts to divine God’s will. To that end, the rest of this article will revisit, as exhaustively as possible, the instances of lot-casting in Scripture to determine whether some purpose other than divination may have been in view. In view of the large number of these, I will not make extensive examination of each case; instead, I will create a taxonomy of biblical lot-casting, based on historical similarities, then evaluate each taxon separately. If it may be established that impartiality is the leading purpose for biblical lots, it might be plausibly suggested that the broad recommendation of lots in Proverbs might possibly be a recommendation of *impartiality* rather than a recommendation of *divination*.

The Faithless Use of Lots

Of the 77 OT uses of the גֵּרַל word group, 9 reflect instances of pagan lot-casting that may be discarded immediately as lacking sufficient warrant to call for a normalization of the practice. The term גֵּרַל appears three times in Jonah 1:7 when Jonah’s shipmates attempt to divine the cause of a storm. Twice in Esther the term is used in the determination of the details of the planned genocide of the Jews (Est 3:7; 9:24). And on four occasions, lots were employed by Israel’s enemies in the plundering and division of spoils—once against David (Ps 22:16) and three times against the exiled Jews (Joel 4:3; Obad 1:11; Nah 3:10).

³⁰Dales, “Of Dice and Men,” p. 19. The use of dice in modern-day games of chance is an apt analogy.

³¹Such practices, which persist to the present day, were rarely employed to seek God’s will. Just as modern lottery systems used today to draft military personnel and to select random winners of large sums of money are free from the trappings of divination, so also were many ancient lotteries.

Of these occasions, the last four do not demonstrably involve divination, but rather the pursuit of an unbiased decision. The Esther account may involve divination, though this is not directly stated. The Jonah story represents, however, a clear case of lot-divination. Regardless of whether divination is being practiced, however, the fact remains that all of these represent faithless or, worse, *idolatrous* instances of lot-casting, a fact that excludes them from further consideration for the purpose of this article.³² True, the providential hand of God is evident in the lots cast in Jonah and Esther, but this by no means normalizes the practice: God was working in these cases not because of obedience, but in spite of disobedience.³³

*The Faithful Use of Lots in the Distribution
of Property, Duties, or Other Assignments*

By far the largest category of biblical lot-casting falls under the heading of the faithful use of lots to distribute land, assign tasks, draft military personnel, and the like. A full 52 of the 77 uses of the גֹּרַל word group fit into this category. Specifically, lots were cast in establishing the original tribal allotments (Num 26:55, 56; 33:54 [2]; 34:13; 36:2, 3; Josh 14:2; 15:1; 16:1; 17:1, 14, 17; 18:6, 8, 10, 11 [2]; 19:1, 10, 17, 24, 32, 40, 51; 21:5, 6, 8, 10, 20, 40; Judg 1:3 [2]) and priestly cities (Josh 21:4 [2]; 1 Chron 6:39, 46, 48, 50); the priestly assignments (1 Chron 24:5, 7, 31; 25:8, 9; 26:13, 14 [3]; Neh 10:35; cf. also Mic 2:5); conscription for military service (Judg 20:9); and the post-exilic population of Jerusalem (Neh 11:1).

It is often supposed by commentators that the lot was used in each of these cases in order to divine God's will. Narrowing our discussion to Joshua's land distribution (the largest block of texts in this category), we find two major arguments among conservative commentators for this conclusion: (1) the fact that the land distribution was deliberately conducted "in the presence of the Lord" (לְפָנֵי יְהוָה—Josh 18:6, 10; 19:51),³⁴ and (2) the corroborating statement in Proverbs 16:33 that "every decision" of the lot is "from the Lord." This appeal to Proverbs 16:33, especially, is nearly universal among conservatives.³⁵

³²The author found one objection to this general conclusion in Waltke's suggestion that the use of lots in Jonah and Esther argues for a normative expression of lot-casting that continues for the "state and other secular institutions," but not for the church (*The Book of Proverbs Chapters 15–31*, NICOT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005], p. 38), but this understanding is not widely held.

³³Note below under the discussion of Prov 16:33, however, some of the implications of God's providence in ordering even pagan lots.

³⁴In addition to Waltke, above, see esp. Dommershausen, "גֹּרַל, goral," p. 452; also Trent Butler, *Joshua*, WBC (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), p. 204 and apparently David M. Howard, Jr., *Joshua*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman, 1998), p. 325, p. 325.

³⁵Marten H. Woudstra, *The Book of Joshua*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), pp. 213, 225; Howard, *Joshua*, pp. 306, 325; Butler, *Joshua*, p. 171; Pitkänen, *Joshua*, pp. 178, 277–78; Hess, *Joshua*, p. 238; and most conservative commentators. Curiously, what is also nearly universal among conservative commentators is the ab-

Since the latter argument seems to be the linchpin that connects the whole argument for the use of lots as a normative means of divination, we will postpone discussion of this critical text until the end of this article. But the argument from lots being cast “in the presence of the Lord” will be addressed here.

In view of Butler’s apt observation that the Tent of Meeting was a place where God regularly made special revelation,³⁶ it is reasonable to suggest that the setting of the lot-distribution at Shiloh “in the presence of the Lord” anticipates oracular superintendence by Yahweh. Kitz, however, while not denying this possibility, offers at least two alternative reasons, drawn from parallel literature, why the distribution might have been made “in the presence of the Lord.” First, ANE land allotment documents regularly included the presence of *witnesses* to confirm the integrity of the proceedings and conformity of the distribution to prearranged stipulations.³⁷ Second, ANE land allotments were often accomplished in the approving presence either of the *testator* of the land or, more often, his official representative.³⁸ Both of these ideas match well the use of the underlying Hebrew phrase, לִפְנֵי יְהוָה, which typically calls attention to the solemn and honorable nature of the action done.³⁹ That the phrase conveys the meaning of oracular superintendence is possible, but it seems that the weight of parallel literature and the language employed renders the ideas of gravity and accountability more likely purposes for casting lots in Yahweh’s presence. It is hardly conclusive that the phrase “in the presence of the Lord” demands Yahweh’s oracular superintendence.

If the above argument holds (and I recognize that discussion of Proverbs 16:33 is still forthcoming), then it becomes plausible to suggest that Joshua’s lot-distribution (and other scriptural examples like it) was implemented to prevent bias, treachery, and nepotism on the part of leaders,⁴⁰ and to prevent resentment and hostility on the part of

sence of any reference to the problem of Deuteronomy 18. Of the commentators just mentioned, Howard, Woudstra, Butler, and Hess do not even mention the tension; Pitkänen dismisses it out of hand (pp. 277–78).

³⁶Joshua, p. 204.

³⁷Anne M. Kitz, “Undivided Inheritance and Lot Casting in the Book of Joshua,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 119 (Winter 2000): 615. Likewise, while Richard Nelson argues for an “oracular” understanding of lots, he nonetheless argues that the point of lots being parceled out “before Yahweh” draws attention to Yahweh’s “approving presence” (*Joshua*, OTL [Philadelphia: Westminster/John Knox, 1997], p. 209).

³⁸Ibid., pp. 616–17. In many cases the testator himself was dead—his estate was being parceled out to his heirs. In Joshua, the divine Testator was still alive, so the proceedings were conducted in the presence both of the Testator *and* his representative (note that in several of the pertinent texts, Eleazar the priest is listed before Joshua as the representative agent of the allotment—14:1; 19:51).

³⁹See, e.g., BDB, p. 817.

⁴⁰Dommershausen’s “primary” and “frequent” function of lots (“גורל”, goral,” p. 451).

disgruntled recipients.⁴¹ In the words of Proverbs 18:18, the public and duly witnessed use of lots on these occasions successfully “settled disputes and kept strong opponents apart.”

The Faithful Use of Lots on the Day of Atonement

While it might be argued that the use of lots on the Day of Atonement could be subsumed under the previous category, the five uses of גרל in the treatment of the atonement proceedings (Lev 16:8 [3], 9, 10) are a bit of a curiosity. On this occasion, the priest selected by lot which of two goats was to be assigned to Yahweh and slaughtered, and which was to be released, bearing the sins of the people, to “Azazel.”⁴² Most commentators on Leviticus do not remark on the reason for the atonement lot.⁴³ A few assume that the purpose of the atonement lot was to discern God’s will in this matter,⁴⁴ though one wonders why God would care which goat was killed and which was released—the two goats were identical in every way. Jacob Milgrom gives perhaps the most inventive reason, arguing that “if the high priest chose the animals, it would appear that he and the people that he represented were offering an animal to Azazel.”⁴⁵ This explanation, while intriguing, probably owes more to Milgrom’s assumption that this ritual was borrowed from a pagan religion that acknowledged binary deities. It is provocative, though, because it offers a negative reason for lots—it was not so much that God was making the decision, but that the priest was *not* making the decision.

To summarize, this curious use of lots remains something of a mystery. Perhaps God had some unstated theological reason for making the decision himself. Perhaps God wanted to save the priest from the angst of arbitrarily deciding which animal lived and which died. In the end, it is probably best to refrain from speculation, and to assign this text a subordinate role in answering the question of the normativity of lot-divination.

⁴¹I.e., Israelite heads of family who received land that was not especially arable, priests who received tasks that were menial in nature, or young men conscripted for dangerous military assignments.

⁴²An interesting (if historically late) detail of this procedure can be found in Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 1991), pp. 1019–20.

⁴³No discussion of the purpose of this lot is made by Wenham (1979), Harrison (1980), Hartley (1992), Rooker (2000), Ross (2002), Currid (2004), Gane (2004), or Kiuchi (2007).

⁴⁴Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Leviticus*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1996), p. 219; Kenneth A. Mathews, *Leviticus: Holy God, Holy People*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), p. 137; W. H. Bellinger, Jr., *Leviticus, Numbers*, NIBC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), p. 99.

⁴⁵*Leviticus 1–16*, p. 1020.

Metaphorical Uses of Lot Language

Nine of the eleven remaining OT instances of the גַּרְלֵל word group make up a more abstract classification of lot usage. These passages do not reflect historical instances of lot-casting, but rather the use of lot language to describe a person's standing: one's "lot in life" or destiny. We find that the lot of the wicked is destruction (Prov 1:14; Isa 17:14; 57:6; Jer 13:25) even though no lot is actually cast (Ezek 24:6); the lot of the righteous, on the other hand, is blessing (Ps 16:5; 125:3; Isa 34:17; Dan 12:13).

That the use of lot language in these passages is metaphorical should not be construed to mean that these passages can be ignored. In fact, three of these passages offer something that all the biblical instances of lot-casting discussed heretofore do not: explicit statement of divine agency in establishing one's lot. In Psalm 16:5 Yahweh "maintains" (הוֹנִיחַ) the lot of the Psalmist; in Jeremiah 13:25, Yahweh "decrees" or literally "measures out" (מִדְּיָךְ) the portion allocated by lot; and in Isaiah 34:17 the author uses the hiphil stem to indicate that Yahweh causes the lot to "fall" (הִפִּיל) at his discretion and consequently "distributes" it (הִזְקִיחָהּ). This observation is important, because it makes a rare reference to divine participation in the lot. These three passages assure us that there is no such thing as sheer chance or contingency in the plan of God: irrespective of this providentially instituted laws of probability, he still decrees all that occurs in his universe and perfectly orchestrates the outworking of this decree—including the distribution of the lot.

This thought, while comforting, might at first blush seem to upset the basic thesis of this article. But it does not. That God has *decreed* the outcome of every instance of lot-casting does not mean that he has *caused* the outcome. In these nine cases, the mediating cause of blessing/judgment by lot was not God, but individual obedience and disobedience, respectively. God rendered the outcome of the "lot" certain, but he did not cause the outcome of the lot. That is not to say that God *could not* have caused the outcome of the casting of lots; however, these passages offer no proof that he did.⁴⁶ And there certainly is no evidence that divination is in view in any of these metaphorical uses of lot language.

Implied Uses of Lots for Purposes of Divination?

It is often assumed that lots were employed on several OT occasions where inquiry/divination was being made. In fact, it is even common for English translators to insert lot language into such passages. For this reason, it has been consequently assumed that the use of lots for divination was more common in Israel's history than the Bible actually records. Note the following three instances:

In Joshua 7:14, in response to the disaster at Ai, Joshua assembled

⁴⁶For further discussion see the material on Prov 16:33, below.

all the people to determine the cause of the problem. In a series of verdicts, Yahweh “takes” (לָקַח) first the tribe, then the clan, then the family of Achan, and finally Achan himself. No indication is given how Yahweh indicated his choice, only that he “took” them. Several versions (e.g., NASB, ESV) have made the interpretive decision that lot-casting was the method used; however, there is no exegetical basis for this decision. As Cryer notes, “The means employed in [Josh 7 and 1 Sam 10] are not stated; moreover, the verb employed in both cases is the Niphal of *lkd*, which never occurs in conjunction with any of the 78 attestations of *gōrāl*.”⁴⁷ Cryer refuses to speculate on the likely means used, except for this suggestion that lot-casting is *unlikely*. Perhaps since Joshua, the *de facto* theocratic leader, oversaw the process, the Urim and Thummim were consulted. At the end of the day we simply do not know.

In 1 Samuel 10:20–21 Yahweh answered Israel’s call for a king through a series of verdicts similar to the Achan narrative just discussed. First a tribe was selected (again, לָקַח), then a clan, then Saul himself. In these verses there again is no indication how these selections were made, only that God “took” them.⁴⁸ Despite this omission, a host of modern translations have supplied the means, viz., “by lot” (so NASB, ESV, RSV, NET, NLT). While lots may possibly have been used, the Urim is another option, or, since the prophet Samuel was present, God may simply have issued his decision directly through this spokesman. We simply do not know. In this instance, however, we have more than Cryer’s lexical observation to cast doubt on the conclusion that lots were used. As we read further in the narrative, we discover that the newly selected king could not be found, so the people “inquired further” of Yahweh, who obliged by revealing that Saul was “hiding among the baggage” (v. 22). As Lindblom sagely observes, the specificity of this response precludes that this “further” inquiry was answered by means of lot-casting;⁴⁹ thus, it seems to follow that the previous inquiry was likewise not made by means of lot-casting.⁵⁰

In 1 Samuel 14:41, the situation is a bit more complex. Saul, impatient to discover who had violated his foolish vow, legitimately “inquired of the Lord” for an answer at the advice of the priest, but received no response (vv. 36–37).⁵¹ Frustrated by this failure, Saul turned to divination to discover the perpetrator, and God obliged by correctly identifying Jonathan. The particular method Saul used is

⁴⁷ *Divination in Ancient Israel*, p. 277.

⁴⁸ Note that Cryer’s comments, above, apply equally to this passage.

⁴⁹ So Lindblom, “Lot-Casting in the Old Testament,” p. 165, n. 1. Lots could select a name from a pool of names; they could not, however, give the answer “Saul is hiding among the baggage.”

⁵⁰ But see *ibid.*

⁵¹ The language closely resembles that of 28:6, and probably involved the Urim (so Van Dam, *Urim and Thummim*, p. 198).

unclear. The Hebrew term for lots (גורל) is notably absent in the Hebrew text (though see the LXX⁵²). But even if we assume for sake of argument that Saul was divining by lots, this passage is scarcely a ready basis for normalizing divination by lot. The situation is highly irregular, and is probably the first recorded instance of Saul's fatal habit of turning to illicit forms of divination when God refused to answer through the Urim (cf. 1 Sam 28:6–7). If this passage says anything about lot-divination, it stands as an argument *against* lot-divination.

The Commendation of Lot-Casting in Proverbs

The foregoing brings us finally to the discussion of two key verses in the book of Proverbs that commend the practice of lot-casting: Proverbs 18:18 and 16:33. That God commends the practice of lot-casting in both texts is clear, but this is not the question at hand. The question is instead whether God commends lot-casting *as a normative means of divination*. It is the argument of this section that this conclusion is not forthcoming in the book of Proverbs.

In Proverbs 18:18, the writer announces that “casting the lot settles disputes and keeps strong opponents apart.” This verse very clearly states the reason for its commendation of lot-casting: casting of lots is a prudent means of preventing strife. There really is nothing more, exegetically and contextually, to be said. Nothing in this text suggests that lot-casting is here commended because of its value in divining the mind of God or in eliciting an oracular and thus authoritative answer. This could be the case, but nothing in the text indicates this. Instead, the text simply states that lot-casting is to be valued for its unique capacity for injecting impartiality into the decision-making process, thus removing the possibility of bias, nepotism, or tyranny leading to strife.

The statement in Proverbs 16:33 that “the lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord,” however, offers much better biblical evidence for viewing lot-divination as a normative method for discovering God's will—*every* time the lot is cast, its answer is *from the Lord* and, by implication, is authoritative.⁵³ But is this what the Scripture writer meant to imply? I am not convinced that this is the case:

First, this interpretation says too much, resulting in the necessary qualification of the word *every* (כָּל). As we have seen, scholars rarely affirm that God obliges himself to give authoritative, oracular responses to *every* instance of lots. Most would exclude lots cast in the names

⁵²For a good discussion of the intricacies of this discrepancy see Lindblom, “Lot-Casting in the Old Testament,” pp. 172–78.

⁵³This is not the only published interpretation of this verse (see esp. David Hubbard, who argues that the verse teaches that God's will prevails even *despite* the result of the lot—*Proverbs*, Communicator's Commentary [Dallas: Word, 1989], pp. 237–38), but is, with occasional qualifications, the majority interpretation. So Waltke, *Proverbs 15–31*, pp. 37–38; Tremper Longman, III, *Proverbs*, BCOTWP (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), p. 339; Roland E. Murphy, *Proverbs*, WBC (Nashville: Nelson, 1998), p. 124; etc.

of other gods (though note God's intervention in Jonah and Esther).⁵⁴ Others qualify the *every* still further, arguing variously that God gives authoritative, oracular responses to lots only when they are expressly ordered,⁵⁵ "properly administered" in "special and limited situations,"⁵⁶ or when they are cast "in the presence of the Lord" and after "other forms of wisdom had failed."⁵⁷ Many also restrict the use of lots to the era of incomplete revelation.⁵⁸ Now I am the first to concede that the biblical term *every* is sometimes subject to implicit qualification, but in the absence of contextual factors to this effect, such implicit qualifications should be maintained only with some reserve. If an interpretation that needs no implicit qualification can be reasonably offered, it is for that reason to be given strong consideration.

Second, this interpretation holds that the phrase *from the Lord* (מִיְהוָה) necessarily implies that the result of the lot has an oracular and normative character—it is an authoritative expression of God's moral expectations. Theologians regularly distinguish between two aspects of God's will: (1) his secret, sovereign, or decretal will by which he renders certain all events, past and future, in his created universe and (2) his revealed, desired, or moral will by which he informs his creatures of their ethical obligations.⁵⁹ If, in fact, the casting of lots divulges the latter (God's moral will), then Proverbs 16:33 teaches, as a great many commentators claim, that we creatures have a sacred obligation to obey the results. But if the casting of lots is an expression of the former (God's sovereign will), an entirely different message emerges from this verse, viz., that despite God's providential institution of natural laws (in this case, the laws of probability), he nonetheless stands as earth's Sovereign, ordaining and maintaining all of its events to conform to his eternal decree...*on every single occasion, and without exception*. Despite the observed stability of the laws of probability and statistics, there is no such thing as genuine "chance" or "contingency" in God's universe. In fact, he even reserves the right to supernaturally intervene to alter the course of natural laws when he deems necessary. All this goes to explain how that we can be sure that every instance of

⁵⁴Though note the exception to this statement raised by Waltke, above (*Proverbs 15–31*, p. 38).

⁵⁵Hess, *Joshua*, p. 238.

⁵⁶Merrill, *Everlasting Dominion*, p. 100.

⁵⁷Waltke, *Finding the Will of God*, pp. 47–48; William McKane restricts the referent still further, arguing that only decisions of the Urim and Thummim are in view in Proverbs 16:33 (*Proverbs*, OTL [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970], p. 499; so also, apparently, Paul E. Koptak, *Proverbs*, NIVAC [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003], p. 422).

⁵⁸Waltke, *Finding the Will of God*, p. 48.

⁵⁹For a fine defense of this widely held understanding, see John Piper, "Are There Two Wills in God?" in *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), pp. 107–31.

lot-casting (or coin-flipping and dice-rolling, for that matter) is “from the Lord.”

If the foregoing observations hold, then Proverbs 16:33 does not teach that oracular and normative messages from God are contained in every use of lots (much less rolled dice or flipped coins). And, consequently, this verse should not be used, as it commonly is, to defend lot-divination or the fact of oracular responses to lots in all of the many instances of their usage throughout the Old Testament. In fact, the prohibition of divination in Deuteronomy 18 strongly suggests otherwise.

Conclusion

It has been the contention of this article that the tension between the strict prohibition of divination in Deuteronomy 18:9–14 and the practice of lot-casting in the Old Testament need not be resolved by regarding the lot-casting as an exception to Deuteronomy 18:9–14. Instead, the biblical commendation of lot-casting is due to the peculiar prudence of lot-casting in resolving disputes without strife and partiality (so esp. Prov 18:18). This is not to say that God cannot or will not overrule such “chance” methods to effect his sovereign will (Prov 16:33); in fact, as we have argued, even seemingly “random” circumstances do not reflect contingencies within God’s decree. The results of the lot-casting are always a providential outworking of God’s sovereign will. But this does not mean that lot-casting should be regarded as a normative means by which OT saints received authoritative revelation from God.