JEWISH TRADITIONS ON DIVINATION WITH BIRDS (ORNITHOMANCY)

by Gerrit Bos

Introduction

Divination, that is the art of discerning portents of the future in current phenomena, was common in the ‘magic societies’ of the ancient Near and Middle East. A variety of divinatory techniques were employed including extispicy (omen sacrifice), oneiromancy (dream divination), necromancy (conjunction of the dead), and ornithomancy or divination with birds. Literal evidence of ornithomancy in ancient Babylonia may be found in a series of texts called “šumma ḫalu,” after their incipits. The tenor and structure of these texts is well illustrated by the following, rather typical formula: “If Śumma a man starts on a journey and a raven hovers to the right of him and caws, this man will not attain his goal.” In this article we will not address the role of the cock, which traditionally roused men from their slumber to worship at dawn. This is an ancient theme, embellished in the Apocrypha, incorporated in the daily liturgy, and Perek Shirah, and further developed in the Zohar. However, our focus is another ancient tradition, augury, which has rather different means and ends.

Bible

Ancient Israel was, as Cryer put it, a “magic society”, like those around her. In spite of the prohibition of Deuteronomy 18, 9-22 a wide variety of magical practices was adhered to. The Bible lists different means of divination: dreams, Teraphim, Urim and Thummim, the

1. I thank my friend Eric Pellow for his vital contribution to the composition of this article.
4. Fahd, op. cit., p. 36.
5. See 3 Baruch 6: 15-16.
6. TB Berakhot 60b.
7. Sefer ha-Zohar, vol. 1, fol. 77b, 218b; vol. 2, fol. 196a; vol. 3, fols. 23a-b, 171b-172a; Zohar Ḥadash fol. 47d.
Goralot, the Ephod and the Ark, the Priestly Oracle, and the Omen Sacrifice. We also find several cases of unspecified divination by means of random signs, namely, that of Laban (Gen 30: 27), Balaam (Num 24:1), and Ben Hadad’s men (1 Kings 20:33). The specific Hebrew term for this kind of divining is le-naḥesh.

Though birds play an important role in the Bible, especially in the tales of Noah and Elijah, divination with birds or the “language of birds” is not explicitly referred to. Balaam’s ass speaks; Noah’s dove and Elijah’s ravens do not. Although the Bible does not refer explicitly to divination with birds, one of its major characteristics, namely, the typology of birds in which the raven and the dove represent opposite traits, goes back to the story from Genesis about the raven and the dove sent out by Noah to look for a dry spot on earth. The raven is sent out by Noah and “went to and fro until the waters had dried up from the earth.”

Although the story does not say so explicitly, it is clear from the continuation that the raven did not fulfill his task, namely, to show that the earth is dry. For this reason the dove is sent out and returns the second time with an olive-leaf. A parallel to this story and its typology has been preserved in the Gilgamesh Epic. Utnapishtim releases a dove, which does not find

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10. See Cryer, op. cit., pp. 284-6. According to some scholars (Baudissin) this term is a derivative of naḥash (snake), since omens were originally taken from the movements of snakes (cited by T.W. Davies, Magic, divination and demonology among the Hebrews and their neighbours, London 1898, p. 82. However, others (Wellhausen) deny this, pointing out that Aramaic knows the same term le-naḥesh but not naḥash (See Brown-Driver-Briggs, A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament, repr. 1978, p. 638b). The argument to a possible link between both terms is reinforced by wide-spread folkloric traditions referring to a connection between the snake and divination with birds. As we noted above, the Arabs had gained a knowledge of the bird language by eating the heart or liver of serpents. An explanation why the consumption of serpents gives the talent to understand the language of birds is given by Democritus who, according to the report by Plinius (Natural History X, 137; XXIX, 72) has stated that serpents were generated from the mixed blood of certain birds, and that therefore whoever ate a serpent would understand the bird language. The seers of the Greek myths, such as Kassandra and Helenos reportedly received this particular gift through the gratitude of snakes who lick the ears of the future prophet (See W.R. Halliday, Greek divination. A study of its methods and principles, London 1913, p. 250). For more traditions see J.G. Frazer, The golden bough, and especially idem, “The language of animals,” The Archaeological Review, vol. 1 (1888), pp. 166ff; see as well below for the discussion of the link between “serpent” and “divination with birds” in the Zohar. Natural History X, 137; XXIX, 72.
11. Gen. 8: 6-12; transl. JPS, Philadelphia 1985 (all biblical quotations will be according to this translation. It should be noted that the Hebrew term ‘orev, commonly translated as “raven”, refers to the genus Corvus of which four species are found in Israel, three black and one, the hooded crow, Corvus corone, gray black.
a dry place and returns; he sends out a swallow which also does not find a dry spot and returns, and finally he sends forth a raven which found something to eat and does not return.\textsuperscript{13}

\textit{Post-biblical literature}

Only in post-biblical literature, written under the massive impact of other cultures, do we find the first reference to direct communication with birds. Divination from the cries or movements of birds was popular in the Mediterranean area. Cicero mentions Phrygians, Pisidians, Cilicians, Umbrians, and Arabs.\textsuperscript{14} In Greece augury was the divinatory technique par excellence. The term “οἰόνος” originally meaning “bird” came to be used for to indicate any kind of omen. But augury was preeminent especially in the early and later phases of its religion. In the “heroic” age it was practised by the mythical heroes and seers, Teiresias, Melampus, and the like. Hesiod’s happy man is he who can divine by birds.\textsuperscript{15} Augury comes into fashion again with the spread of Pythagoreanism. It is above all represented as a magical power of understanding the language of birds.\textsuperscript{16} In ancient Rome the \textit{auspicium} was of central importance. It meant the consultation of the will of the Gods by means of the observation of the flight of a bird indicating if a certain plan should be executed or given up. Nothing was left to coincidence; the question asked was simple with only two possible answers, yes or no. In this way all the major events of human life—public and private, were decided by the consultation of the Gods through the augurs. The observation of the birds took place in a specific area of the sky called “templum”. The Romans distinguished between \textit{alites}, birds giving signs by means of their flight and \textit{oscines}, by means of their voice. In the case of the \textit{alites} the height and way of flight, the coming down, perching and total behaviour of the bird were central elements; with the \textit{oscines} the tonalities of the voice and the direction towards the observer were of central importance. The raven, the oracle bird par excellence also for the ancient Romans was consulted by means of its voice, especially bad was when they “glutiunt vocem quasi strangulati” (produce sounds when their throat is as it were strangled”). Next to its voice, the side from where it appeared was considered important.\textsuperscript{17} The Septuagint, the

\begin{itemize}
  \item De \textit{divinatione} I, 41 (91), 42 (94).
  \item \textit{Opera et Dies} 826-828.
  \item See Halliday, op. cit., pp. 246-250.
\end{itemize}
Greek translation of the Bible prepared by Jewish scholars in Alexandria in the third century B.C.E. interprets the general prohibition of divination in Lev. 19; 26: “we-lo tenaḥašu” (You shall not practice divination) as referring to divination with birds: “oude ornithoskopesesthe” (You shall not divine by means of birds). The Peshitta version of Lev. 19: 26 adds to its translation of “lo tenaḥašu” the explanation “by winged creatures”.

Rabbinic literature

Divination in general was popular in Rabbinic times, especially in the environment of the Babylonian Rabbis. It seems that the popular practice of ornithomancy in the Mediterranean world made its way into Jewish society as well. Some Church Fathers held this practice to be characteristic of Jews, not Christians. For both Eusebius of Alexandria and John Chrysostom (354-407) condemn paying attention to the cries of birds as a Judaizing practice. The Rabbis tried to circumvent the biblical prohibition for certain popular divinatory practices by distinguishing between naḥash (divination proper) which was forbidden, and simanim (signs) which were allowed. According to the Rabbis every kind of sign that is not similar to the form pronounced by Eliezer the servant of Abraham at the well, or by Jonathan the son of Saul, is not considered a divination. Divination by means of birds was considered as “divination proper” and thus specifically forbidden in the Sifra: “‘You shall not practice divination’ (Lev. 19:26): Like those who practice divination by means of a weasel, birds and stars.” However, according to other sources only divination by means of the raven is to be considered as “divination proper” and thus forbidden, while divination by means of other

20. See Encyclopaedia Judaica (hereafter EJ), vol. 6, pp. 111-120, s.v. “Divination” (L.I. Rabinowitz). We have extensively consulted this important article for our discussion of divination.
21. Gen. 24: 14: “let the maiden to whom I say, ‘Please lower your jar that I may drink,’ and who replies, ‘Drink, and I will also water your camels’—let her be the one whom You have decreed for your servant Isaac....”
22. 1 Sam 14: 9-10: “If they say to us, ‘Wait until we get to you,’ then we ’ll stay were we are, and not go up to them. But if they say, ‘Come up to us,’ then we will go up, for the Lord is delivering them in our hands. That shall be our sign.”
23. TB Ḥulin 95b; see Rabinowitz, op. cit., note 22 above, p. 116. Rabinowitz also deals extensively with the contradictory interpretation of this statement by the medieval commentators. Maimonides concluded that it means that this kind of divination is forbidden, while Abraham b. David of Posquières regarded it as allowed.
species of birds is allowed. TB Sanhedrin states: “So and so’s bread has fallen out of his hand; his staff has fallen out of his hand; his son called after him; a raven screamed after him, a deer has crossed his path; a serpent came at his right hand or a fox at his left.”

According to TB Shabbath, divination by means of the raven is an Amorite practice: “He who says to a raven: ‘Scream,’ and to a she-raven: ‘Screech, and return me thy tuft for [my] good,’ is guilty of Amorite practices.”

And R. ‘Ilish who was carried away captive, refused to heed the message of a raven since it is a lying bird, but when a dove repeated it he obeyed:

One day a man was sitting next to him (R. ‘Ilish) who understood the language of birds. A raven came and called to him, and R. ‘Ilish said to him, What does it say? It says, he replied, ‘Ilish run away, ‘Ilish run away.’ He said, The raven is a false bird, and I do not trust it. Then a dove came and called. He again asked, What does it say? It says, the man replied, ‘Ilish run away, ‘Ilish run away.’ Said [‘Ilish]: The community of Israel is likened to a dove; this shows that a miracle will be performed for me.

An indication for the influence of ornithomancy in Rabbinic literature is the interpretation given to the wisdom traditionally attributed to king Solomon. While according to the Hellenistic writers Solomon’s wisdom consisted in his great knowledge of science and philosophy and according to some Rabbinic sources in his great mastery of the Torah, the fifth century Pesikta de Rav Kahana explains his wisdom as surpassing the ornithomancy of the children of the East. This statement has clearly two implications: (i) that Solomon was considered a master ornithomancer; and (ii) that ornithomancy was highly regarded by the author. The specific Aramaic term used for ornithomancy in this text, namely, “ṭayyar” underwent a similar shift in meaning as the cognate Arabic “ṭayrun”, namely, from divination with birds to divination or omen in general, indicating the popularity and possibly Eastern origin of the practice. For already the ancient pré-Islamic Arabs drew omens from birds, as we are informed by classical authors. According to Philostratus, this art was best understood and practiced by Arab tribes. He explains that they had gained a knowledge of the bird

25. Tb Sanhedrin 66a; translation I. Epstein.
27. TB Gittin 45a, transl. I. Epstein; Lewysohn, op. cit., p. 200. For other rabbinic stories stressing the ominous character of the raven, see TB Shabbath 35b.
language by eating the heart or liver of serpents. The Banū Lihb from the tribe of Azd provided the Arabs with the best interpreters of bird omens. Birds were so pre-eminent as ominous animals that the name “‘awf”, originally meaning “birds”, became to mean “fortune”, while the derivative verb “ta’ayyafa” came to be used for “to divine” in general. The terms “ṭayrun” (birds) and “ṭatayyara” were used indifferently for all kinds of omens. But the raven was pre-eminently the bird of omen for the Arabs, always bringing bad tidings. It is, according to Fahd, even not impossible that it was a sacred bird in their ancient cult. The term “ṭayyar” recurs in the fifth century Midrash Wajjikra Rabba where R. Jeremiah b. Eleazar remarks that the verse “For a bird of the air shall carry the voice” (Eccl. 10:20) refers to the raven and the art of bird divination (ṭayyarin).

Biblical typology of raven and dove continues in Rabbinic and medieval literature. According to the Talmud, the raven did not go out on its mission to seek land because it suspected Noah of seeking its death in order to take its wife for himself. According to the Alphabet of Ben Sira the raven has to blame himself for the awkward hop in his gait. For once he observed the graceful step of the dove, and out of envy tried to emulate it. The result was that he broke almost all his bones, and attracted the ridicule and scorn of the other animals. Moreover, when he tried to return to his original gait, he could not do so anymore, since his own step had become a hop between and between. The Talmud also informs us about two families in Nehardea, one highly esteemed and of pure descent called The House of Jonah, the other despised and of impure descent called The House of ‘Urbathi [ravenlike]. Zerahiah ha-Levi Gerondi (12th cent.) composed an elegy (qinah) entitled

34. Fahd, op. cit., p. 506.
37. Tb Sanhedrin 108b. Cf. Rashi on Gen. 8: 7: “He (the raven) kept going around the ark, but did not go to fulfill his mission because he suspected him (Noah) in connection with his wife; Ginzberg, op. cit., vol. 1. pp. 38-9, 163-4.
38. E. Yasif, Sippurei Ben Sira bi-Yemei ha-Beinayyim, Jerusalem 1984, pp. 245-6; Ginzberg, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 39. There are many parallels to this story, as, for instance, in the fables of Aesopus, Kalilah and Dimnah, and Arabic literature (Yasif, op. cit., pp. 86-7).
“Ze’evei ‘Arav” for Tish’ah be-Av (the ninth of the month Av) in which he wrote: “I am a dove, black as a raven, because of my house that has been destroyed (We-hinneni yonah shehorah ke-‘orev ya’an beiti asher hu ḥarev).” But Rabbinic literature has also preserved an example of a positive role played by the raven. It is said that Adam and Eve were at a loss what to do with the corpse of the slain Abel, until they observed how a raven buried a dead bird of its own kind in the ground. Following its example, they buried the corpse of Abel, and the raven received an award from God.

A similar typology of raven and dove can be found in Islamic literature. The story goes that the raven of the story of Noah did not return to the ark because it found a carcass. In the story of Adam in Paradise related in The Tales of the Prophets by al-Kisā’ī, the dove sheds light on Adam’s crown. In the Hadith collections we find sayings highlighting the negative image of the raven. It is, for instance, stated that there are five vicious or harmful animals which should be killed even by a Mecca-pilgrim who is in the state of iḥrām (ritual consecration), and even within the precincts of the Ihrām (the sacred territory of Mecca), namely, the rat, scorpion, raven (ghurāb), kite, and voracious dog.

Kabbalistic literature

It was only in the Middle Ages under the impact of Islam that ornithomancy became a prominent theme in Jewish literature, above all in mystical literature. Under Islam ornithomancy continued the prominent role it already played in the pré-Islamic period. Called ‘iyāfa’ it was based on the following essential points: 1. the nature of the birds: some birds were considered as ominous par excellence; 2. their flight: a distinction was made between “ṭīra” or “ṭayr”, i.e., the observation and interpretation of the spontaneous flight of the bird and zajr, the observation of its flight provoked by throwing stones and shouting; of central

41. Ginzberg, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 113, vol. 5, n. 31. This story can be found in Pirkei de R. Eliezer 21, Midrash Tanhuma Bereshit 10, but also in the Koran, Sura 5, 31. It is possible that this story originated in Islam and was then adopted by Jewish literature.
42. Cf. M. Grünbaum, Neue Beiträge zur semitischen Sagenkunde, Leiden 1893, p. 82ff; Yassif, op. cit., p. 87; Encyclopaedia of Islam (hereafter EI), Leiden 1960ff, vol. 2, pp. 1096-7 s.v. ghurāb (Ch. Pellat). Although Pellat translates this term as “crow”, I have preferred the term “raven” for the sake of consistency. Just like the Hebrew term ‘orev, ghurāb refers to the genus, comprising several species.
44. State of ritual consecration of the Mecca-pilgrim.
45. This term denotes both the raven and the crow.
importance was the direction of the flight; a flight from the right side of the observer to his
left side was considered as felicitous and the opposite direction as a bad omen; 3. their cries:
detailed lists were provided of the interpretation of the different cries of the birds and animals
in general, while also the number of cries and possibly their tonalities were considered; and 4.
their perching places.\textsuperscript{47} Especially known for its ominous character was the raven, which was
possibly a sacred bird in the ancient cult of the Arabs. A stereotyped expression in Arabic
poetry is “\textit{ghurāb al-bayn}” (the crow or raven of separation). It symbolizes the immanent
departure of the tribe and more particularly of the beloved.\textsuperscript{48} An interpretation of its flight and
croaking has been preserved by the Arab encyclopaedist al-Nuwayrī (d. 1332) in a text
attributed to al-Jāḥiz.\textsuperscript{49} An example from this text, which, as Fahd has shown bears a close
parallel to Babylonian-Assyrian texts, is: “When you leave your house for business or to get
engaged, and a raven croaks at your right and left side, go ahead, for you will attain your
goal, God willing.”\textsuperscript{50}

Indicative for the influence of Arabic ornithomancy on medieval Jewish literature are the
elaborations in medieval \textit{Midrashim} on the theme of Solomon as a master ornithomancer
quoted above.\textsuperscript{51} For especially in Muslim legends Solomon’s knowledge of the language of
animals in general and of birds in particular played an prominent part.\textsuperscript{52} It is thus possible that
the specific motif of Solomon as a master ornithomancer which originated in the early Jewish
tradition was adopted and embellished by Islam and then borrowed again by the Jews in the
early Middle Ages. But the impact of Arabic ornithomancy betrays itself above all in
medieval Jewish mystical literature. Jacob b. Sheshet, the 12th century Kabbalist from
Gerona discusses divination with birds in his \textit{S. Meshiv Devarim Nekhōhim}. Here we find a
basic classification of birds (pure vs. impure “birds of prey”) and a related division of
ornithomancy into two arts—the interpretation of the birds’ movements and of their calls.
Further, like his contemporary Nachmanides he regards the interpretation of their speech as a
form of wisdom, rather than as a means of divination.\textsuperscript{53} But he also describes the mechanism
by which heavenly secrets are communicated by birds and other creature. The passage in
question explains how a lowly animal or an inanimate object is able to transmit that which is,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{47} See T. Fahd, \textit{La divination arabe}, Paris 1987, pp. 431-450.
\item \textsuperscript{48} See Fahd, op. cit., pp. 506-510.
\item \textsuperscript{50} Ibid., p. 34.
\item \textsuperscript{51} See \textit{Bemidbar Rabba} 19:3; \textit{Midrash Tanḥuma}, ed. Buber 4:55a-b (\textit{Ḥukkat}, 11).
\item \textsuperscript{52} See Ginzberg, op. cit., vol. 6, p. 288, n. 34; M. Grünbaum, \textit{Neue Beiträge zur semitischen Sagenkunde}, Leiden 1893, p. 201.
\item \textsuperscript{53} \textit{S. Meshiv Devarim Nekhōhim}, ed. G. Vajda, Jerusalem 1968, ch. 3; ll. 58-81.
\end{itemize}
by definition, beyond its comprehension. Jacob b. Sheshet argues that the angelic utterance (\textit{ma’amar or dibbur}) is superimposed upon and expressed through the natural call or sound (\textit{havarah}) of the creature. To use a modern metaphor, the natural sound of the animal is a carrier wave modulated to transmit a message from high. The author also informs us that there ten types of natural sounds: creatures of the water, such as frogs; birds; domestic animals; wild animals; swarming creatures; man; fire; wind; water; earth.\textsuperscript{54} Jacob Ben Sheshet’s treatment of ornithomancy influenced other scholars, notably Bahya b. Asher, who incorporated it in his Torah commentary without attribution.\textsuperscript{55}

**Nachmanides**

Nachmanides discusses divination in his commentary on the Torah. He unequivocally defines the biblical term “naḥash” as ornithomancy: “who divines by looking at the wings of the birds [in flight] or by listening to their chirping.” He attempts to derive the term “naḥash” from the root “hush” (to hasten). Although he regards divination as forbidden, he excludes “me’onen” (who divines by observing the clouds) and “menaḥesh” from the biblical category of “abomination” (\textit{to’evah}).\textsuperscript{56}

On divination by birds he remarks:

Now, many scholars dispose themselves with regard to these enchantments by saying that there is no truth in them whatsoever, for who tells the raven or the crane what will happen? But we cannot deny matters publicly demonstrated before the eyes of witnesses. Our Rabbis also, acknowledged their existence, as they have said in Eileh Shemot Rabbah: “\textit{For a bird of the air shall carry the voice} - this refers to the raven and the craft of tifar.\textsuperscript{57}” Birds in Arabic are called tiar and those versed in the divination of birds are called tifar. This subject is also mentioned in the Gemara. But there is a secret to this matter. We have already made known that the constellations have lords that lead them, these being the “the souls” of the circuits of the spheres, and the lords of the tail and [head of] Aries (the Ram) are near the earth, these being termed “the princes of the quiver (teli)\textsuperscript{58},” that make the future known. It is through them that the signs in the birds indicate

\textsuperscript{54.} Ibid., ch. 7, ll. 42-82; see Georges Vajda, \textit{Recherches sur la Philosophie et la Kabbale dans la pensée juive du Moyen Age}, Paris 1962, 343-346.

\textsuperscript{55.} See E. Gottlieb in the introduction to S. Meshiv, op. cit., note 23 above, pp. 23, 44 (see ibidem for the influence on Menahem Recanati). Menahem Ziyony (late 14th-early 15th cent.) cites Jacob Ben Sheshet’s comments in his commentary on the Torah (Cremona 1559, fol. 66a) from a secondary source, namely, Recanati.


\textsuperscript{57.} This text does not feature in \textit{Shemot Rabba} but in \textit{Wayyikra Rabba} XXXII, 2 and many other places (see ed. Margulies and references).

\textsuperscript{58.} “Quiver” for \textit{teli} is a wrong translation in this context; it should rather be translated as
things to come, not for long duration or distant future do they tell, but only of events that are about to happen. Some make them known by utterance of bitter sounds [resembling wailing] over the dead, and some by spreading their wings.\textsuperscript{59}

Nachmanides’ position on augury is part of a larger response to Maimonidean rationalism, which forcefully rejected astrology and divination. With regard to ornithomancy in particular, Nachmanides responds to Maimonides’ critique with (1) empirical evidence (But we cannot deny matters publicly demonstrated before the eyes of witnesses); (2) the authority of Rabbinic tradition (Our Rabbis also, acknowledged their existence); and (3) esoteric explanations of the phenomenon (But there is a secret to this matter). Nachmanides also treats of augury in his \textit{Torat ha-Shem Temimah}.\textsuperscript{60} Here, too, his argument with the rationalists is threefold. He refers to (1) empirical evidence, (2) Rabbinic tradition, and (3) an esoteric explanation. What makes this passage so important is Nachmanides’ attribution of the explanation to Hai Gaon (939-1038):

\begin{quote}
Rabbenu Hai, in a Responsum, already explained that some of the Separate Intelligences dwell in the heavens, as the philosophers too, admit, and they are called “angels.” Others reside in the atmosphere within the spheres of the [four] elements; they are called “demons.” Those [Intelligences] that reside on the earth [are of the sort] called “spirits” and are covered with a body where [each Intelligence] is entrapped like air caught in a leather bottle. The powers of the constellation of the Sheep indicate events which are to occur in the [near] future. [They indicate these events] through the medium of the voice and wings of the birds, but they do not impart that which is to transpire in the distant future. Yet, the desire of all peoples among every nation is to penetrate the future in order to know what is destined to befall them\textsuperscript{61}
\end{quote}

If the text is reliable -- and we are not aware of any reason to doubt it -- we have testimony (if such is required) that ornithomancy, like other forms of divination, \textit{kefiṣat ha-derekh} (path-jumping) etc., was alive in gaonic Babylon, and that Hai regarded it as an authentic phenomenon that warranted a rational explanation. Nachmanides’ position on augury and astrology is also articulated -- albeit briefly -- in a responsum.\textsuperscript{62}

\textsuperscript{59.} Ibid., p. 217.
\textsuperscript{60.} Ed. Ch.B. Chavel, vol.1, p. 149.
\textsuperscript{61.} Ramban, \textit{Commentary on the Torah, Leviticus}, Translated and Annotated by Ch.B. Chavel, New York 1974, p. 57.
\textsuperscript{62.} \textit{She’elot u-Teshuvot ha-Rashba ha-meyuḥasot la-Ramban}, no. 283 (\textit{Kitvei ha-Ramban}, vol. 1, pp. 378-381).
The influence of Nachmanides’ stance on divination cannot be overstated. He was the font of kabbalistic wisdom for generations of scholars, and his “authentification” of ornithomancy in the face of Maimonides’ critique was cited at length in popular works such as the Torah commentaries of Menahem Recanati (13th-14th cent.), Leveshei Or Yeqarot, and Menahem Ziyyoni. Note the following passage obviously influenced by Nachmanides, in Meir Aldabi’s Shevilei Emunah: “What has been said that the demons hear the future is because they receive [information about] future events during their flight in the air from the lords of the constellations who are the princes of the quiver. And so also the birds announce [these events] as proven by divination.” Note, too, the following passage in the preeminent Lurianic text, Esh Hayyim:

Know that the ten spheres [of the world] of making (‘olam ha-‘asiyyah) consist of matter and form...and in the lowest sphere, namely, the moon, there is a quiver (teli) which causes its movement and which has matter and form [as well], namely, the princes of the tail of the quiver (i.e., dragon). Since they are low and close to the element of fire, the demons of the elements hear from them about future events. And from them the raven receives its knowledge.

Here we have a full elaboration of Nachmanides’ explanation within a hierarchy that extends from the sefirot to the base elements. This passage, undoubtedly authentic, is part of Hayyim Vital’s (not entirely successful) final attempt to arrange his Lurianic works.

The Rashba (R. Solomon Ben Abraham Adret; 13th cent.), one of the outstanding students of the Ramban, regards occasional recourse to ornithomancy as permitted, particularly in cases which can be construed as “medical”. It is possible that the Rashba’s lenient position is based on the Talmudic ruling “kol ma she-yesh bo mi-shum refu’ah eyn bo mi-shum darkhei ha-Emori” (Anything that heals does not fall under the head of “ways of the Amorite” [i.e. superstition]). In the Jewish medical tradition magical therapy plays an important role in popular medicine as featuring in the Talmud. Recognizing the popularity of magical healing and the futility of any attempt to suppress it, the Rabbis formulated this fundamental rule.

63. Leveshei Or Yeqarot, Jerusalem 1961, fol. 87b (Deut. 18: 10).
66. Sefer Esh Hayyim, Tel Aviv 1960, 50: 8, p. 403.
Joshua Ibn Shu’aib (14th century), Spanish scholar and student of the Rashba, mentions the subject of ornithomancy briefly in his derashot. To a midrash on Proverbs 30: 19 (*Derekh ha-nesher ba-shamayim*: The way of the eagle in the sky) he remarks: “And this is their midrash on “The way of the eagle”, namely, that this refers to the language of birds (*siḥat ‘ofot*). It is a wonderful and hidden thing how the birds understand and twitter about future things which they receive from the ruler of Sagittarius...and because he is part of the right side, the Sages of Israel received from them, believed them, and were careful concerning them.” Elsewhere Ibn Shu’aib distinguish between different methods of augury; doves, which are a metaphor for Isra’el are permitted, whereas other species, such as the raven, are forbidden. He cites Nachmanides to the effect that interpreting the calls of birds is permitted, while divining by their movement is forbidden.

R. Isaac Ben Samuel of Acre (late 13th-mid-14th century) stated in his *Sefer Me’irat Eynayyim*, a commentary on Nachmanides’ mysticism, that one is permitted to contemplate the omens of birds, but not to act upon them; ornithomancy is to remain a theoretical, rather than a practical pursuit. Isaac of Acre brings a similar report about R. Aaron ha-Levi, an important student of Nachmanides, namely, that he would study the behaviour of birds, but not act upon their omens (*hayah mistakkel bahem le-havin u-le-horot, aval lo la’asot o le-hanni’ah*).

**Hebrew works of Moses de Leon**

In his commentary on the liturgy Moses de Leon, like Jacob Ben Sheshet before him, attempts to explain how birds and other creatures with limited intelligence are able to apprehend heavenly secrets. In the context of a polemic against those who mock the benediction “who givest the cock understanding” (*ha-noten la-sekhvi binah*), de Leon explains that a spirit of divine understanding speaks through the cock, just as a prophetic spirit speaks through the mouths of children without their awareness of its significance. Similarly, a spirit from “another (i.e., evil) cause rests upon and speaks through the mouths of ravens and other birds despite the fact that they cannot understand the message that they

69. Ibid., vol. 1, p. 277.
70. *Sefer Me’irat Eynayyim*, ed. Amos Goldreich, Jerusalem 1981, p. 232. Cf. TB *Sanhedrin* 68a: “Thou shalt not learn to do after the abominations of these nations (Deut. 18:9): thou mayest not learn in order to practice, but thou mayest learn in order to understand.”
71. Ibid.
convey. Although de Leon does not explicitly invoke the agency of demons, a comparison of his explanation with that of Nachmanides, for example, suggests that ornithomancy involves impure spirits that mediate between the astral powers and the physical world. De Leon seems to distinguish between the cock and all other species of fowl. Whereas the latter are vehicles for spirits of the “other cause” -- or, in Zoharic terminology, the “other side” -- the cock is an instrument of a spirit that emanates from the divine understanding.

Zohar

In the Zohar de Leon makes the following general statement about birds:

No creature imitates the deeds of man as readily as the bird. Man builds a house for his domicile; a bird builds a house for its domicile. Man brings food to his young; a bird brings food to its young. Man cures sickness with herbs; a bird cures sickness with herbs (cf. Leviticus Rabbah 22: 4). Man crafts boats for the water; a bird prepares its fledgling for the water. Man praises and exalts the supreme King; a bird chirps and praises the Lord.  

For the sake of convenience and clarity we ought to distinguish between (1) ornithomancy as a motif in the narrative frame of the Zohar, and (2) substantive discussion of augury or the language of birds.

(1) Material from the narrative frame of the Zohar: In the Zohar R. Yosi recalls that two birds had imparted knowledge of the future to his father. In other tales birds warn R. Ḥiyya and R. Yosi of imminent danger, and R. Ḥiyya exclaims that “in the days of R. Simeon even the bird whisper wisdom...”.

Birds play significant roles in two more fully developed tales; a third tale which appears in the Tikkunei Zohar, will be discussed later. In the first of these texts the author extends a familiar rabbinic dictum to include ornithomancy. We read in the Talmud: “R. Yoḥanan said: Since the Temple was destroyed, prophecy has been taken from prophets and given to fools and children.” The Talmud then offers two tales that illustrate and confirm R. Yoḥanan’s dictum. The Zohar extends the talmudic dictum to include ornithomancy: “R. Ḥiyya said: Thirty days before a powerful event occurs to a nation in this world or before misfortune happens to it, the event is announced in that world (i.e. the heavenly world). Sometimes it is transmitted to the mouths of children, sometimes to those who have no understanding (i.e.,

73. Zohar Ḥadash fol. 77c.
74. Vol. 1, fol. 117b.
75. Vol. 3, fol. 20b.
76. Vol. 3, fol. 22b.
77. Bava Batra 12b; transl. I. Epstein.
fools), and sometimes to the mouths of birds. They announce this event in the world without
that anyone pays attention to them."

R. Hiyya’s dictum is followed by a fascinating tale that confirms the efficacy of
ornithomancy in the post-prophetic era. The story, which is replete with magical and mystical
motifs, is too long to cite in full. In brief, R. Yosi tells about a dawn encounter with a bird
whose ominous flight and calls warn of imminent political strife. When R. Yosi asks for
further information the birds sends him three feathers from its right wing and one from its
left. R. Elazar, whose wisdom is said to surpass that of other sages, interprets the message of
the birds by means of quasi-magical techniques. The enigmatic words of three children are
interpreted in the same vein by R. Elazar, who, reminiscent of the biblical Joseph, remarks
that the portent of the bird and the portent of the children are one (cf. Genesis 41: 25-28).
Thus, the tale confirms the equivalence of ornithomancy to other forms of “prophecy”
mentioned in the Talmud, and helps to legitimate occasional recourse to divination.

R. Elazar is the hero of another Zoharic tale which owes much to the talmudic story of R.
Ilish. The relevant portions of the tale may be briefly retold as follows: When a dove calls to
R. Elazar, he dispatches the bird, described as a “faithful messenger,” with a message for his
ailing father-in-law, R. Yosi. The bird returns with information that saddens R. Elazar. When
R. Abba asks him to explain the bird’s message, R. Elazar states that although his father-in-
law has been spared, another Yosi, portrayed as a “pomegranate” full of goodness, has died in
his stead. Later, a raven appears and shrieks loudly and repeatedly. R. Elazar, like R. Ilish of
the aggadah, dismisses the raven, saying: “for this [to be the bearer of evil tidings] you exist,
for this you were created.” The ancient typology, operative in Genesis and in rabbinic
literature, is evident here as well.

These tales, typical of the narrative frame of the Zohar, suggest that ornithomancy was
fully integrated into the spiritual world of the author. However, for a fuller understanding of
ornithomancy in the Zohar we must consider the substantive discussions of the technique.
(2) Substantive discussions in the Zohar: Although birds -- especially doves, ravens, and
eagles -- are prominent symbols in the Zohar, there are few discussions of the mechanics,
limitations, and significance of ornithomancy in the text. Only in the Tikkunei Zohar, with

78. Vol. 2, fol. 6b. What is true for the fate of nations is equally true for the fate of
individuals; cf. vol. 1, fol. 183b, 217b.
79. The “substitution” of one Yosi for another recalls another problematic exchange --
amely, that of the two Miriams in Hagigah 4b. Note Cordovero’s attempts to solve the
problem in Or ha-Hammah, ad. loc.
80. In the Zohar and Tikkunei ha-Zohar the eagle and the dove are symbols of Tif’eret and
Malkhut (Shekhinah), respectively. See D. Frish, Oṣar ha-Zohar, Jerusalem 1976; E. Peretz,
Ma’alot ha-Zohar, Jerusalem 1987. In the Tikkunei ha-Zohar the eagle also functions as a
its denser symbolism, do we find complex correlations between the dove, eagle, and “bird” (Ṣippor) and different states of the Shekhinah.\(^8\)

In the Zohar we find a kabbalistic answer to a question that has troubled modern philologists: why is divination with birds subsumed under the biblical rubric “nahash,” the term for serpent? The answer -- which commentators such as Lavi and Cordovero attempt to qualify in light of other, less categorical Zoharic texts -- reduces ornithomancy to a form of black magic in which the source of information is a “spirit of impurity”: “Why is someone who watches the twitter of birds called “nahash”? He answered him: Because it comes from that side (i.e. the other side), for an impure spirit rests on it and thus it announces [future] events in the world. And every impure spirit cleaves to the serpent (nahash).\(^8^2\)

The Zohar, like Nachmanides, envisions a cosmic hierarchy in which birds function as messengers between the angelic and mundane realms. Birds, whose proximity to the heavens enables them to hear angelic proclamations, repeat the proclamations when they return to earth. This process, embellished with mythical motifs,\(^8^3\) functions as a symbol in an enigmatic passage that later kabbalists interpreted in very different ways:

Every day the voice of a messenger is heard in two hundred and fifty worlds. It was taught: An announcement is made in one world above, and when the messenger comes forth it is shaken and shattered. Two birds which dwell under the tree of the vision which contains life and death, come forth from that world. One of them goes to the southern side and the other to the northern side; one of them lightens the day while the other makes it dark. Each of them announces what it has heard from that messenger. Hereafter they try to return to their places, but their feet slip off on the female of the great abyss so that they get stuck in her until midnight.\(^8^4\)

In a passage that, as Scholem noted, may be related to the Sefer ha-Tamar of Abū Aflaḥ al-Saraqūṣṭī,\(^8^5\) the Zohar portrays the magical art of Balak son of Ṣippor, whose name is here construed Balak “master of the (magical) bird.”\(^8^6\) The Zohar claims that all of Balak’s

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symbol of Binah (Imma or Shekhinah ‘ila’ah): Tikkunei ha-Zohar 22b-23a; Tikkunei Zohar Hadash 121b-122a.
81. See, for example, Tikkunei ha-Zohar 22b-23a, 117a; Tikkunei Zohar Hadash, 116b.
83. Perhaps the description of the birds’ feet caught in the cleft is related to the motif of Gabriel’s misshapen feet in Zohar, vol. 3, fol. 172a.
84. Sefer ha-Zohar; For later interpretations see Ketem Paz, Or ha-Hammah and Sha’ar Ma’amarei Rashbi ad loc.; these interpret the two birds as symbols of angels, sefirot, and kelippot, respectively.
methods of divination involved a magical bird, known as the Yadua, which was fashioned from gold, silver and copper, and drew its power from the sun and moon. With requisite incense and incantations the Yadua could be induced to reveal the future, information that it seems to have received from “uncovered eyes” (geluy eynayyim) -- a reference not to the biblical Balaam, but rather to the source of his magic, the fallen angel Azael. Here, as in many of the medieval texts that we have examined, the bird is a vehicle for information transmitted by astral and “demonic” beings. So deeply entrenched is the power of ornithomancy in the author’s mind that, despite the inclusion of hermetic motifs, he interprets the magic of Balak as an attempt to improve upon the paradigmatic form of divination, which (as he understands it) involves demons and impure spirits.

Perhaps the author’s interpretation of augury as a demonic praxis explains the objection of R. Ḥiyya to a homily in which Noaḥ, whose wisdom enabled him to understand the speech of all creatures, is said to have chosen the raven, the most portentous of birds, because he wished to divine the future. R. Ḥiyya’s categorical rejection of mere signs (simana be-‘alma) or portents (niḥush be-‘alma) -- methods permitted by talmudic law -- as bibliically prohibited forms of divination seems to reflect the author’s fear that any active pursuit of portents, particularly when they involve ravens, entails impurity.

Commentators such as Lavi and Cordovero offer coherent syntheses of the position of divination of the Zohar. They note that augury with ravens and other “impure” birds is forbidden, whereas divination with “pure” species, such as doves, is permitted. As Cordovero remarks, this dichotomy is operative not only in the Zohar, but also in the Talmud: “Precisely in the case of the raven and the like it is forbidden [to divine], while the [divination of] the twitter of the dove is permitted, as we found in several places in the Zohar, for a pure spirit rests on the dove, and Keneset Yisrael is likened to a dove...And therefore it is right that R. ‘Ilish fled.”

Tikkunei ha-Zohar

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88. Cf. Sefer ha-Zohar, vol. 1, fol. 126a; vol. 2, fol. 112b; vol. 3, fols. 194a, 208a, 212a.
89. Note, in this connection, the earlier statement of the Zohar that Balak saw the future through the “window of wisdom,” the “tail and [nether] extremity of the stars,” -- almost certainly a reference to the negidei ha-teli mentioned by Nachmanides and others.
90. Zohar Ḥadash, fol. 22d.
91. See note 4 above.
The author of the *Tikkunei ha-Zohar* borrowed from the second of the aforementioned tales when he wrote the story of R. Kruspedai.\(^93\) Again, the relevant portion of this tale may be retold as follows: After the death of R. Kruspedai his friends gather at his house. However, they do not inform the sage’s mother of his death for fear that it will hasten her own demise. Nevertheless, from their discussion she senses that something is amiss. When she discovers that the lamp that shone when her son was alive had grown dark, the distraught mother sets out to search for her son. At a fork in the road she finds a dove, once again described as a faithful messenger, and she adjures the bird to determine whether her son is alive or dead. When the dove returns in the evening, tearing its feathers and excavating a grave-like hole in the dirt, R. Kruspedai’s mother learns the truth and dies of grief.

Perhaps the most significant discussion of ornithomancy from the era of Nachmanides and Jacob b. Sheshet to the generation of Isaac Luria is that found in the *Tikkunei ha-Zohar*.\(^94\) The text, which elaborates upon motifs found in the Zohar, associates ravens with the malevolent influence of Saturn. The author claims that ornithomancy involves “leilot” -- impure spirits whose name explicitly refers to the black of the night, and implicitly to Lilith, queen of the demons -- that dwell beneath ravens’ wings. Whereas Lilith reveals imminent decrees through the movements of the raven’s head, body, wings, and tail, Samael, represented by the primordial serpent, is said to “ride the call of the raven.” These demonic beings, which draw their power from the principle of Judgement (*Gevurah*), are entrusted with the transgressions of man and, consequently, know of the punitive decrees that must follow.

The *Tikkunei ha-Zohar*, unlike other texts that we have considered, revels in the details of divination.\(^95\) Thus, a broken call akin to the *shevarim* of the shofar portends misfortune; the call of the raven reminiscent of the *teki`ah, teru`ah, teki`ah* of the shofar augurs a rapid series of misfortunes preceded and followed by more merciful decrees. Similarly, the text reveals the significance of the ravens’ movements. An upward motion, represented by the position and intonation of the masoretic accent *revi`a*, points to a transgression the recompense for which must await the world to come; a downward motion, like the *tevir*, portents imminent punishment in this world. Another disclosure (perhaps a development of motifs in TB *Ḥulin* 63a) but rather to their location when they portend. Ravens, representatives of the “other side” akin to Amalek (Deut. 25: 17-18) and bandits, only have power when they confront one on the road.

The *Tikkunei ha-Zohar* also explores the limits of the biblical prohibition of divination in a markedly different manner than the Zohar. R. Elazar asks the question that inevitably flows

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94. Fols. 124a-b.  
95. In this aspect it is very similar to some Arabic sources on ornithomancy.
from the interpretation of ornithomancy presented above: May one divine with ravens to
discover, and hence to repent, one’s sins? His father forbids active augury, but permits
occasional recourse to unbidden portents for the sake of repentance. However, citing the
talmudic exegesis of Deut. 18:9, R. Simeon permits the study of ornithomancy and magic
for juridical purposes.

Finally, in the Tikkunei ha-Zohar, with its thicket of symbolic associations, the speech of
birds itself becomes a symbol of one state of the Shekhinah: And from the side of these
Niqqudim the Shekhinah is called “speech of all”, “speech of the ministering angels”, “speech
of the palm trees”, “speech of the winds”, “speech of the birds”, “speech of all creatures”.

Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi, a 14th century Spanish Kabbalist, deals with the speech of
animals in his commentary on Genesis:

But since the species of animals lacks the proper matter for receiving the faculty of truth,
which encompasses speech, but only possesses the vital faculty without speech, it does not
receive the “Holy Spirit” from the Shekhinah in order to speak. It is well-known that
speech is articulated in the throat, gums, tongue, teeth, and lips as ‘IH’, GYKQ, DTLNT,
ZSSRŠ, and BWMP. Animals have all these [organs] except for the teeth, and birds lack
the lips, while the neb is instead of the teeth and lips. Therefore in the case of some birds it
seems as if they have some [power of] speech, for because of the secret of transmigration
the lower status of birds compared with human beings is unlike that of the other animals.
Consider the word of the Prophet: ‘For a bird of the air may carry the utterance, And a
winged creature may report the word’ (Eccl. 10: 20). From here we come to [the subject
of] the speech of birds, to which we have already referred above as far as we are allowed
to.

It seems as if the author interprets the speech of birds in terms of the controversial doctrine of
transmigration.

R. David Ibn Abi Zimra (Radbaz, 1479-1573) remarks in his commentary on the
commandments: “It is well-known that there are powers and demons in the air which are
called “flying” (pořehot). The impure birds are their messengers to announce a message in
the world, as it is said: ‘For a bird of the air may carry the utterance, And a winged creature
may report the word’ (Eccl. 10: 20). If someone knows this art, he has knowledge of the near
future which the spirits hear from the messenger, and this is the art of augury (tayr), about
which we have already written above.” Of interest in this discussion is the focus on impure

96. TB Sanhedrin 68a.
97. Reference
98. Perush le-Pharashat Bereshit, Ed. by Moshe Ḥallamish, Jerusalem 1984, p. 237, l. 29-
p. 238, l. 8.
species and the notion that they receive their information from demons. The reference to an earlier discussion is to no. 60 where the author quotes Nachmanides’ Commentary on the Torah (cf. the notion of knowledge of the near future only and the term ṭayr).

R. Judah Loew Ben Bešalel (Maharal) of Prague (c. 1525-1609) remarks that the birds are the carriers of the divine decrees by means of their twitter because they fly in the air and have a finer constitution and are less material than the other animals. He remarks that amongst all the creatures, the birds above all are [only] capable of one thing, known from their twitter and names. Some birds predict cruelty, like the raven; others charity (ḥasidut), like the swallow (ḥasidah); yet others lovingkindness (raḥamim), like the vulture (raḥam).

Isaac Luria

R. Isaac Luria (1534-1572) had the gift of understanding the language of birds in general and that of the raven in particular. The different genres that comprise the Lurianic corpus amplify one another in this aspect. Thus, in his introduction to Sha’ar ha-Hakdamot, Ḥayyim Vital reports that his teacher has many supranatural gifts; amongst them, knowledge of the speech of trees, birds, and angels, and of physiognomy. According to Elleh Toledot Yishak, a tract attributed to Vital he also understood birds that are mute (aves mudos).

An example of Luria’s proficiency in the language of birds is found in Sha’ar ha-Kawwanot: One day, when they were in the fields the Ari explained to his students the subject of “the parting of the Red Sea” which the Rashbi had considered as a deep secret, a raven passed over his head screeching as usual. The Ari answered him: “Barukh Dayyan ha-Emet” (i.e., the Berakhah said over evil tidings, cf. TB Berakhot 60). The reason for this particular answer was, as the Ari informed Vital, that the raven had informed him that because he had revealed this secret to every one publicly, it was decreed that his son would die. Accordingly happened, his son fell ill that same night and died after three days. In one version of the story of Luria’s own death, the announcement of his imminent demise is made...

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100. Perush ha-Aggadot, vol. 4, pp. 98-9 (on TB Hulin 63a).
102. Ed. Jerusalem 1909, fol. 4a; cf. Sha’ar Rua’h ha-Kodesh, Jerusalem 1912, fol. 4b.
105. Sha’ar ha-Kawwanot, Jerusalem 1902, fol. 86b. For the discussion of parallels see Benayahu, op. cit., pp. 98-99, 197-198. With regard to the significance of this passage see Y. Liebes, “Trei Urzilin de-Ayyalta,” Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought, 10 (1992), pp. 126-148. Luria’s ability to understand the language of birds figures in two other tales that are included in the popular Shivhei ha-Ari. See Benayahu, op. cit., no. 25 (pp. 183-184) and no. 27 (p. 185).
by a raven.106

The most detailed discussion of Luria’s ability to understand the language of birds is that of Vital in Sha’ar Ru’ah ha-Kodesh.107 Although Vital pens one of the lengthiest treatments of the language of birds in Hebrew literature, his point of departure is the extraordinary character of his master, Isaac Luria, rather than a detached interest in the phenomenon. This accords well with Liebes’ characterization of Lurianic Kabbalah, particularly in its latter phases, as being rooted in the spiritual development of Luria and his closest disciple.

Thus the passage begins: “On the knowledge of the language of birds. The Rav, of blessed memory, possessed yet another [kind of] knowledge, namely, that he understood the language of birds...”. Vital begins by explaining how the powers and secrets of the Torah have been given over to the kelipot (unholy forces) Although he does not use the term “shevirah” here, he describes an analogous event in which the secrets of the Torah fell and became entrapped in the lower realms. Vital then explains how the mysteries of the Torah are revealed by birds and animals. The “princes” that govern the species, having received the secrets of the Torah when it was burned and the Temple destroyed, convey those secrets via the calls of the birds, which can be understood by the righteous. With the latter remark Vital hints at a notion that he explores toward the conclusion of this text -- namely, the idea that every creature, from the angels to the lowliest insect, is potentially, a vehicle for the revelation of secrets and decrees that contribute to the self-perfection of man.

Further, Vital informs us that the decrees of the heavenly court and the sins of man are proclaimed in all the worlds, and particularly in the lower world, ‘olam ha-‘asiyyah. He then delineates two ways that birds convey decrees from on high. First, they clear a path by means of which the spiritual decrees of the heavenly court can penetrate the dense air of the physical world. One way that birds convey the decrees is by means of their flight only. Vital informs us that these birds, known as “aves mudos” (mute birds) or “raḥam” (Egyptian vulture), are intended in Eccl. 10: 20: “For a bird of the air may carry the utterance, and a winged creature may report the word.” The second way that birds act as agents of the heavenly court is by conveying the decrees together with their calls; their own voices function as a “carrier” for the more subtle voice from on high. Vital informs us that whereas mute birds convey heavenly decrees only with their wings, birds that produce sounds convey decrees with their calls as well as their flight.

Vital then correlates different species of birds with particular sorts of decrees. Mute birds convey decrees about children that die young. The raven only conveys bad decrees,

106. Benayahu, op. cit., 347 (from the glosses of a younger contemporary of Luria). The other versions attribute the announcement to Samael (Ibid., pp. 200-202).
especially that of the plague. The hawk conveys good decrees. The swallow (golondrina) conveys good messages as well, especially that of the end of the plague. Vital then offers some additional information about one type of mute bird, namely, the “raḥam”. Vital offers a peculiar etymological account of its muteness: its silence is part of its role in the death of children too young to speak. Already some 18th century scholars pointed to the apparent contradiction between Vital’s description of the “raḥam” as mute and a passage in TB Ḥulin, 63a, which portrays the “raḥam” as a bird whose distinctive call is a good omen.

Vital concludes this passage with a discussion of two other ways in which birds and other creatures transmit secrets and decrees from on high. First, the soul of a sinner may be transmigrated in the body of a bird. Such a soul may impart wisdom acquired in a previous existence or convey heavenly decrees to which it is privy. Cf. the following story from the mouth of Samuel Vital:

I remember how one Rosh ha-Shanah when my father, my teacher, was preaching near a stream on the occasion of the Tashlikh-ceremony, we saw a frog approaching him from the water. We started to throw stones at it in order to chase it away, while my father was expounding the Torah with closed eyes, as he used to do. But when he heard the croaking of the frog he opened his eyes, rebuked us and said that a soul embodied in that frog had come to listen to his words of Torah. To honour it he then started to preach on the subject of the frog: “Why is it called “Ṣefarde’a”? Because this comes from “Ṣippor de’ah” (Bird of knowledge).

Second, a righteous soul may appear in the form (as opposed to actual incarnation in the body) of a bird. In Sefer ha-Likkuṭim we find the following interesting, if somewhat cryptic passage: From the Rav, may his memory be a blessing:

Know that from the day that the Temple was destroyed and the Torah burned Samael took the secrets and announces [them] and that amongst the planets Saturn would be associated with blackness? (le-hodi’a ukkama ba-mazzalot Shabbetai). And Samael conveys the secrets to the ravens. Therefore R. El’azar did not want to know what the raven said because he preferred the other message about R. Yose his father-in-law [which he had received from the dove], namely, that he would be saved. For the raven knows the heavenly secrets and therefore R. El’azar only wanted to hear them from the dove.

This passage is reminiscent of earlier discussions of the speech of birds, especially by Nachmanides and his disciples.

108. Cf. Tikkunei Zohar, Tikkun 48, fol. 85a-b, Tikkun 70, fols. 124a, 134a.
110. Sefer ha-Likkuṭim, Jerusalem 1913, fol. 69a.
In his “Kabbalah Ma’asit we-Alkhimiyah”, a comprehensive recipe book, Vital himself gives a recipe for the acquisition of the ability to understand the language of the raven:

When one's wife is pregnant one should bury a raven's head on the roof of one's house, after one has put dry coriander seeds in the orifices [eye sockets etc.]. When she gives birth one should take the coriander which is growing from the raven's skull, extract its juice and put it on the palate of the child before it has sucked or tasted anything. When it grows up, the child will understand the language of ravens.  

Moshe Mizrachi, an acquaintance of Vital in Damascus, introduces his account with Solomon’s gift to understand the language of animals, and then continues:

The hoopoe (tarnegol ha-bar) started to speak to the king and to tell him secrets and words of wisdom about the black raven who speaks true things. He said: When you meet him (the raven) on the road and he comes towards you and speaks words beginning with the letter Quf, it is a good omen. If you need a wife his intention is to inform that you will have sexual intercourse and will have a relationship, for the letter Quf [indicates] that you will overcome your shame and will marry.

Other examples of the interpretation of the speech of the raven by the woodcock are: If he begins with the letters Yud, Pe, Alef, it indicates that mourning will come soon. If he begins with Bet, Yud, Resh, it is an omen of something really good. When he speaks [words] with ‘Ayin, Alef and Dalet something good will occur to you soon through someone unknown to you. Mizrachi gives the following recipe for the actual acquisition of the supernatural talent to understand the speech of birds: “Bind a raven that is totally black, [and keep it like that] until he dies; cut him open, take his fat out, smear it on your face, and go outside.”

Menasseh Ben Israel

112. See section on folk-literature above.
115. See ibid.
116. See ibid.
Menasseh Ben Israel (1604-1657) quotes Maimonides’ halakhic ruling against the veracity of ornithomancy and Nachmanides’ argument in favour of it extensively in his Sefer Nishmat Ḥayyim, in a chapter that “will show with strong arguments that the science of ornithomancy (Ḥokhmah ha-ṭayy) and the interpretation of the speech of birds is true.”

Menasseh’s own opinion, as the title already indicates, is that Nachmanides’ theory is correct. Menasseh himself develops a theory of a hierarchy of supernal beings who pass the divine decrees from heaven to our world. On top are the holy exalted angels who pass the decrees on to the aerial spirits (ḥa-ruḥot ha-awiriyim), and these to the earthly spirits, who inscribe these decrees in the birds. Below these are the magicians who can interpret the twitter and flight of the birds by their association with demons. As Menasseh remarks himself, a similar theory framed in different terms had been put forward by the author of the Zohar. Menasseh’s argument for the veracity of ornithomancy is that it is a phenomenon confirmed by our senses, and that our mind is too small to comprehend it.

For proof he quotes the story from Aristotle’s Historia Animalium about the ravens, who, “about the time that the mercenaries of Medius were destroyed at Pharsalus, deserted their places around Athens and the Peloponnese.” However, while Aristotle sees this as an indication that the ravens “have some perception of communication with each other”, Menasseh Ben Israel interprets it as an indication for their supernatural communication with God. Further proof adduced by him is the story from Josephus Flavius’ Antiquities about the owl appearing to Agrippas, the grandson of Herodes. According to the interpretation given by the German augurer, he would soon be released from prison and be crowned king. However, a second appearance of the bird to him would mean that he would die soon. Accordingly happened. Other sources quoted by Menasseh Ben Israel confirming his argument, are classical authors like Ovidius, stating that since the birds fly in the sky, close to the Gods, they are as their intimates (ba’alei sodam), and the Renaissance Jewish author Abraham Farissol.

Although agreeing that birds sometimes tell the future by means of their twitter and flight, Menasseh Ben Israel refutes the opinion of those scholars who maintain that they possess the

117. Sefer Nishmat Ḥayyim, repr. Israel 1968, fols. 56b-57b.
119. HA 618B13-17.
faculty of individual speech (*dibbur peraṭ*). One of these is, says Menasseh, Apollonius of Tyana. For according to his biographer Philostratus, Apollonius of Tyana one day gave a discourse to his audience on the subject of communism. He told them that he had seen a flock of sparrows in a state of utter excitement after the arrival of one of their mates, and how soon thereafter they all flew away. Apollinius’ interpretation of this event was that that particular bird had told them about a sack of wheat that had fallen from the back of a donkey, and had burst open, so that the wheat was now lying around all over on the ground. After the birds had heard about this, they went off for that place to take their share. And a visit to the place by the audience confirmed his words.\(^\text{122}\)

Hayyim Joseph David Azulai (1724-1806) counted the language of birds and other creatures among the 15 categories of wisdom upon which he elaborated in his *Midbar Kedemot*.\(^\text{123}\)

**Hasidic literature**

In a famous story featuring in the hagiography of the Ba‘al Shem Tov and entitled “The language of animals”, the Besht explains to Aryeh Leib of Polonnoye after long entreatment the phenomenon of the language of the birds, which the latter was so eager to learn. According to the Besht, “the language of each animal of the upper chariot descends to the lower animals, beasts, and birds. The wise man who can understand and examine everything in its upper source in the upper chariot will be able to comprehend the origin of all and the details and the means of the speech of the animals, beasts, and birds.”\(^\text{124}\) During this exposition the Besht also revealed to him “awesome and wonderful secrets until he knew the matter [of the language of the birds] thoroughly. According to the theory of the Besht knowledge of the language of birds can only be acquired by a wise man. With this supernatural talent the wise man can “understand and examine everything in its upper source in the upper chariot”, and will be able to “comprehend the origin of all”.

The theory of the Besht, attaches, as may be clear, a very high value to the understanding of the language of the birds, and regards it as a way to achieve knowledge not of the things of this world, but of those in the divine world of the chariot. It is an inversion and reevaluation of the Kabbalistic doctrine expounded above, which associated this knowledge with profane mundane things.\(^\text{125}\)


\(^{125}\) On Hasidism as continuation and innovation of Kabbalah see, for instance, Rivka
The negative typology of the raven is inverted in the Torah commentary of Elimelech of Lyzhansk (1717-1787), in his comment upon the verse and sent out the raven (Gen. 8: 7):

This means that Scripture counts and estimates the rank of the righteous that he created in his world; and sent out etc. means that he sent the righteous to the world; the raven: this means that there are people who were created by God for enterprise in good faith, so that they would feed his children and the children of his house, as the Talmud says to announce about those people who do not want to feed their children: “The raven cares for its young, but that man does not care for his children”;126 raven also means sweetness (metiqut), because he is pleasant and sweet in the eyes of God, and in the eyes of men, for he deals in good faith. And this is “and sent out the raven”, namely, the righteous, who are called “raven” (‘orev).127

The raven is ranked even higher than the dove, as Elimelech states: “The second rank is Then he sent out the dove (Gen. 8: 8): “This indicates the perfect righteous (ha-Saddik ha-shalem) who is called “dove”.

Denise Levertov, a contemporary poet living in New York and descending from Shneur Zalman of Lyady, the founder of Ḥabad Ḥasidism, writes in a poem entitled “Illustrious Ancestors”:

The Rav
of Northern White Russia declined
in his youth, to learn the
language of birds, because
the extraneous did not interest him; nevertheless
when he grew old it was found
he understood them anyway, having
listened well, and as it is said, ‘prayed
with the bench and the floor.’ He used
what was at hand - as did
Angel Jones of Mold, whose meditations
were sewn into coats and britches.
Well, I would like to make,
thinking some line still taut between me and them,
poems direct as what the birds said,
hard as a floor, sound as a bench,
mysterious as the silence when the tailor
would pause with his needle in the air.

126. TB Ketubbot 49b.
Ornithomancy in Jewish folk-literature

Jewish folk-literature has preserved several tales in which the hero, through his knowledge of the speech of the black raven, makes his fortune. These Jewish folktales are adaptations of a specific type of tale, whose basic elements are the acquisition of the talent of understanding the language of birds from a snake, and the utilisation of this talent by the hero. According to Noy, the replacement of the serpent by ravens in the Jewish oicotype may stem from the ambivalence of the raven in the Bible and post-Biblical literature. An example of such a folk-tale is:

Two black crows, a father and a son, were sitting in a tree, and the son said to the father: “I would like to peck out the eyes of the man who is lying there,” for the crow believed that he was dead. The other crow said do not go near him, for he pretends to be asleep, but he will catch you and kill you.” The son said to the father: “I will risk it.” Now the man had learned all the languages...and he understood what the crows were saying to one another. The crow sat down on the man’s face and was about to peck at his eyes when the man caught it and wanted to kill it...And then turning to the man the [other] crow said: “My dear man, let my son go free and I will show you a treasure full of money, and you will become very wealthy and happy.

The story has a happy ending, namely, that the man lets the bird free, and finds the treasure. Like all Jewish versions, it adds a moralistic epilogue.

Summary:

The early Israelites practised just like the neighbouring nations different forms of divination; however, we have no indication that ornithomancy was actually one of them. In the Rabbinic period the Jews living in an Hellenistic environment—where this form of divination was very popular, certainly practised it. However, to what extent this practice penetrated Jewish society is unclear. The material at hand is too scarce and too diffuse to provide a clear picture. The characterisation of ornithomancy by some Church Fathers as a “Judaizing practice” may simply have been part and parcel of an anti-Jewish bias. The Rabbinic characterisation of divination with birds as “divination proper” and thus forbidden,

and the distinction between divination by means of the raven and that with other birds, seems to indicate that this practice had made some inroads into Jewish society. In medieval Jewish literature, especially mystical literature, ornithomancy becomes an important theme, under the impact of the Arabic environment. The traditions adopted by the Jews from the Muslims in this particular period underwent different transformations as they encounter medieval rationalism such as the gaonic interpretation cited by Nachmanides, or kabbalistic interpretations such as those by Nachmanides, the Zohar, Tikkunei ha-Zohar etc. The idea of the birds as carriers of heavenly messages based on the Biblical verse “For a bird of the air may carry the utterance, And a winged creature may report the word” (Eccl. 10: 20) became the central theme discussed and expanded upon by the Kabbalists. Nachmanides’ theory on divination with birds is of central importance since he was the font of kabbalistic wisdom for generations of scholars and since his authentification of this practice was cited at length. In certain traditions of the Zohar and Tikkunei ha-Zohar ornithomancy is considered to be a demonic praxis, a form of black magic, associated with demons, impure spirits, Lilith and Samael. In Hasidic literature we find a reevaluation and inversion of the Kabbalistic doctrine of ornithomancy as a demonic practice in the theory of the Besht, who regards the knowledge of the language of the birds as a way to achieve knowledge of the divine chariot, while Elimelech of Lyzhansk ranks the raven as even higher than the dove.