Divination as a Literary Tool:
Examples from the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Egyptian Texts

Beyond its primary function to facilitate the communication between the divine and human spheres, the phenomenon of divination also has another function: it serves as a powerful literary tool in narrative texts. This paper will argue that presenting a message within a literary divinatory framework helps to convey its meaning to an audience and increases its level of authority. The role of divination in texts will be explored on the basis of examples from the Hebrew Bible and ancient Egyptian sources. While 'biblical prophecy' has been thoroughly studied, this paper seeks to focus on other forms of divinatory practices chosen as literary settings. Different types of such practices to be examined include prophecy, oneiromancy, oracles and necromancy. Case studies will range from divine dreams in the biblical texts and accounts of royal message-dreams from New Kingdom Egypt to necromantic examples of Egyptian instruction literature in which a deceased person shares their knowledge with the living. Thinking of these texts as part of a wider corpus of 'divinatory literature' will provide new grounds for comparing these text and will be particularly insightful for studying relationships of power and the relationship between divine and human agency in divination.