

The Practice of Witchcraft in the Scriptures

Roy B. Zuck

WITCHCRAFT TODAY

In recent years, witchcraft--the alleged power to cast spells of influence on people or events--has become almost commonplace in America. The publishing of books on how to practice witchcraft¹; the offering of courses on witchcraft at the University of Alabama, New York University, and other schools; the scheduling of radio and television interviews with self-claimed witches; the publishing of articles in large circulation daily newspapers--all these offer tips on how to cast curses or spells.

Involvement in witchcraft used to be limited to the eccentric few, but is now the experience of many. For example, an article in *The Wall Street Journal*² describes a thirty-four-year-old woman who cast a love spell on a friend she just started dating. In her New York apartment she drew around her a "magic circle" on a sheet on the floor with a stick of charcoal. Then as incense swirled around her and as candles flickered, she chanted, "By all the names of princes and by the ineffable name on which all things are created, I conjure you . . ." Louise Huebner, the so-called official witch of Los Angeles, explains in her book *Power through Witchcraft*³ how to cast spells of love to lure a person with whom one is having

¹ *Books in Print 1970* (New York, 1970) II, 1757. Almost 100 titles of books on witchcraft are listed.

² October 23, 1967.

³ Louise Huebner, *Power through Witchcraft* (Los Angeles, 1969).

romantic problems, spells of emotional bondage, money spells, and so forth.⁴

Some present-day witches meet monthly in covens, usually when the moon is full. A coven consists of six males called warlocks, six females, and a high priest or priestess. They also hold eight festivals a year, with the most significant one being on Halloween. In these meetings spells of influence are conjured either for the benefit of others (to heal physically or to help in numerous other ways), or for the harm (physical or otherwise) of others. The former is commonly known as white magic and the latter as black magic.

Dr. Kurt Koch, noted German theologian and pastor, has counseled thousands of persons entangled in various forms of occultism. He reports that through black magical powers, witches are able to bring upon others oppression, disease, harassment, and even death. Through white magic, persons have been healed, crops have improved, protection from harm has been maintained, and so forth.⁵

Many missionaries report having witnessed evidences of the supernatural power of witchcraft in foreign lands. But the American public at large has only recently been confronted directly with the open display of these powers on a wide scale.

What does the Bible say about witchcraft? Are instances of magic charming with incantations recorded in the Scriptures? How does God view this practice? Is it a harmless pastime or a dangerous engagement with demonic forces? An understanding of what the Bible teaches on this subject will better enable one to analyze and counteract the present-day growth of witchcraft.

WITCHCRAFT IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Supernatural powers possessed by the "magicians" of Egypt and of Babylon were not unlike the powers and the chantings of some witches today.

⁴ In addition to this spell-casting power, there are at least three other kinds of occultic powers: (1) power to foretell the future, (2) power to communicate with the dead (spiritism) or with the living (telepathy) without the use of the physical senses, and (3) power to locate hidden objects or to cause objects to appear, move, or disappear without the physical senses. Persons possessing one of these kinds of ability may also have one or more of the others.

⁵ Kurt E. Koch, *Between Christ and Satan* (Grand Rapids, 1961), pp. 65-89; *Occult Bondage and Deliverance* (Grand Rapids, 1970), pp. 20-22; *The Devils Alphabet* (Grand Rapids, n.d.), pp. 20-25, 28-31, 37, 75, 76, 122, 123.

The morning after the Pharaoh (of Joseph's day) dreamed about seven fat cows devoured by seven thin ones and seven full ears of corn consumed by seven thin ones, he called in his magicians to interpret the dream (Gen. 41:1-8). The word translated "magicians" in the Authorized Version occurs twice in this chapter (41:8, 24). It is the word **חֲרָטְמִים**, which comes from **חָרַט** "stylus" and literally means "scribes" or "engravers." They were "men of the priestly caste, who occupied themselves with the sacred arts and sciences of the Egyptians, the hieroglyphic writings, astrology, the interpretation of dreams, the foretelling of events, magic, and conjuring, and who were regarded as the possessors of secret arts ..."⁶ Kidner suggests these magicians were "expert in handling the ritual books of priesthood and magic."⁷

In Moses' and Aaron's contest with Pharaoh the Egyptian magicians duplicated three of the miracles: rods were turned to snakes (Exod. 7:11), water was turned to blood (7:22), and frogs appeared (8:7). However, the magicians could not produce lice, as Aaron did (8:18). The three demonstrations of their magical powers were accompanied by "enchantments" or "incantations," a word from the verb **לָוַה** meaning "to wrap tightly or to envelop" and thus suggesting secret, mysterious ways. Jehovah's supremacy over these magicians is demonstrated in a threefold way: (1) their snakes were devoured by Aaron's (7:12), (2) Aaron's miracles did not require incantations, and (3) they were unable to duplicate the plague of lice.

The same word for "magicians" is listed along with names for other occultists in the book of Daniel. Nebuchadnezzar called in magicians, sorcerers, Chaldeans (Dan. 2:2) and wise men (2:27) to interpret his image dream, but they were unable to do so. Also these occultists were unable to interpret Nebuchadnezzar's dream of a large tree (4:7).⁸

The word "witch" occurs twice in the Authorized Version—in Exodus 22:18 and Deuteronomy 18:10. In both occurrences the Hebrew word is a piel participle from **כָּשַׁף**, "to practice sorcery," and could be translated "sorcerer" or "sorceress." Unger explains that this Hebrew word denotes "one who practices magic by using

⁶ C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament, The Pentateuch*, trans. by James Martin (Edinburgh, 1866), 1, 349.

⁷ Derek Kidner, *Genesis* (Chicago, 1967), p. 195.

⁸ The "astrologers" in Daniel may better be translated "chanters" that is, persons with magical ability through incantations.

occult formulas, incantations, and mystic mutterings."⁹ J. S. Wright points out that this root verb "probably means 'to cut,' and could refer to herbs cut for charms and spells."¹⁰

God's attitude toward witchcraft is bluntly stated in Exodus 22:18, "Thou shalt not suffer a witch (מכשפה) to live." "There must not be found among you anyone who makes his son or daughter pass through the fire, anyone practicing divination or soothsaying, observing omens, applying sorcery (משף), a charmer, a medium, a wizard, or a necromancer. For all who do these things are offensive to the Lord" (Deut. 18:10-12, Berkeley). God gave these stringent orders in order to preserve the Israelites from spiritual contamination with the degraded occultic practice of Canaan.¹¹

The profession of the sorcerers in both Egypt and Babylon along with the magicians and the enchanters in Babylon "is condemned through the O.T. as representing black magic."¹²

Jezebel, the wicked queen of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, was deeply involved in witchcraft ("her sorceries were many," 2 Kings 9:22). Therefore Joram asked how there could be any peace in Israel so long as Jezebel's magical practices prevailed. This "cursed woman" (9:34) died a violent death (9:33-35), which is typical of the fate of so many who are involved in this kind of evil practice.

King Manasseh of Judah practiced numerous kinds of occultism, including spiritism and magical sorcery (2 Chron. 33:6). God called these deeds "abominations" and stated that Manasseh had "done wickedly" (2 Kings 21:11). Therefore Manasseh and his kingdom suffered greatly (21:10-16). "The term 'abomination' has the clear connotation of outrageously affronting God by contaminating His holy worship with the adoration of finite, polluted, false deities."¹³ It is certainly shameful that the chief monarch of God's people fell to such low depths of sin.

In Jehoiakim's reign, just before the Babylonian Captivity of Judah, Jeremiah warned Judah that her occultic leaders were false in predicting that she would not become subservient to Babylon

⁹ Merrill F. Unger, *Biblical Demonology* (Wheaton, II, 1952), p. 153.

¹⁰ J. S. Wright and Kenneth A. Kitchen, "Magic and Sorcery," *The New Bible Dictionary* (1962), p. 766.

¹¹ The Ras Shamra tablets indicate that the Canaanites practiced many magical arts. See Cyrus A. Gordon, *Ugaritic Literature* (Rome, 1949), p. 94.

¹² James A. Montgomery, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Daniel* (Edinburgh, 1927), p. 143.

¹³ Merrill F. Unger, *The Haunting of Bishop Pike* (Wheaton, II, 1971), p. 92.

(Jer. 27:9-10). This points up two things: (1) an entire nation can become susceptible to the influences of occultists, and (2) many of the seers' and sorcerers' predictions are not reliable.

God does not let sorcery go unpunished. Through Isaiah He informed Babylon that within one day she would lose her children and her husband, meaning that her people would be taken captive and her king killed (Isa. 47:9). This was fulfilled by the attack of Cyrus--in spite of her sorceries and incantations (47:9). "Babylon was famed for expiations or sacrifices, and other incantations, whereby they tried to avert evil and obtain good."¹⁴ In fact, "Babylonia was the birthplace of astrology from which sprung the twelve-fold division of the day, the horoscope and sun-dial (Herod. ii. 109) ; but it was also the home of magic, which pretended to bind the course of events, ..."¹⁵

The word "incantation" in Isaiah 47:9, 12 is **כַּחַר**, which could be rendered "spell" or "charm." It comes from the root which means "to unite or bind."

Isaiah sarcastically challenged Babylon to continue on in her incantations and magical practices, in her effort to avert the invasions of the Medes and Persians (47:12-13). But the efforts of Babylon's magicians and astrologers to save their nation were doomed to failure (47:14-15). This poignantly illustrates that sorcery is incapable of exercising power over God's plans.

The ancient world was deeply entrenched in occultism. Not only were the nations Canaan, Israel, Judah, and Babylon engaged in witchcraft; Assyria too was an active participant in the black arts.¹⁶ The city of Ninevah, known for its bloody atrocities and torturous inhumane treatment of its prisoners, is called "the mistress of sorceries (**כַּשְׁפִּים**)" (Nah. 3:4). Entire nations ("families") were subjugated by her witchcraft.

Witchcraft will not continue indefinitely. When the Messiah, Israel's Prince of Peace, returns (Mic. 5:2-5), He will deprive Israel of any possible reliance on material strength (5:10, 11). In addition, "all man-made religions--with their sorceries, diviners, idols,

¹⁴ Robert Jamieson, A. R. Faussett, and David Brown, *A Commentary, Critical, Experimental, and Practical, on the Old and New Testaments* (London and Glasgow [1866]), III, 712.

¹⁵ Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Prophecies of Isaiah*, trans. by James Martin (Edinburgh, 1877), 11, 242.

¹⁶ For details on Assyro-Babylonian magic, see Wright and Kitchen, *The New Bible Dictionary*, pp. 770, 771, where numerous firsthand sources are cited.

shrines, and cities devoted to idolatry-by which Israel has been led astray, Jehovah will pluck up"¹⁷ (5:12-14).

Malachi also refers to the removal of witchcraft as part of the future judgment on the nation Israel at the Lord's return. The Lord will be "a swift witness against the sorcerers" (Mal. 3:5). This judgmental attitude of the Lord toward sorcery and its practitioners indicates that witchcraft has a defiling effect on Israel. Complete removal of every trace of this sin is necessary to prepare Israel for the millennium.

WITCHCRAFT IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

In the New Testament there are several striking examples of the clash of Christianity with demonic magic.

Simon, of Samaria, had gained a great following through his practicing of witchcraft (**μαγεύων**, participle). People on all levels of society ("from the least to the greatest") followed him for some time (Acts 8:10, 12). They were amazed¹⁸ because of his magical arts (**μαγείαις**, 8:12) and his claim that he was "some great one" (8:9). So overwhelmed and deceived were they by his power that they claimed, "This man is the great power of God" (8:10). However, on hearing the Gospel from Philip, Simon believed and was baptized. Interestingly, Simon himself was amazed as he saw that the miracles Philip performed were far greater than his own (8:13). This points to the superiority of God's power over that of sorcery.

The noun **μάγοι**, translated "wise men" in Matthew 2:1, 16, is related to the verb **μαγεύω**. However, men from the East (Persia or Arabia) were not sorcerers like Simon. They were experts in philosophy, religion, astronomy, and medicine. Barnes suggests that **μάγοι** "came afterwards to signify those who made use of the knowledge of those arts for the purpose of imposing on mankind-astrologers, soothsayers, necromancers, fortunetellers, etc. Such persons pretended to predict future events by the positions of the stars, and to cure diseases by incantations, etc."¹⁹ Delling states that the specific meaning of **μάγος** was "a member of the Persian priestly caste" and then came to mean more generally a possessor of super-

¹⁷ E. Leslie Carlson, "Micah," *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* (Chicago, 1962), p. 858.

¹⁸ The Authorized Version has "bewitched" but the word is **ἐξίστημι**.

¹⁹ Albert Barnes, *Barnes' Notes on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids; reprint, 1962), p. 430.

natural knowledge and ability, or one who practices magical arts, or figuratively, a deceiver.²⁰

It is noteworthy that on each of Paul's missionary journeys he confronted some form of satanic occultic powers. On Paul's first journey, Bar-Jesus, a Jewish sorcerer (μάγος) who was also called Elymas, opposed Barnabas and Saul on the island of Cyprus. Bar-Jesus tried to prevent Sergius Paulus the governor from turning to the Lord (Acts 13:6-8). Perhaps Bar-Jesus sensed that if the governor accepted Christ, Bar-Jesus would be ousted as the governor's sorcerer. Saul denounced Bar-Jesus with strong words: "O full of all deceit and all mischief,²¹ thou child of the devil, thou enemy of all righteousness, wilt thou not cease to pervert the right ways of the Lord?" (13:10) In this denunciation Paul indicates that witchcraft is deceiving, satanic, the opposite of righteousness, and a spiritual perversion.

At Ephesus many of the Christian converts confessed to having engaged in magical practices. Many of those burned their books (apparently volumes with instructions on the performance of magical arts). The words "magical arts" in the New Scofield Reference Bible are the translation of περιέργα, a word meaning irrelevant, trifling, or curious (Acts 19:19).

In Galatians 5:20 witchcraft is listed among the "works of the flesh." The word for witchcraft here is φαρμακεία (from which comes our word "pharmacy" from φάρμακον, a medicine, poison, magic potion, or drug), which is the preparing and giving of medicine. From the primary notion of administering medicines and drugs, the word came to mean preparing and giving magical potions possibly with incantations.²²

The practice of witchcraft will continue in the tribulation period. As Revelation 9:21 makes clear, the people not killed by God's trumpet judgments will not repent of their murders, sorceries (φαρμακειῶν), fornication, nor thievery. The gross sins listed along with φαρμακεία in Galatians 5:19-21 and Revelation 9:21 are clear

²⁰ G. Delling, "μάγος," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. by Gerhard Kittel and trans. by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, 1967), IV, 356-57.

²¹ The word rendered "mischief" (ῥαβιουργία) "denotes properly facility of acting, and then sleight of hand; sly, cunning arts, by which one imposes on another, and deceives him with a fraudulent intention" (Barnes, p. 457).

²² Unger, *Biblical Demonology*, p. 154.

evidence that God considers this practice a serious judgment-deserving transgression.

In the latter half of the tribulation, one reason ecclesiastical Babylon will be destroyed is that she will have deceived many nations by her practices in witchcraft (φαρμακεία, Rev. 18:23). Sorcerers (φαρμακοίς²³) will have no part in the New Jerusalem (Rev. 22:15) for they will be cast into the lake of fire (21:8).

CONCLUSION

Several things become evident from this study of the practice of witchcraft as recorded in the Old and New Testaments.

First, witchcraft is *demonic*, opposing all that is godly. Egyptian and Babylonian magicians were in direct opposition to Jehovah and His followers; Manasseh's witchcraft was wicked and an abomination to the Lord; witchcraft will be cleansed from Israel before the millennium; Bar-Jesus, who withstood the ministry of Paul, was an enemy of righteousness; witchcraft is one of the works of the flesh; and sorcerers will be cast into the lake of fire.

Second, witchcraft is *deceitful*. At first glance the performances of the Egyptian magicians appeared identical with those of Aaron, but in actuality were less powerful. Simon, the Samaritan sorcerer, deceived many for a long time by means of his magical powers. Bar-Jesus was "full of all deceit." And ecclesiastical Babylon will deceive many nations. Obviously, then, satanic powers are noted for their blinding deception.²⁴ Because Satan performs miracles "with limitless deceit" (2 Thess. 2:9-10, Berkley), masquerading as an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14), many "yield to deluding spirits" (1 Tim. 4:1, Berkeley).

Third, witchcraft is *deteriorating* and *destructive*. God ordered the Israelites to put witches (sorcerers) to death lest His people become contaminated spiritually. Jezebel's involvement in this sin resulted in her own violent death, and Judah suffered greatly because of Manasseh's witchcraft. Koch cites numerous modern-day examples of persons who have suffered physical harm, mental depression, emotional upheaval, and spiritual defeat as a result of dabbling in black or white magic.²⁵ Experimentation with any form of witchcraft is highly dangerous. Those who participate in witchcraft

²³ The word is used by the Septuagint several times to translate מכשפים.

²⁴ See Koch, *Occult Bondage and Deliverance*, pp. 20-22.

²⁵ See books cited in footnote 5.

do so to the serious detriment and endangerment of their own souls.

Fourth, witchcraft is *doomed*. Though sorcerers may have tremendous supernatural powers because of their subjugation to and alignment with demonic forces, God's power is superior. A person trapped by magical practices can experience deliverance from that bondage through faith in Christ (Heb. 2:14; Col. 1:13; 1 John 4:4). The wise believer refuses to toy with any form of sorcery or witchcraft. Instead he continually appropriates the whole armor of God, he claims the protective power of the blood of Jesus Christ, and steadfastly resists the devil.²⁶ Only in this way can the power of witchcraft be broken and its growth be counteracted.

²⁶ For more on how to obtain deliverance from witchcraft, see Roy B. Zuck, "The Occult Craze," *Moody Monthly*, April, 1971, pp. 28-29, 49-50; Koch, *Occult Bondage and Deliverance*, pp. 85-128.

This material is cited with gracious permission from:

Dallas Theological Seminary
3909 Swiss Ave.
Dallas, TX 75204
www.dts.edu

Please report any errors to Ted Hildebrandt at: thildebrandt@gordon.edu