

MAGIC AND REDEMPTION

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1 Magic and the Christians Scriptures

Thus says the Lord GOD: Woe to the women who sew magic bands upon all wrists, and make veils for the heads of persons of every stature, in the hunt for souls. Will you hunt down souls belonging to my people and keep your own souls alive? You have profaned me among my people for handfuls of barley and for pieces of bread, putting to death souls who should not die ... therefore you shall no more see false visions nor practice divination. I will deliver my people out of your hand. And you shall know that I am the LORD. Ezek 13:18f. (ESV)

The great narrative of Salvation history is set against a backdrop of struggle and conflict. In this drama the Enemy comes to kill, steal, and destroy, but Jesus comes to give life abundantly.² The imprint of death, decay, and rebellion, sin's bitter fruit, cries out for renewal, healing, and redemption. By the cross we are reconciled, lives are restored, and, one day, the whole cosmos will be made whole.³ In the meantime, though, the conflict rages. We face temptation, assault, and distraction from multiple arenas: the world, the Enemy, and from our warring selves within.⁴ We are in a holy struggle.⁵

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² John 10:10.

³ Rom 8:18f.; Eph 1:3-10; 2:13-22; Col 1:13-14, 20; Rev 21.

⁴ Eph 6:12f.; Jas 4:1; 1 John 3:8.

⁵ For example, in 2 Tim 4:7 Paul says he has 'fought the good fight'; the 'fight' or 'struggle' (Greek: *ἀγών*) is, of course, in Arabic, *jihad*.

However, the battle to which we are summoned is precisely not a battle against other people; the 'warfare' of the people of God must never be a religious cover for our own ego-centric agendas or nationalisms. Ours is a struggle to live transformed lives, signposts pointing to redemption, in the corrupt and hopeless cultures, nations, and political systems we all inhabit.⁶ Ironically, our greatest opponent and most invidious threat often lies within our fallen human natures.⁷

Nonetheless, an unseen reality behind so much woe, violence and inhumanity, behind oppressive political, cultural, and religious systems is the dark, spiritual power of the Accuser.⁸ This is as true in contexts where scant attention is given to matters of magic, spirits, and the occult, as it is in contexts rife with witchcraft, and superstition: the Enemy of our souls is quite content with either of our equal, and opposite, errors—disregarding his reality or overemphasizing his power.

2 Magic, Deception and Ministry in the Arab Context

In serving among the Arabs of the Middle East one often stumbles into the consuming and controlling prevalence of magical practices and dark spiritual activity on a scale that is truly shocking.⁹ For many, turning to 'alternative' sources for answers in times of need is the default option. Working with a local congre-

⁶ Phil 1:27-30; 2:12-16; Col 2:15; 2 Tim 1:9-10; Titus 2:11-14; 1 Pet 2:9-12; 3:16.

⁷ Rom 6-7; Jas 1:14-15.

⁸ Rom 6; 1 Cor 2:6-8; 2 Cor 4:4; Eph 6:12f.; Col 2:15, 20; Rev 12, etc.

⁹ One is reminded here of the prevalence of the notion of the *jinn* (spirit beings? demonic entities?) in the Arabic-Islamic tradition. Though there is no space to expand on the matter presently, the *jinn* have left their mark from the Qur'an to *fiqh* (matters of Islamic law) to the everyday reality of the common person. Cf. Q 15:27; 27:17f.; 39f.; 32:13; 34:12f.; 41:25; 55:15; *sura al-jinn* (72); 114:6; *Encyclopedia of Islam, Second Edition: 'Djinn'* Vol. II, p. 546; Bill Musk, *Touching the Soul of Islam: Sharing the Gospel in Muslim Cultures* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2005) also contains information on the topic.

gation, it is thrilling to see significant numbers of people coming to faith, worshipping Jesus as Lord and Author of a new life. What is amazing, though, is how often part of this process of rebirth so graphically requires a relinquishing of ties and bonds to spirits and magical practices.¹⁰ Liberation must be total for it to take root.

In home visits and group meetings, we see people seeking deliverance, struggling with fear and strife due to bizarre (movie-like) phenomena in their homes (inexplicable sounds, objects spontaneously moving, music coming from empty rooms, etc.). Invariably it eventually comes out that spiritists or mediums have been consulted in the person's past.

Solutions are sought to life's issues by means of occult powers. Mediums and spiritists can at times make a considerable income from their 'trade'. Sometimes a professional will prepare a specific charm for a client; in other cases it is as mundane as a friend reading the grounds from the bottom of a glass of Arabic coffee.¹¹ Perhaps one is after fertility, the wooing of a resistant girl, success in exams, or a counter-curse on a rival family... Tragically, whatever 'answers' are provided by consorting with such spiritual powers, the seeker ends up in greater bondage, fear, and oppression than ever.¹²

We find ourselves praying for individuals to be released from such oppression and sometimes physically burning the tokens of these entanglements: for example, (*kitbe*) tiny, tightly-wrapped papers with inscriptions written all over them and then hidden in the home. Other elements include magical oils dashed on door frames used to curse an enemy, the Jewish or Muslim hand-talisman¹³ hung on the wall, a dried seahorse kept in a purse, etc... In the quest for power and 'solutions' magical charms from

¹⁰ Think for example, of the dramatic stories of demonic liberation in the Gospels (e.g., Luke 8:26f.) or Acts (e.g., chapters 16 and 19).

¹¹ In itself a potent brew for the uninitiated.

¹² The thought is not identical but similar in Luke 11:24-26.

¹³ See below.

any and all quarters will be consulted: Jewish mediums of Moroccan or Iraqi descent are often thought to be especially powerful;¹⁴ in other cases Muslim Sheikhs will be sought out, or on occasion even a village priest plays the role of 'witch doctor'.

Tragically, such practices have a long pedigree in this part of the world (think ancient Egypt and Babylon). They are deeply embedded in the cultures of the Middle East. Turning our gaze to the First Century, we are well aware of the explosive confrontation of the Gospel with the Enemy, magic spells, and spiritists when Paul brought the Gospel to proud Ephesus (Acts 19).¹⁵ And certainly, when Jesus came announcing the Kingdom of God, the first ranks of the enemy to be routed were surprisingly not the Romans, but evil powers in heavenly realms. At the stunning archaeological site of Caesarea Maritima scores of 4th Century magical inscriptions were found in the bottom of a well. Such esoteric spirituality has remained since the rise of Islam—one still hears of the practice of throwing magical curses into the cistern of an enemy in Arab villages of the Galilee.

The lure of magic as a means to power for living is as attractive as it is deceptive. The subtle deception of magic practices lies in part in its evident effect (Satan *is* active and powerful) and in part in its evident 'neutrality'. The appeal of magic lies in the fact that it claims to offer real power, while demanding so little in re-

¹⁴ For a selection of references relevant especially to Islam, Judaism, and magic see, e.g., Malik b. Anas, no. 1481 online at <http://hadith.al-islam.com/Display/Display.asp?Doc=7&Rec=2537> ('talisman and incantation for sickness'). Also Sunan Abu Dawud v.3 (H. Ahmad, trans) (New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan, 1990), p. 1089, no. 3874; *Saïd Bukhari* (M. Muhsin Khan, trans), Medina: Dar al-fikr, n.d., 8.73.89; 7.71.660-661. See too Ignaz Goldziher, 'Hebräische Elemente in muhammedanischen Zaubersprüchen,' *ZDMG* 48, 1894, 350-360; Michael Lecker, 'The Bewitching of the Prophet Muhammad by the Jews: A Note Apropos 'Abd al-Malik b. Habib's *Mukhtasar fi l-tibb*', in *Al-Qantara* 13 (1992), pp. 561-569, esp. 566f.; S. Shaked, 'Medieval Jewish Magic in Relation to Islam: Theoretical Attitudes and Genres', in B. Harry et al (eds), *Judaism and Islam: Boundaries, Communication, and Interaction* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), pp. 97-109.

¹⁵ Cf. Acts 8.9f.; 16.16f.

turn. Too often it is seen as religiously 'neutral'. In our environment, it is socially acceptable to dabble in spiritualist practices and remain a 'good Christian', 'good Jew', or 'good Muslim'. Or so it seems.

The claims and seductions of magic transcend religious and communal boundaries. For example, it is not at all uncommon in the Middle East to enter a shop and find it is 'protected' by talismans such as crucifixes, Jewish *kaf* or *khamisa*¹⁶ symbols, and even Qur'anic passages, all at the same time. Indeed 'Magic' claims in some senses not to be making any religious demands at all. Herein lies the deception:

1) It is precisely this promised access to power and success, irrespective of faith commitments, without any moral demand or call to discipleship, which is so alluring, and so destructive.¹⁷ It is the promise of 'spirituality' without the inconvenience and self-denial involved in commitment to the Creator. It is the flavor of faith, without the rigor of moral accountability. The appeal of spiritual 'junk food' is obvious; its ultimate consequences are less immediately clear to the undiscerning.

2) The claim of alternative spiritualities to be compatible with any and every religious heritage is in fact a false profession of neutrality. We do not inhabit a morally neutral universe. Two ways lie before each one of us, Life or Death, the Fear of the Lord or *willful independence from our Maker*.¹⁸ This later option, i.e., idolatry in all its forms, is tantamount to slavery—slavery to self, sin, and the basic spiritual forces at work in a broken world;¹⁹ this is the arena of magic. Its end is separation from the One who is our source of life and hope.

¹⁶ A charm styled as an inverted hand or palm, intended to protect from harm or the 'evil eye'.

¹⁷ This also applies to popular mystical and esoteric practices in the West today.

¹⁸ Deut 28-29; 30:19-20; Ps 1; Pr 9 (and throughout); Luke 16:13; Rom 6.

¹⁹ Rom 6; 1 Cor 2:6-8; 2 Cor 4:4; Eph 6:12f.; Col 2:15, 20.

3 Magic, Temptation and Idolatry

The moral neutrality of magic is an ancient myth. The siren song of magic is a temptation to idolatry, usually subtle, always corrosive. Notice, for example, that throughout Israelite history the temptation to idolatry was rarely a temptation to a flat denial of YHWH's existence or validity. No, rather the temptation was generally to violate in some way the first two commandments: You shall not have *other* gods and you shall not worship images/created things. We might say, 'You must not worship false gods, nor may you worship the One God falsely.'

The temptation throughout Israelite history was to add gods to the pantheon, to introduce a variety of gods and goddesses alongside YHWH²⁰ or to corrupt and pollute the *mode of worship*, even worship of YHWH.²¹ Sorcery and magic, just as much as sexual immorality or bowing before statues, were part of the warp and woof of pagan life and practice.²² And so explicitly and in detail, God has forbidden flirtation with magic practices, divination, fortune telling, etc., behind which lie the power of the Ancient Deceiver himself.²³ To look elsewhere besides the God of Abra-

²⁰ The ever-present temptation was to add worship of the goddess Ashera and the god Baal, or to blend YHWH with Baal. Other gods and forces were also in the running. See: 2 Chr 33; Isa 65:11; Jer 7:18; 44:17f.; Amos 5:25-26.

²¹ A constant refrain warning against idolatry in the OT is that the people will be led into corrupt (often sexually immoral) worship practices through pagan ritual. From Old to New testaments ritual prostitution was a threat to true worship of God. Other examples of the corruption of true worship abound: setting up unauthorized shrines to YHWH was a common problem; the 'golden calf' idol was possibly taken as a representation of the 'true God' who had delivered the people from Egypt; the calves of Dan and Bethel were presumably taken to be images, again, of this same 'true' god. 2 Chr 33 contains an amazing record of the syncretism of Manasseh—the pantheon of gods and practices he introduced even into the temple of YHWH. Ezek 8 is similar.

²² See the convergence of magic and idolatry, for example, in 2 Kgs 17:14-17; Mic 5:12-14 and elsewhere.

²³ Exod 22:18; Lev 19:26, 31; 20:6, 27; Deut 18:9-14; 2 Kgs 17:17; Isa 8:19; 47:12 (cf. Rev 18); 2 Chr 33:6; Rev 12:9.

ham, Isaac, and Jacob for life and hope and fulfillment is to turn away from God to idols. It is to ignore this Lord and God who has at long last spoken to us in his Son. Magic is not a neutral option, it is an addition to or an adulteration of total loyalty to God.

This degraded and desperate quest for 'success' by which the idolater is willing to adulterate their self to any and all lures is graphically depicted in the corrupt Temple worship of Ezekiel 8. In the very temple of YHWH we encounter the spectacle of Israelites attempting to simultaneously placate the *mutually opposed* Babylonian sky/star/sun gods (Ezek 8:16) *and* the Egyptian 'animal gods' (Ezek 8:9-11).²⁴

God alone is worthy of our worship, devotion, and comprehensive obedience. He alone is able to deliver the joy, purpose, and wholeness for which we all long. Life is in his hands.²⁵ *You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve* (Luke 4:8; Deut 6:13-15). This is no command from a petty and insecure deity; it is coming from our loving Father and redeeming Lord, it is the only sure prescription for a future and a hope. It is also a word from our King and Maker, to whom we will all give account.²⁶

Satan's power is real and pervasive. The influence of Magic in our world extends back through generations and suffocates peoples in a web of fear. But thanks be to God, the reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the work of the Evil One.²⁷ The liberating power of Jesus expressed in the Gospel is that much stronger; it is mighty to save and break captivities as light dawns over dark cities, dark neighborhoods, and darkened hearts.²⁸

²⁴ At least this is one reading of the evidence. See Christopher J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God* (Downer's Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), pp. 143-144.

²⁵ Neh 8:10; Job 12:10; Ps 4:7; 104; Jer 29:11; John 1:4; 10:10; Acts 3:15; Col 3:4; Heb 5:9; Jas 1:17; 1 Pet 1:8; 1 John 1:2.

²⁶ Rom 2:1-6; 11:36; 2 Thess 1:6f.; 1 Tim 6:14-16; Rev 20:11f.

²⁷ 1 John 3:8.

²⁸ Zeph 3:17; 2 Cor 10:3-6.