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Practice of Magic and Occultism in the Old Testament: Presuppositions, Responses, and God's Attitude

Original Stage

The origin of magic and occultism according to the biblical account is surprising, even shocking, because it all began in the Garden of Eden. The starting point is associated with Satan when he disguised himself in the form of a serpent, the first medium (see Gen 3:1–6). Satan, the Serpent, was cognizant of God's statements recorded in Gen 2:16–17 and directly opposed God's command by using the serpent for his purposes.

By eating from the forbidden tree, Satan promised immortality: "You will not certainly die" (Gen 3:4 NIV). Behind this statement was the lie, seduction, and allusion that Adam and Eve would be able to obtain eternal life independent of God, and this quest for everlasting life could be secured by their own action even though forbidden by God. Satan offered Eve the elevated status of even becoming like God if she followed his advice. This offer was false, but unfortunately it worked.

Before going further it is important to offer some definitions. "Magic is the power of apparently influencing the course of events by using mysterious or supernatural forces" (Oxford Dictionaries). The *World Book Encyclopedia* states that "magic is the supposed use of supernatural power by a person to control human actions or natural events" (2012:13:48). Closely related words but with specific nuances and meaning are sorcery, witchcraft, wizardry, necromancy, enchantment, spiritualism, etc. Occultism or the occult is the term which "refers to 'hidden' or 'secret' wisdom; to that which is beyond the range of ordinary human knowledge; to mysterious or concealed phenomena; to inexplicable events" (Enroth 1984:787, 788). Divination is defined as the "art or science of deducing the future or the unknown through the observation and interpretation of some facet of nature or human life, ordinarily of an unpredictable or trivial character" (Aune 1980:1:971). Spiritism or spiritualism is the belief that the spirits of dead

people can communicate with the living (see also Aune 1980:3:213–219; Schwartz and Simon 2002; Scurlock and Kuemmerlin-McLean 1992:4:464–471; Spiritualism 2012:18:796, 797).

The magic in the Genesis passage occurred when the serpent was able to speak (3:1). This is not normal, because animals do not possess the gift of speech. In the Bible, there is only one additional case when an animal was enabled to speak; namely, in the situation of Balaam's alienation and disobedience to God when his donkey suddenly talked to him twice (Num 22:28–32). This anomaly occurred only by God's supernatural intervention. However, there is a striking contrast in these two situations; the donkey's mouth was opened by the Lord but the serpent's mouth speaks directly against the Lord's command. This very unusual phenomenon of a serpent speaking should immediately have indicated to Eve that this creature was speaking with extraordinary and out-of-this-world power. The situation was portrayed with the unspoken suggestion that the serpent's ability to speak was there because of eating the forbidden fruit. Eve observed and thought from her perspective that this fruit must have supernatural power to gain special wisdom (Gen 3:6). Her empirical observations and evidence mislead her; it was a deception. The truth was bigger than what her "eyes" could see and experience.

After Adam and Eve's disobedience, the first pair tried to cover their nakedness with fig leaves, but were unsuccessful because when God appeared in the Garden of Eden and asked them the question, "Where are you?" Adam explained the reason for their hiding with the following words: "Because I was naked." Physically, Adam and Eve were covered with fig leaves, but spiritually they were exposed. Thus, their nakedness was more than physical, it pointed to their sense of shame and guilt. Disobedience always results in disaster. In spite of the tragedy, God brought the true solution to their sinful situation by giving them garments made out of skin, an allusion to God's sacrifice as explained in the proto-Gospel, the mother of all biblical prophecies: "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel" (Gen 3:15 NIV). Humans tried to cover up their problem with their own activity (righteousness by works), but God mercifully took the initiative and did for them what they could not do for themselves; namely, He covered them with the robe of His righteousness in view of the divine grace springing up proleptically from the cross (Rev 13:8). In confrontation with magic, deception, disobedience, and covering up, God reacts with blazing grace and answers with the offer of salvation.

In the Hebrew language, the term for a "serpent" is *nachash*. It is significant to notice that the Hebrew verb *nachash* "practice divination" has

a vocal connotations to the noun *nachash* “serpent” even though scholars see two different roots behind these words (see VanGemeren 1997:3:84, 85; Harris, Archer, and Waltke 1981:2:571, 572; Brown, Driver, and Briggs 1907:638), and it appears only in Piel with a meaning to “seek an omen, divine, observe signs, practice divination, learn omen” (for a different biblical vocabulary in relation to magic and the occult, see Aune 1990:3:214, 215; Kuemmerlin-McLean 1992:4:466, 467). For examples of the usage of this term, see Gen 30:27 (Laban) and 44:5 (used in relation to Joseph); Lev 19:26 (given as legislation); and 2 Kgs 21:62 and 2 Chr 33:6 (describing activities of the Judean king Manasseh).

The importance of these first observations is obvious: the devil’s promise of becoming divine (You will be like God), and his offer of immortality (You will not surely die) were connected to an invitation to live independently from God and disobey His word/command. These lies opened the way for magic, occultism, and spiritualism. Magic is the opposite of obedience and God’s holiness. Satan himself stands behind these false offers and manipulations of the truth. In my conversations with people from non-Christian religions, I realized that the desire to become divine is very strong among many of them. The deceitful offer made in the Garden of Eden, “You will be like God,” is still very pertinent. A Hindu priest in India told me: “I want to be a god.” A very high ranking Buddhist monk in Sri Lanka confessed: “I want to reincarnate into higher and higher powers, and ultimately to become god.”

Two Crucial Presuppositions for Magic, Divination, and Occultism

Wrong Understanding of God

Magic is based on the belief that the divine can be subjected to manipulations by different means (e.g., sacrifices, enchantments, and gifts) and thus is built on the wrong understanding of God. Behind this misunderstanding lies the belief that it is possible to buy God’s or the gods’ favor. According to this concept, God or god(s) need human food, drinks, sacrifices, and donations that can bring advantages to those who offer these items. The more people give the better for them. In this view of God, one may build one’s own way to heaven by performance and special deeds. One may influence God or the gods and gain courtesy and consideration by good actions. The pagan principle in worship can be summarized by the Latin phrase *do ut des* (I give in order that you give), which is the basis of magical thinking. People will do things “their” own way (not God’s way) in order to obtain the acceptance and influence of different deities and thus receive certain advantages. Manipulation of the divine, spirits, and gods can be recognized by the use of “some form of words or actions”

in order to “make them do one’s will” (Gibson 1946:40). Manipulations of the sacred are done by using signs, lies, omens, and specific formulas in the name of the “gods” or even God (see especially the practices of false prophets in the Bible) in order to get what the pronouncer desires.

It is interesting that the first manipulations outside of the Garden of Eden were made in the setting of worship: doing things in one’s own way and forcing God to accept what was offered in order to receive His blessings. This model is given in the story of Cain’s and Abel’s worship. On the basis of the narrative recorded in Gen 4:2–9, one receives significant insights concerning what true and false worship consist of. The relevant question is why did God accept the sacrifice of Abel but rejected the worship of Cain? There are at least five hints in Gen 4:3–9 that offers an awareness about the characteristics of authentic worship that are needed to avoid manipulation tactics. Characteristics of true worship recognized in that account may be summarized in the following points:

1. *The kind of sacrifice.* Abel’s sacrifice was a bloody sacrifice, but Cain offered only vegetation. A similar principle occurred with the garments of Adam and Eve after sinning that should have covered their inner nakedness. Adam and Eve tried to cover their shame and guilt by vegetation (fig leaves), but God gave them a garment of skins (allusion to a bloody sacrifice of the animal that pointed to the death of the Promised Seed, the Messiah). Thus, true worship must always be theocentric. In view of the coming Savior, the symbolism of blood played a key role.

2. *The nature of sacrifice.* Cain only brought something from the products of the land (some of the fruits of the soil; v. 3), but Abel offered the best of the best (fat portions from some of the firstborn [animals]; v. 4). True worship must be our best response to God’s love—a submission of our entire life to Him, and not only a portion of it. We cannot play, act, or pretend to worship Him. Gratitude for God’s grace and goodness leads us to give the best to Him—ourselves.

3. *Genuine motivations.* Verses 4b and 5a underline the fact that God looked first upon the persons (Cain and Abel) and then upon their sacrifices. God’s interest is in people and not only what they are doing! He looks first upon the heart in worship. True worship must be done from an unselfish heart, from true motives. Acceptable worship must always be authentic, sincere, and honest, not forced, external, or calculating.

4. *Willingness to obey.* Cain played with God; he wanted to manipulate Him through his sacrifice. This is indicated by God’s statement to Cain: “If you do what is right, will you not be accepted?” (Gen 4:7a). Cain wanted to do things in his own way without obedience, to control God, to appease Him, but Abel was willing to listen to and follow God’s instructions. True worship must be connected with a willingness to obey.

5. *Humble attitude.* The whole story teaches that people can come to God as they are but not in any manner—only with a contrite spirit and humble heart (Isa 57:15). A right attitude toward God and consequently toward humans is the key factor in worship.

Immortality of the Soul

Belief in the immortality of the soul is a second crucial presupposition necessary for occultism. Spiritism and necromancy is founded on a conviction that the living may contact the souls or spirits of dead persons. It is believed that a medium has the ability to communicate with the deceased souls and the underworld (*sheol*). However, if humans do not possess an immortal soul, then all that follows is a fabrication. It means that the spirits that appear are not human souls but satanic spirits, demons (Lev 17:7; Deut 32:17; Pss 96:5 [the LXX uses the word *daimonia*]; 106:37–39; Isa 8:19; 2 Cor 11:14). Kiuchi rightly explains: “Most probably such an act [to turn to mediums and necromancers] involves contacting satanic beings” (2007:373).

The basic question in occultism evolves around the notion of the immortality of the soul. Do humans have a soul? The basis of biblical anthropology is that we are a soul, we do not have a soul. Hans Wolff asks: “What does *nephesh* [soul] mean here [in Gen 2:7]? Certainly not soul [in the traditional dualistic sense]. *Nephesh* was designed to be seen together with the whole form of man, and especially with his breath; moreover man does not *have nephesh*, he is *nephesh*, he lives as *nephesh*” (1974:10). God created people as a vibrant animated body but not as an incarnate soul. Claude Tresmontant correctly asserts: “By applying to the Hebrew *nephesh* [soul] the characteristics of the Platonic *psyche* [soul], . . . we let the real meaning of *nephesh* escape us and furthermore, we are left with innumerable pseudo-problems (1960:94).

The Apostle Paul testifies that only God is immortal: “Who [God] alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light” (1 Tim 6:16 NIV). The expression immortal soul or the teaching that humans are born immortal or possess immortal souls or spirits, or that babies inherit immortal souls/spirits from their parents or receive them as a special gift from God, is not found in the Bible. Humans or souls are not inherently immortal. Immortality is not naturally ours, but only on the condition of a belief in Christ as one’s personal Savior. Human immortality is always derived from God. The Bible clearly attests that eternal life is God’s gift to believers only (John 3:16; 10:27, 28; 17:3; Rom 2:7; 6:22, 23; Gal 6:8). Humans have no conscious existence apart from the body, and after they die their consciousness ceases to operate. Death is a sleep or rest (Ps 13:3; John 11:11–15;

Acts 13:36; Rev 14:13). Immortality is conditional and depends on one's positive response to God's goodness, on the acceptance of the Gospel. This immortality is given to believers at the second coming of Christ (1 Cor 15:51–55; 1 Thess 4:13–18).

Tertullian (ca. 155–222) was one of the first among Christians who claimed that humans have an immortal soul (see also Athenagoras [ca. 133–190 AD] of Athens 2015, especially chapters 12–15; Clement [ca. 150–215 AD] of Alexandria 2008:5:28; Clement of Alexandria 2014:5:14). Tertullian wrote, "I may use, therefore, the opinion of Plato, when he declares, 'Every soul is immortal'" (cited in Fudge 2011:30). Oscar Cullmann challenges Tertullian's view and stands in opposition to it. He wrote a very influential book where he argued that the idea of immortality is of Greek origin (1958). Brevard Childs explains: "It has long been noticed that according to the Old Testament man does not *have* a soul, but *is* a soul (Gen 2:7). That is to say, he is a complete entity and not a composite of parts from body, soul and spirit" (1985:199).

Death causes a reversal of God's creation activity. Human identity is in His hands. Ecclesiastes says it in poetic language: "Remember him [the Creator]—before the silver cord is severed, and the golden bowl is broken; before the pitcher is shattered at the spring, and the wheel broken at the well, and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it (Eccl 12:1, 6, 7 NIV). "Spirit" here means "character" (Ps 32:2), our identity. We are not forgotten by God, our names are in the book of life (Phil 4:3; Rev 3:5; 13:8; 20:15; 21:27), and He will resurrect us to a new full life.

Recent studies in theological anthropology present excellent new views on the human being and the notion of the soul that impact our understanding of our being and immortality. David Gushee declares: "Unlike the Greek notion that the body decays while the self floats off to heaven, a biblical (especially a Jewish) understanding seems to envision no such separable existence between body and soul or spirit. When we die, all of us dies" (2005:49). Joel Green, using his background in neuroscience and biblical studies, states that we need a better understanding of biblical anthropology. He argues for the biblical wholistic view of humankind. He is for monism, not for Greek dualism, and stresses that humans are a unit and do not possess an ontologically distinct soul; therefore he rightly denies that after physical death the soul lives in an "intermediate state." He ends his study with the hope of the resurrection and powerfully declares: "Nothing in the created human being is intrinsically immortal. Resurrection and embodied afterlife are God's doing, divine gift" (2008:175). F. F. Bruce powerfully declares:

In biblical usage immortality belongs inherently to God alone; otherwise it belongs only to those to whom God gives it. Again, where human beings are concerned, immortality in the Bible is predicated of the body, not of the soul. In our Western culture, thought and language about immortality have been largely determined by Plato's doctrine of the immortality of the soul. But any attempt to combine Plato's doctrine with the teaching of the Bible can only lead to confusion. For Plato did not mean by immortality what the biblical writers mean by it, and what Plato meant by the soul is not what the biblical writers mean by the soul. (cited in Wisbrock 1990:i)

Examples of Magic, Divination, and Occultism in the Bible

Laban

Laban declares that through divination he knows that God blessed him because of Jacob's presence in his household: "If I have found favor in your eyes, please stay. I have learned by divination that the LORD has blessed me because of you" (Gen 30:27 NIV).

Joseph

It is stated by Joseph's steward that Joseph, who was now the prime minister in Egypt, supposedly used divination in order to know that his brothers tricked him with stealing his precious silver cup. The text declares: "Isn't this the cup my master drinks from and also uses for divination? This is a wicked thing you have done" (Gen 44:5 NIV). Joseph pretended to know everything by practicing magic: "What is this you have done? Don't you know that a man like me can find things out by divination" (Gen 44:15 NIV)? However, the story reveals that Joseph knew all these things without using the divination cup because he himself ordered that the cup be placed in Benjamin's sack. Joseph desired to discern if love or hatred was in their hearts.

Egyptian Magicians

The Egyptian magicians were using divination during the encounter of Moses and Aaron with Pharaoh. We read in Exod 7:11, 12 that "Pharaoh then summoned wise men and sorcerers, and the Egyptian magicians also did the same things by their secret arts: Each one threw down his staff and it became a snake. But Aaron's staff swallowed up their staffs." They were also practicing divination during the first two of 10 plagues. They were able to imitate the first plague of turning water into blood: "But the magicians did the same things by their secret arts" (Exod 7:22) as well as the second plague: "But the magicians did the same things by their secret arts; they also made frogs come up on the land of Egypt" (Exod 8:7). However, it is

stated that the magicians surrendered during the third plague: “All the dust throughout the land of Egypt became gnats. But when the magicians tried to produce gnats by their secret arts, they could not. Since the gnats were on people and animals everywhere, the magicians said to Pharaoh, ‘This is the finger of God.’ But Pharaoh’s heart was hard and he would not listen, just as the LORD had said” (Exod 8:17–19 NIV). In the sixth plague, according to Exod 9:11, the magicians themselves were affected by the plague, and their magic, different tricks, and divination was proven to be powerless. “The magicians could not stand before Moses because of the boils that were on them and on all the Egyptians.”

Balaam

Balaam’s story (Num 22–24 NIV) well articulates the idea that trying to manipulate by giving generous offerings to bend the will of God is completely futile. God is not a puppet to be changed by rich donations or flourishing supplications. It is plainly proclaimed that “there is no divination against Jacob, no evil omens against Israel” (23:23). Balak, the king of Moab, asked Balaam, the prophet of God, “Now come and put a curse on these people, because they are too powerful for me. Perhaps then I will be able to defeat them and drive them out of the land. For I know that whoever you bless is blessed, and whoever you curse is cursed” (22:6). Balaam honestly answered: “Well, I have come to you now, but I can’t say whatever I please. I must speak only what God puts in my mouth” (22:38). Three times it is stated in chapter 22 that Balaam could say only positive things about God’s people, because God cannot be manipulated by an abundance of offerings. Balaam said, “‘Build me seven altars here, and prepare seven bulls and seven rams for me.’ Balak did as Balaam said, and the two of them offered a bull and a ram on each altar. Then Balaam said to Balak, ‘Stay here beside your offering while I go aside. Perhaps the LORD will come to meet with me. Whatever he reveals to me I will tell you.’ Then he went off” (23:1). The narrative demonstrates that the prophet could not control God and skillfully influence a change in Him or alter the word of the Lord even though different manipulative tactics were used. Sadly, at the end, Balaam gave very shrewd advice to the pagan king—seduce God’s people into sin (31:16; cf. 25:1–3); and in the consequent war between the Moabites and Israel, Balaam was killed as a sign of God’s disapproval of his actions (31:8; Rev 2:14).

King Saul

The biblical narrative about Saul and the witch of Endor is very eloquent and instructive. According to 1 Sam 28, the rebellious king Saul

went to the witch of Endor because God was not communicating anymore with him. Who then spoke to Saul? A careful analysis of this incident demonstrates that Saul did not encounter the soul or spirit of the dead Samuel, who at that time was in the grave, but experienced the performance of an evil spirit who played the role of the prophet Samuel in order to completely discourage the king. Several pertinent studies of this story lead to this conclusion (see, especially, the outstanding studies of Grenville Kent 2011; 2014:141–160). Satan is a master of disguise and presented himself in the appearance of Samuel, because he can even come as an angel of light (2 Cor 11:14). The next day, lacking God's presence in his life and lost in despair, Saul committed suicide (1 Sam 31:1–6). Because God did not answer Saul in his troubling situation, he went to a forbidden source and sought a spiritualistic encounter. The narrator of 1 Chronicles clearly states that "Saul died because he was unfaithful to the LORD; he did not keep the word of the LORD and even consulted a medium for guidance, and did not inquire of the LORD. So the LORD put him to death and turned the kingdom over to David son of Jesse" (1 Chr 10:13–14 NIV) (for other important insights see Galenieks 2005:290–298; Ndyssia 2015:98–100).

Queen Jezebel

Queen Jezebel was involved in witchcraft as 2 Kgs 9:22 testifies: When Joram saw Jehu he asked, "'Have you come in peace, Jehu?' 'How can there be peace,' Jehu replied, 'as long as all the idolatry and witchcraft of your mother Jezebel abound?'" (NIV).

Isaiah

The Prophet Isaiah mentions that God's people had fallen into magical practices: "They are full of superstitions from the East; they practice divination like the Philistines and embrace pagan customs" (Isa 2:6 NIV; see also 3:2, 3; 57:3; and 47:9, 13, for Babylonian practices; cf. Nah 3:4 concerning Nineveh's sorceries and witchcraft). The Creator God is the one who stands against these wrong actions: "This is what the LORD says—your Redeemer, who formed you in the womb: I am the LORD, the Maker of all things, who stretches out the heavens, who spreads out the earth by myself, who foils the signs of false prophets and makes fools of diviners, who overthrows the learning of the wise and turns it into nonsense" (Isa 44:24, 25 NIV).

King Manasseh

King Manasseh was the worst king in Judah (like Ahab in the North), a symbol of evil, yet he reigned 55 years. He practiced idolatry as no one

had before. He offered his sons to foreign gods as living sacrifices and exercised magic, divination, and spiritism. The biblical text says regarding him: "He sacrificed his own son in the fire, practiced divination, sought omens, and consulted mediums and spiritists. He did much evil in the eyes of the LORD, arousing his anger" (2 Kgs 21:6 NIV). Similar things are written in the Chronicles: "He [Manasseh] sacrificed his children in the fire in the Valley of Ben Hinnom, practiced divination and witchcraft, sought omens, and consulted mediums and spiritists. He did much evil in the eyes of the LORD, arousing his anger" (2 Chr 33:6 NIV). Manasseh murdered Isaiah and many other prophets and people. According to the pseudepigraphic writing, *The Ascension of Isaiah*, Isaiah was sawed in half during his reign. Nevertheless, according to 2 Chr 33:12–16, King Manasseh repented while he was in Assyrian captivity, regained his throne, and introduced a large reformation in Israel. What a miracle of conversion! This is great news: God saves repentant sinners. Even those people who are caught in witchcraft can experience genuine repentance and be redeemed by God's grace and His power. There is hope of salvation even for diviners and magicians. Praise the Lord!

Micah

The Prophet Micah speaks about God's judgment on those who practice magic: "I will destroy your witchcraft and you will no longer cast spells" (Mic 5:12 NIV).

Ezekiel

Ezekiel describes the use of magic by false prophetesses (chap. 13) as well as by Nebuchadnezzar who sought an omen and read from an animal's liver (chap. 21). Magic misleads, enslaves, and God strongly condemns it:

Now, son of man, set your face against the daughters of your people who prophesy out of their own imagination. Prophesy against them and say, "This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Woe to the women who sew magic charms on all their wrists and make veils of various lengths for their heads in order to ensnare people. Will you ensnare the lives of my people but preserve your own? You have profaned me among my people for a few handfuls of barley and scraps of bread. By lying to my people, who listen to lies, you have killed those who should not have died and have spared those who should not live." Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: "I am against your magic charms with which you ensnare people like birds and I will tear them from your arms; I will set free the people that you ensnare like birds. I will tear off your veils and save my people from your hands, and they will no longer fall prey to your power. Then you will know that I

am the LORD. Because you disheartened the righteous with your lies, when I had brought them no grief, and because you encouraged the wicked not to turn from their evil ways and so save their lives, therefore you will no longer see false visions or practice divination. I will save my people from your hands. And then you will know that I am the LORD.” (Ezek 13:17–23 NIV)

Ezekiel reveals Nebuchadnezzar’s divination practices in the forms of seeking a sign by shooting arrows and hepatoscopy. God proclaimed to Ezekiel what he needed to perform before the people: “Mark out one road for the sword to come against Rabbah of the Ammonites and another against Judah and fortified Jerusalem. For the king of Babylon will stop at the fork in the road, at the junction of the two roads, to seek an omen [*qesem*]: He will cast lots with arrows, he will consult his idols, he will examine the liver [*kabed*]” (Ezek 21:20, 21 NIV). The liver was considered the source of the blood and hence the base of life itself, therefore the cuts through the livers of chosen birds or animals were used for predicting future events (hepatoscopy or haruspicy).

In Assyria and Babylonia the *baru* (seer) priest, an important caste of diviners, specialized in examining the entrails of sacrificial sheep (extispicy). They looked for a sign by ‘seeing’ the position of the internal organs (liver, gall bladder, stomach, etc.). The *baru* were consulted by kings at court and by generals on the battlefields. Other forms of divinations included interpretation of dreams, dream liquids and fire, casting lots, shooting arrows, throwing sticks, mediums consulting the dead (necromancy), watching the behavior of animals, and observing signs in the heavens (astrology or astro-mancy). (VanGemeren 1990:22)

It was generally believed that gods could give humans an omen.

Ezekiel also has a very authoritative statement against false prophets and their perverted deceptions: “Her prophets whitewash these deeds for them by false visions and lying divinations. They say, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says’ — when the LORD has not spoken” (Ezek 22:28 NIV).

Daniel

Daniel was considered to be a wise man of Babylon. It is interesting that four categories of wise men are enumerated in the book of Daniel: enchanters, magicians, diviners, and astrologers (Dan 2:2; see also 1:20; 2:10, 27; 4:7; 5:7), but Daniel was never directly associated with any of these four groups even though he went through the Babylonian University, engaged in rigorous studies, and was named president of their academia, the head of all wise men in the province of Babylon (see Dan 1:3,4; 2:48; 5:11).

Malachi

The Prophet Malachi mentions that sorcerers were among God's people even after the Babylonian exile, and he lists them together with adulterers, perjurers, and oppressors (Mal 3:5).

God's Response and Attitude

It is important to state that true prophets never used magic, incantation, or any form of divination or manipulation in order to pronounce God's message (VanGemeren 1990:16–40). The word of God was revealed to them without their specific tactics or actions. They relied on this revelation; they did not urge God by any means to produce it (Heb 1:1, 2; 2 Pet 1:19–21). This is a unique claim of the biblical prophets in the midst of Ancient Middle East cultures that was full of magic, divination, and occultism. John Oswalt rightly underlines that “there is no record of a Hebrew prophet's message requiring confirmation through divination” (2015:70). He notices that there is “the remarkable absence of forms of divination in connection with prophets” (77). It is true that divination was practiced among false prophets and the Israelites, but “one could not ‘get a message’ from God on one's own initiative and in response to some device” (79).

God's instruction was specific: any manipulation with the word of God was forbidden. The needed truthfulness of the prophet's message and his credibility is described in Deut 13:1–4:

If a prophet, or one who foretells by dreams, appears among you and announces to you a miraculous sign or wonder, and if the sign or wonder of which he has spoken takes place, and he says, ‘Let us follow other gods (gods you have not known) and let us worship them,’ you must not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer. The LORD your God is testing you to find out whether you love him with all your heart and with all your soul. It is the LORD your God you must follow, and him you must revere. Keep his commands and obey him; serve him and hold fast to him.

It is important to realize that even false prophets can perform signs and miracles, but they mislead. Mighty deeds and miracles are not proof of the trustworthiness and authenticity of the prophecy or the prophet's teaching. “One impossibility for a true biblical prophet, therefore, is that he would proclaim any message that promotes other gods and their worship” (Williams 2003:16). “The signs or wonders the prophet performs are of secondary importance to the message they accompany” (17). “A person is not necessarily a prophet because he is able to announce a sign or wonder that comes to pass. If the message that person speaks calls people to faithful obedience to the God of the Scriptures, only then should the sign or wonder be acknowledged as legitimate” (18).

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The Pentateuch's teaching on this topic brings God's powerful disapproval and a strong condemnation of magic, occultism, and spiritistic practices in the Old Testament. Consider these key texts that are very relevant to this topic:

1. "Do not allow a sorceress to live" (Exod 22:18 NIV).
2. "Do not practice divination [*nachash*] or seek omens [*'anan* = bring clouds, soothsay, practice magic]" (Lev 19:26 NIV).
3. "Do not turn to mediums or seek out spiritists, for you will be defiled by them. I am the LORD your God" (Lev 19:31 NIV).
4. "You are to be holy to me because I, the LORD, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own. A man or woman who is a medium or spiritist among you must be put to death. You are to stone them; their blood will be on their own heads" (Lev 20:26–27 NIV). There was in Israel a very severe punishment for those practicing divination, occultism, or acting as a spiritistic medium—the death penalty. It is important to remember that this capital punishment was executed under a theocratic system, a system that no longer exists or is relevant today, though the severity of the penalty stands against the occult and magic and still upholds an unbending and unchanged principle.
5. "I will set my face against anyone who turns to mediums and spiritists to prostitute themselves by following them, and I will cut them off from their people" (Lev 20:6 NIV).
6. "When you enter the land the LORD your God is giving you, do not learn to imitate the detestable ways of the nations there. Let no one be found among you who sacrifices their son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the LORD; because of these same detestable practices the LORD your God will drive out those nations before you" (Deut 18:9–12 NIV). This text provides the most inclusive list of forbidden practices (eight of them) among God's people in Israel.

The experience described in Acts 19:17–20 (ESV) is very relevant for understanding biblical legislation: "And this became known to all the residents of Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks. And fear fell upon them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was extolled. Also many of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices. And a number of those who had practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted the value of them and found it came to fifty thousand pieces of silver. So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily." This is the only voluntary occurrence of books being burned in the Bible. It must be underlined that these books contained magical words, incantations, and formulas.

This is the only proper attitude toward such occult literature. No matter the cost, this material is not proper, because it leads to contact with unclean spirits. A drachma was a silver coin worth about a day's wages (the 50,000 days of work represents around 140 years of hard work practically without any vacations). When people are in Christ, they are willing to sacrifice anything that is a hindrance to following God and fulfilling His will.

When I was in Papua New Guinea several years ago, I visited an Adventist church in a village not far from the capital city. A big stone monument was erected in the courtyard in front of the church as a memorial of the people burning their spiritualistic books, magical formulas, and idols when they decided to follow the Lord and be baptized. This memorial constantly reminded them of their new direction in life—worshipping and obeying the true living God, Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

The Old Testament message is clear. It may be summarized in a simple paraphrase: "Do not play with the fire, it will devour you! Stay away from the occult and magic, because these practices belong to the enemy, the anti-God evil forces." From God's perspective the occult is an ultimate evil because it replaces God with demons. It is a matter of life and death, and this is why the language against magic and occultism is so strong. The message of those involved in the occult should be completely ignored: "So do not listen to your [false] prophets, your diviners, your interpreters of dreams, your mediums or your sorcerers who tell you, . . ." (Jer 27:9 NIV). God's judgment will fall upon the wicked and enchanters (Ps 58:3–5, 11; see also the New Testament condemnation of the magical practices of different kinds—Gal 5:20, Rev 9:21; 18:23; 21:8; 22:15). To practice divination is an act of rebellion against God comparable to the evil of idolatry (1 Sam 15:23).

One needs to maintain a right relationship with the Lord in order to escape the deception of magic, divination, and occultism. God's people need to cultivate trust and a loving relationship with their good God. Only in this way will they remain on safe ground. God's Word is categorical and unequivocal: "When someone tells you to consult mediums and spiritists, who whisper and mutter, should not a people inquire of their God? Why consult the dead on behalf of the living? Consult God's instruction [law] and the testimony of warning [testimony of prophets]. If anyone does not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn" (Isa 8:19, 20). This is why David encourages God's people to be faithful to the Lord, because He is our only safeguard and refuge: "The LORD is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid?" (Ps 27:1 NIV). The people of God

do not need to be afraid of magic or occultism, because behind all these practices are fallen and defeated evil demonic forces. Believers can fully trust their loving and caring God who is the Victor over evil, and who has already defeated Satan.

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