

“In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God’s gracious choice” (Romans 11:5)

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Better than Magic

How God’s Word speaks to Judaism’s acceptance of unbiblical spiritual practices

by Galen Peterson

The book of Exodus tells about the confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh regarding the release of the people of Israel from slavery. God made it clear that He would empower Moses and his brother Aaron (Ex 7:1, 3-4), and it was demonstrated in miraculous fashion when “Aaron threw his staff down before Pharaoh and his servants, and it became a serpent” (v. 10).

This manifestation is not surprising. The Creator who brought the atoms of the universe into existence in the first place is fully capable of rearranging them to His liking. He is omnipotent—infinately powerful and capable of working His will. That is the nature of miracles. They are times when the Almighty God accomplishes His will in a supernatural way that seems impossible from our limited perspective.

But, as the story continues, something rather surprising *did* happen in verses 11-12.

Then Pharaoh also called for the wise men and the

sorcerers, and they also, the magicians of Egypt, did the same with their secret arts. For each one threw down his staff and they turned into serpents.

The surprise is the actual ability of the magicians to work the same kind of transformational miracle of turning a staff into a serpent. The question, then, is—where did they get their power?

If we relegate this episode to mythology, then we have to make the same assertion regarding the rest of the Exodus account. That would mean discounting the validity of all ten plagues, including the final one in which the Angel of Death passed over the land. And that would mean the sacrifices of the Passover lambs that spared lives of Israelites never actually happened. And that would make the foreshadowing of the Messiah as the lamb who takes away the sins of the world merely legendary, not anchored in reality.

So you can see how the overall context of Scripture leads us to conclude that the ability of

Pharaoh’s magicians was very real. But since they did not get the power to do so from the true God, there must be another source.

The word magic comes from the ancient Persian word *magus* and its plural form *magi*. The *magi*, also known as wise men, are part of the story of the birth of Yeshua (Jesus). We are told that they came to Bethlehem from the east, and that is where Persia was (Mat 2:1).

Magi were followers of the religious system known as Zoroastrianism. They believed that there was one supreme deity that was not personal in nature and was spread throughout the universe, which means that human beings share in that divinity.

They taught that the universe is in a perpetual conflict between order and chaos. And they said that humans play an important role in that conflict by overcoming chaos in a number of ways: by doing good deeds, by protecting nature, and by being aware of their guardian spirit that assists them in

the struggle against chaos.

The *magi* were said to have gained secret knowledge about the spiritual realm. They did that through astrology, alchemy, soothsaying, interpreting dreams, casting spells and warding off evil through the use of amulets. And because of the interconnectedness of all dimensions of the universe, they discovered ways to appropriate power from the spiritual world that could influence the natural world.

This, then, establishes the fundamental meaning of magic—it is the manipulation of the spiritual world in order to gain power in the natural world. Thus we can see how the practices of the *magi* of Persia were essentially the same as the magicians of Egypt.

Glimpses of the Spiritual Realm in Scripture

The Bible speaks about the spiritual realm in a number of passages. Most notably, Revelation 12 describes the war in heaven that took place after Lucifer rebelled against Adonai in his quest to become ruler of the universe. As a result of losing that battle, he became known as Satan (Adversary), and was cast down to the earth along with lesser angels who rebelled along with him.

So fallen angels are present in this world who are doing the work of the Adversary. And you can see how they can facilitate actions that emulate the works of the true God, just like the Egyptian magicians did in response to Adonai's transformation of Aaron's staff. It's all about creating confusion regarding who the real God is.

An example of a fallen angel is described in Daniel chapter 10. Daniel had just received a vision from God, but he did not understand what it meant. A godly

angel was sent to explain it to him, but he could not get to Daniel right away because he was blocked by a fallen angel identified as "the prince of the kingdom of Persia" (Dan 10:13). So God sent the archangel Michael to intervene in Persia so that the interpretation could get to Daniel. This indicates that there was a significant spiritual stronghold there in Persia.

Westerners might scoff at such a notion, but many people around the world today are able to describe similar circumstances in their own communities. And there is no coincidence that this is the same region where practicing magic was so popular.

In 539 B.C. Babylon was conquered by the Persian Empire. That was just three years before Daniel had the above vision. In other words, while the Jewish people were serving their 70 years in captivity for disobedience to God, their Babylonian captors were, in turn, defeated and occupied by Persia.

These events made the Jewish people vulnerable to the practices of Persia, and in particular, the religion of Zoroastrianism. For example, Judaism adopted the ancient Zoroastrian emphasis on doing good deeds. It also opened the doors to a fascination with magic for the Jewish community.

It is worth noting that the Babylonian Talmud was formulated in Persia in the midst of the spiritual environment of Zoroastrianism. We see this association reflected in spiritual elements permitted by the Talmudic rabbis.

Magical Practices in Judaism

Astrology

The Bible states that the stars were given as signs and seasons in God's purposes (Gen 1:14). But

astrology takes it a step further by saying that the orientation of the stars and planets has an influence on the destiny of human beings. That practice is condemned by God in Scripture (Deut 4:19; Isa 47:13-14; Dan 2:27).

The Babylonian Talmud, however, teaches otherwise. According to the rabbis, the zodiac influences everything in the world, including how you live, how many children you have, and how wealthy you become (*Moed Katan 28a*). They also said that God lamented that He could not turn back to the beginning of creation and realign the stars so that the fate of certain individuals could be changed (*Taanit 25a*).

The rabbis further taught that there was a way to overcome the influence of the stars. They said that people can overcome it by observing God's commandments (*Sukkah 29a*). So in that way of thinking, Torah observance became a magical act that manipulated the natural realm.

Astrology is manifested in modern Judaism in a number of ways. Some synagogues include the zodiac as an artistic symbol. Some rabbis will incorporate horoscope in their teachings and advice for people. The custom of saying "*mazel tov*," especially at important life events, is expressed as a wish for "good luck" for others. But *mazel* is related to the Hebrew word *mazalot*, meaning zodiac. Their common root is *nazzal*, meaning "drip or flow." Thus the full meaning of *mazel tov* is "may good fortune flow from the stars above." And that is consistent with the concept of magic.

Sorcery

This practice refers to the use of spirits to make things happen in the physical world, including

causing things to be created or transformed. It was strongly prohibited by God because “whoever does these things is detestable” to Him (Deut 18:10-12). But when the Babylonian Talmud was compiled in the late fifth century, it made exceptions to God’s prohibition against sorcery as long as it involved the use of God’s holy name.

They claimed that they had learned the *Hilkot Yezirah* (Laws of Creation). They said that the universe was created through the power inherent in the letters of God’s name. So by manipulating the letters into various permutations and then chanting them aloud, they were given the same creative power by which the heavens and earth came into being (*Berachot 55a*).

The Talmud records actual instances of such creations. One was the creation of a man. In another case, two rabbis used sorcery to create a cow every week on the day before the Sabbath so they could enjoy a steak dinner (*Sanhedrin 65b*).

Spells and Amulets

In ancient times, spells were used with the intent of causing harm to others. Blocking them was said to be possible through the use of amulets. The most universal concept in that regard involves what is called the evil eye. Numerous cultures around the world have long embraced the belief that a malevolent stare can work as a curse that causes harm to another person.

But the use of an amulet is said to protect you against that power. Typically the amulet would have an eye or concentric circles similar to an eye. And that would be sufficient to ward off any evil that would come upon you when someone cursed you with a stare.

This practice made its way into rabbinic Judaism. The Talmud advises:

If a man goes into a town and is afraid of the evil eye, let him put the thumb of his right hand into his left hand and the thumb of his left hand in his right hand, and say: “I, so-and-so, am of the seed of Joseph over which the evil eye has no power” (*Berachot 55:b*).

It was during the period when the Jewish people flourished in Persia that a goddess named Tanit became popular in the region. Archaeology has uncovered stone tablets called stele that are dedicated to Tanit. They contain an open hand symbol that was used as a means of receiving protection by the goddess.

In time, the hand alone became a more general amulet for warding off the evil eye by including an eye or circular shape on the palm. Amulets of this type became popular in the Berber region of North Africa and the Mediterranean. Their use made its way into the Jewish culture, especially among Sephardic Jews who lived in the same region. The Jewish form of amulet became known as the *hamsa*. The name is derived from *hamesh*, the Hebrew word for the number 5, which relates to the five fingers of the hand.

This practice was justified rabbinically because five also represented the five books of the Torah. It was claimed that the *hamsa* could serve as a reminder to study Torah. So it became easy to accept it as a Jewish symbol. It then evolved into a symbol for seeking divine blessing, especially for homes, by attempting to ward off evil from entering.

Thus the symbol of the *hamsa*, which is very popular

today, is an amulet with clearly pagan origins that is used to manipulate the natural world with powers from the spiritual world. And that, too, is magic.

The Broader Propensity Toward Magic

Embracing unbiblical practices is common throughout humanity and is even present within Christianity. All that is necessary is rationalizing the inclusion as somehow venerating God. Consider the following:

- Crossing fingers for good luck or knocking on wood are both attempts to manipulate the natural world by using a perceived spiritual force associated with the cross where Yeshua died.
- Some people seek favor by making the sign of the cross with their hands in front of their chest.
- Saying “God bless you” when someone sneezes originated when people thought that the Devil was trying to capture their soul by saying their name. But by saying those words, the Devil was blocked from doing harm, just like an amulet.
- Hanging a St Christopher medallion from the rear mirror of a car is thought to be a way of obtaining protection while traveling.
- The belief that the bread and wine of the Eucharist can literally be changed into the body and blood of Christ (transubstantiation) is really no different than the rabbinic act of conjuring by manipulating the letters of God’s name.
- The prosperity gospel is a movement in which people are said to have the ability to gain wealth simply by giving money

to a certain ministry as a sign of faith. That is manipulating God's will for your life spiritually in order to become wealthy in the natural world.

All of these popular practices share the underlying principle of manipulation of the physical world by using spiritual means that are not given by God in Scripture, which conforms precisely to the definition of magic.

Addressing the Spiritual Realm God's Way

This does not mean, however, that we should ignore the spiritual dimension and how it impacts our lives naturally. The Bible leaves no doubt about this reality, for as we read in Ephesians 6:12,

"For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places."

But the manner in which we address the spiritual dimension is very different than the myriad of magical practices found around the world. Paul uses the metaphor of military armor that was utilized in warfare in those days. He describes this armor as being truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace,

faith, salvation, the Holy Spirit in accord with the Word of God, and prayer (Eph 6:13-18).

There is no mention of secret knowledge, mystical powers, religious formulas, and special physical objects in this list.

God's way is very different. He is calling on us to do the same things He has been saying all along throughout biblical history. They are the virtues taught by Moses in the Torah, and throughout the prophets, and by Yeshua and the writers of the New Testament. And they do not involve using manipulation of life's circumstances in any way:

- It means being called to be people of truth, speaking out against the falsehoods that are being promoted.
- It means practicing righteousness by living our lives in such a way that it does not give the enemy an opening to inflict great mischief and harm. It is the kind of righteous living that comes from God's Word, not from the stars above.
- It means proclaiming the gospel of peace that only Yeshua brings. We will only experience true peace in our relationships, our communities, our nation and our world if it is based on the message of reconciliation

through Yeshua alone.

- It means being people of faith who trust in the Lord to exercise His will in His timing, not our own.
- It means being witnesses of the life-changing power of Yeshua, so that others might believe and receive the gift of salvation.
- It means accurately teaching the Word of God, so that our doctrines and practices will always be in line with the will of God and can be used by the Spirit for spiritual maturity.
- And it means being people of prayer who continually seek God's will to be manifested in our lives, not artificially manipulating the spiritual realm for our own purposes.

That is what it means to put on the full armor of God for the spiritual battles in our world. It could be in the context of our families, our neighborhoods, our jobs and our places of worship. Those are all settings that call for engaging the spiritual realm in the right way that has been given to us by God.

There are indeed spiritual battles taking place all around us, whether we realize it or not. Let us recognize that dealing with them God's way is always the best way, even better than magic.

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American Remnant Mission

Post Office Box 2321
Pleasant Hill, California 94523

[925] 943-6061

E-mail: arm@remnant.net
Internet: www.remnant.net



Dr. Galen Peterson, Executive Director