



Witchcraft, Sorcery and Occult: A Biblical Perspective

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Abstract

Religion has been one of the platforms where either believing in the existence of the evil spirit, bad spirit that causes harm or trouble to general people, or purification, protection from such a spirit has been manifested for ages. Among the different religions of the world, Christianity, in its Holy Bible, also contains numerous references to the practices of Witchcraft, Sorcery, the occult, or Black Magic, where people attempt to gain knowledge of such practices to collect money and become wealthy. Additionally, there are instances where people harness such power to cause harm and settle enmity between them. Bible refers any such practices as un-Godly and also in the old Testament has sanctioned severe punishment to those who practice such acts, the Bible in the New Testament says that those who practice such practices such as Witchcraft, Sorcery, Occult or Black Magic has no place in kingdom of Heaven but if they repent and denounce their evil practice they are liable to be forgiven. The paper discusses various references to such practices in the Bible, extracted from different translations.

Subject Areas

Culture

Keywords

Bible, Witchcraft, Divinism, Sorcery, Spiritism, Occult

1. Introduction

Witchcraft traditionally refers to the malevolent exercise or invocation of alleged

supernatural powers to control people or events, typically involving sorcery or magic. Different historical and cultural contexts may define witchcraft in various ways. It is often seen as the work of hags, mostly assumed to be women working secretly at night, indulging in rites and rituals with an evil source, mainly the devil or satan.

Sorcery refers to the supernatural power or ability to utilise supernatural forces, such as witchcraft or magic. The word sorcery often refers to so-called black magic, which is magic used for evil purposes. Thus, a person who can perform sorcery is called a sorcerer (male) or sorceress (female). Some scholars distinguish sorcery from witchcraft by noting that it is learned rather than intrinsic. Other scholars, noting that modern witches claim to learn their craft, suggest that sorcery's intent is always evil and that of witchcraft can be either good or bad. In the early Christian era, the term was applied to any magician or wizard, but by the Middle Ages, it was used only for those who allegedly practised magic intended to harm others.

The occult in the broadest sense is a category of esoteric supernatural beliefs and practices that generally fall outside the scope of organised religion and science. It encompasses phenomena involving otherworldly agency, such as magic, mysticism, and their varied spells. It can also refer to supernatural ideas like extrasensory perception and parapsychology.

The Biblical prohibition of the practice of witchcraft, sorcery, and occult reflects the political control and social regulation in the ancient Israelite society. It also reflected the societal role in occult practices and their relation to authority. It also mirrored the direct impact of Biblical utterance on the formation of law and judiciary in ancient Israel.

According to Richard J. Gehman, Witchcraft and Sorcery usually focus on areas of competition for personal gain within society. On the one hand, witchcraft is used to elevate one's status relative to one's fellows. On the other hand, witchcraft is used to diminish others' health or status, thereby increasing one's own position relative to the other [1]. This paper tries to explore various references to such practices in the Bible, extracted from different translations.

2. Review of Literature

2.1. Old Testament

The Old Testament unequivocally condemns witchcraft, sorcery, divination, and necromancy. Texts such as (Deuteronomy 18: 9-13, Exodus 22: 18, and Leviticus 20: 27 [2]) explicitly forbid these practices, associating them with seeking power from sources other than God. These prohibitions reflect the Israelite belief in one God and the rejection of alternative spiritualities. Scholarly interpretations often contextualise these prohibitions within the ancient Near Eastern world, where such practices were prevalent. Some researchers argue that these prohibitions were intended to maintain religious purity and prevent syncretism with neighbouring cultures.

2.2. New Testament

The New Testament continues to address occult practices, albeit with a slightly different emphasis. The New Testament doesn't explicitly list prohibitions as extensively, but the underlying principle of exclusive devotion to God remains. Acts 16: 16-18 (NKJV) [2] describes Paul casting out a spirit of divination from a slave girl, illustrating the conflict between Christian power and occult forces. Revelation 21: 8 (NKJV) [2] "lists sorcerers among those who will face judgment, indicating the seriousness of engaging in such practices", and 22: 15 includes sorcerers among those excluded from the New Jerusalem. Scholarly works explore how early Christian communities navigated a world where magical practices were common, and how they distinguished their beliefs from these practices. The emphasis on Christ's power as the ultimate source of spiritual authority is a central theme.

2.3. Theological Interpretations

Theological literature examines various interpretations of biblical passages related to witchcraft. Some focus on the historical context, examining the specific practices condemned in the Bible and their cultural significance. Others delve into the theological implications, exploring themes such as spiritual warfare, the nature of evil, and the role of spiritual authority. A key area of discussion revolves around how to apply these ancient prohibitions to contemporary issues.

2.4. Cultural and Historical Contexts

Understanding the historical and cultural context of biblical condemnations is essential. Scholarly works analyse the ancient Near Eastern world, exploring the various magical practices prevalent at the time and their social functions. This helps clarify why the Bible condemned these practices and what they represented within the Israelite worldview. Studies like "Dissecting and Constructing Magic in Greco-Roman Literature" offer valuable insights into the broader ancient world's perspective on magic.

3. Methodology

A rigorous methodology is essential for examining witchcraft, sorcery, and the occult from a biblical perspective, ensuring a balanced and thorough analysis. Textual Analysis: Begin with a detailed textual analysis of key biblical passages. *Examining Deuteronomy 18: 10-12, Exodus 22: 18, Leviticus 19: 31, and 20: 27 in the Old Testament, alongside Galatians 5: 20, Revelation 9: 21, 21: 8, 22: 15 and Acts 16: 16-18 as in the New Testament* as to New King James Version (NKJV) [2], NKJV is being consulted for the work as: 1) this version of Bible provides familiar and traditional related terminology about the witchcraft and occult practices 2) this version has used equivalence approach where it is believed and accepted that NKJV has translated the original Hebrew words, word-by word, 3) this version is easier to read and comprehend for modern researchers and audience, also New Living Translation (NLT), New American Standard Bible (NASB) and New Eng-

lish Version (NEV) are consulted to have better understanding of the terms. This approach will uncover the original intent and meaning of texts related to witchcraft, sorcery, and occult practices in their original Hebrew and Greek forms.

3.1. Analysis of Witchcraft in the Old Testament

The origin of magic and occultism, according to the biblical account, is surprising and even shocking because it all began in the Garden of Eden. The starting point is associated with Satan, who disguised himself as a serpent, the first medium (Genesis 3: 1-6) [2]. Satan, the serpent, was cognizant of God's statements recorded in Genesis 2: 16-17 [2] 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". (Genesis 3: 4) [2] 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. The offer was false, but unfortunately, it worked [3].

Eve, being betrayed by the serpent, assumed that she could achieve all that the serpent claimed just by consuming the forbidden fruit, which led her to the very first and great deception. Hence, the downfall of man occurred in the eyes of God due to the serpent's manipulation.

The Egyptian magicians cited in Exodus [4] employed divination during the clash between the Egyptian King Pharaoh and Moses. Moses performed great signs, wonders, and miracles by the power of God. The Egyptian magicians could also perform similar feats by practising sorcery and divination. However, it is stated that the magicians surrendered midway when their various tricks failed miserably, realising they could no longer stand against Moses and his Sovereign God.

The Biblical account of King Saul and the Witch of Endor is both incredibly persuasive and illustrative. The Biblical passage in 1 Samuel 28 [4] describes that Saul, in all his rebellion, went to consult a medium as he was desperate to know of his future. When he felt that God had stopped communicating with him, he went to consult the Witch of Endor. A careful analysis of this incident demonstrates that Saul did not encounter the soul or spirit of the dead Prophet Samuel, who at that time was in the grave, but experienced the performance of an evil spirit who played the role of Prophet Samuel to discourage Saul completely [5].

The discouraged Saul felt the complete absence of God from his life. He was frustrated, and in despair, he chose to end his life the next day. 1 Chronicles 10: 13-14 [2] states, "So Saul died for his unfaithfulness, which he had committed against the Lord, because he did not keep the word of the Lord, and also because he consulted a medium for guidance. But he did not inquire of the Lord; therefore, He killed him, and turned the kingdom over to David the son of Jesse".

In the book of Daniel, the reality of the power of the Babylonian magicians is

highlighted. According to Daniel Chapter 2 [4], King Nebuchadnezzar was troubled by his dream and sought magicians, astrologers, sorcerers, and the Chaldeans to interpret it.

King Manasseh, the prodigal King of the Old Testament, reigned for 55 years, the longest in Jewish history. He took part in human sacrifices, offering his own sons to foreign gods as living sacrifices. And he burned his son as an offering and used fortune-telling and omens, and dealt with mediums and with necromancers. He did much evil in the sight of the Lord, provoking Him to anger [6].

In the book of Ezekiel, the prophet Ezekiel warns against false prophets and prophetesses who use witchcraft and sorcery as a medium to fool people.

Thus says the Lord God: “Woe to the women who sew magic charms on their sleeves and make veils for the heads of people of every height to hunt souls! Will you hunt the souls of my people, and keep yourselves alive? And will you profane Me among My people for handfuls of barley and for pieces of bread, killing people who should not die and keeping people alive who should not live, by your lying to My people who listen to lies?” Therefore, thus says the Lord God: Behold, I am against your magic charms by which you hunt souls there like birds. I will tear them from your arms and let the souls go, the souls you hunt like birds. I will also tear off your veils and deliver my people out of your hand, and they shall no longer be as prey in your hand. Then you shall know that I am the Lord. Because with lies you have made the heart of the righteous sad, whom I have not made sad; and you have strengthened the hands of the wicked, so that he does not turn his ways from the wicked way to save his life. Therefore, you shall no longer envision futility nor practice divination; for I will deliver my people out of your hand, and you shall know that I am the Lord (Ezekiel 13: 18-23 NKJV) [2].

For the King of Babylon stands at the parting of the road, at the fork of the two roads, to use divination: he shakes arrows, he consults the images, he looks at the liver (Ezekiel 21: 21 NKJV) [2].

The nations around Israel were religious. They sought “divine” guidance. They desired to live in peace and prosperity. To obtain these ends, they sought to know the will of the gods through professional diviners, magicians, enchanters, and interpreters of dreams. They made every effort to maintain the harmony between the society of humans and the world of gods. Whether in war or in peace, in adversity or in prosperity, they seek to know what they should do to advance their goals and to control the desired outcome. However, it is essential to state that true prophets never used magic, incantations, or any form of divination or manipulation to pronounce God’s message [7].

3.2. Crucial Presumption for Witchcraft and Sorcery Manipulation

Magic is based on the belief that the divine can be subjected to manipulation 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 favour. 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 participate, the better it is for them. In this view of God, one may build one's own way to Heaven by performance and extraordinary deeds. One may influence God or the God (s) and gain courtesy and consideration by good actions. The Latin phrase can summarise the pagan principle in worship, *do ut des* (I give so that you provide), which is the basis of magical thinking. People will do things their own way (not God's way) to gain the acceptance and influence of different deities, thereby receiving certain advantages. Manipulation of the divine spirits and gods can be recognised by the use of "some form of words or actions" to "make them do one's will".

Divination and magic provide a bridge between the supernatural world and the human world, through which humans seek special insight or power to control their destiny. Divination (the mantic) is the practice of knowing the future: inductive and intuitive. When a diviner uses an object ("omen"), divination is of an inductive type. The intuitive form of divination occurs when an individual acts as a medium to give a word from the gods. Magic was essentially manipulative, promising personal or national success, even at the cost of others [7].

To achieve their goals, individuals would manipulate the sacred by employing signs, lies, omens, and precise formulas in God's name, as evident from the activities of false prophets in the Bible.

3.3. The Response of the Old Testament towards Witchcraft and Sorcery

The Old Testament responds realistically and explicitly warns against witchcraft, sorcery, and other similar practices. It does not sidestep or overlook such practices as though they were simple notions; instead, it regards them as convictions and practices grounded in reality. The Old Testament condemns such practices as ill-conceived approaches to speaking with the living God. Any confidence in the viability of these practices is seen as a logical inconsistency in the Israelite Faith, which holds that the select and preeminent rule of the one sovereign God whose will cannot be affected by any mysterious means. In this way, witchcraft and sorcery, all in all, are viewed as an abomination by the non-Israelites. The Old Testament aims at exposing the occult practices as false substitutes for the true and living God. Some of the consequences of practising witchcraft or occult are as follows:

1) Put to death: Men and women among you who act as mediums or who consult the spirits of the dead must be put to death by stoning. They are guilty of a capital offence (Leviticus 20: 27 NLT) [8].

- You must not allow a sorceress to live (Exodus 22: 18 NLT) [8].

2) Rejection: When King Saul consulted a witch to learn about his future, God condemned this act and rejected him from continuing as King, as reflected in the following Bible verse: "For rebellion is as reprehensible as the sin of divination, and insubordination is as reprehensible as false religion and idolatry". Since you have rejected the word of the Lord, He has also rejected you from being King (1

Samuel 15: 23 NASB) [9].

3) Warning (Abomination): The Scripture responds in various ways against seeking any medium or following mysterious ways apart from seeking God. It mocks and condemns the mysterious acts of the non-Israelites by articulating judgments and executing judgments, inviting the wrath of God against those who carry out such practices.

- *When you come into the land which the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not learn to follow the abominations of those nations. There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire, or one who practices witchcraft, or a soothsayer, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer, or one who conjures spells, or a medium or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead. For all who do these things are an abomination to the Lord, and because of these abominations, the Lord your God drives them out from before you. You shall be blameless before the Lord your God. For these nations, which you will dispossess, listened to soothsayers and diviners, but as for you, the Lord your God has not appointed such for you (Deuteronomy 18: 9-14 NKJV) [2].*

4) It will bring disasters and calamities: The Bible says that those who believe and also practice charms and spells invite disasters and calamities upon themselves and their entire nation. This has been quoted on the following Bible verse, Isaiah 47: 11-12 (NLT): “So disaster will overtake you and you won’t be able to charm it away”. *Calamity will fall upon you, and you won’t be able to buy your way out. A catastrophe will strike you suddenly, one for which you are not prepared. Now use your magical charms! Use the spells you have worked on all these years! Maybe they will do you some good. Maybe they can make someone afraid of you [8].*

- *You shall not eat anything with the blood, nor shall you practice divination or soothsaying (Leviticus 19: 26 NKJV) [2].*

5) Ex-communication: The Bible refers to excommunicating those who practice or those who seek help from a witch or sorcerer, as it is written.

- *And the person who turns to mediums and familiar spirits, to prostitute himself with them, I will set My face against that person and cut him off from his people (Leviticus 20: 6 NKJV) [2].*

Hence, the law in the Scriptures denies witchcraft as well as each act in light of a mysterious conviction or speculation. In this way, the primary judgment is not about black or white magic but focuses on one’s individual experience of a single sovereign God, with an endeavour to carry on with daily existence according to God’s perfect will.

3.4. New Testament and Occult Practices

3.4.1. Works of Flesh

The New Testament identifies sorcery as one of the works of the flesh. Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: ..., lewdness, idolatry, **sorcery**, hatred,

contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies. (Galatians 5: 19-20 NKJV) [2]. The gospel of Matthew records the response of the Pharisees after Jesus healed a man who was mute, deaf, and blind. When they realised that Jesus did a miraculous work of restoring the sight and speech of a man, they attributed His power to the demons. They accused Jesus of taking the help of demons and working under the authority of the ruler of demons, Belzebub (Matthew 12: 24 NKJV) [2]. Jesus, on the other hand, claimed His power was from the God of Scripture. Rather than proving that Jesus was under the authority of satan, He demonstrated His power by casting out demons.

3.4.2. Renunciation of Occult Practices

And many who had believed came confessing and telling their deeds. Also, many of those who had *practised magic gathered their books* and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted up the value of them, and it totalled fifty thousand pieces of silver. (Acts 19: 18-19 NKJV) [2] This entire passage in the book of Acts recounts the conversion of some Ephesian dwellers who had previously been involved in occult practices. Following their conversion, in full view of the public, they burned their magic books and objects, demonstrating and renouncing their former involvement in occult and witchcraft.

3.4.3. Dangers of Believing in Sorcery

In Acts 8: 9-24 (NKJV) [2], the account of Simon the sorcerer highlights the dangers of the occult. Simon had used sorcery to deceive people, but upon witnessing the genuine power of God through the apostles, he sought to acquire this power for his own benefit. Peter rebuked him, highlighting the incompatibility of the authentic God's work with the deceptive motives and practices of the sorcery.

3.4.4. Fortune Telling and Deception

In Acts 16, Apostle Paul and his companion were on a missionary journey when they encountered a slave girl who, through divination, claimed to predict the future. She was known for her fortune-telling abilities and had brought her master a considerable profit by deceiving people for a long time through this act of divination. When Paul and Silas had an encounter with her, the girl began following them and proclaiming, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation". (Acts 16: 17, NASB) [9] Eventually, Paul became greatly annoyed by her constant following. In response, Paul turned to the girl and rebuked her in the name of Jesus Christ. As a result, the girl lost her fortune-telling abilities. However, this action stirred trouble for Paul and Silas. The girl's masters, who had been profiting from her fortune-telling, became furious because their source of income had been taken away all of a sudden. They seized Paul and Silas and dragged them before the authorities, and accused them of disturbing the city and advocating unlawful practices as Jews. This particular incident highlights the clash between the authenticity of the true God manifested through Apostle Paul and the deceptive, manipulative influence that the girl had.

It demonstrates the potential opposition faced by believers when their actions threaten the interests of those engaged in occult practices.

3.4.5. Eternal Condemnation

But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death. (Revelation 21: 8, NKJV) [2] In the context of describing the fate of the unrepentant, the book of Revelation mentions sorcerers among those who will be consigned to the lake of fire for eternity. This underscores the severity of engaging in occult practices.

These passages, among others, convey a consistent and significant message that occult practices are incompatible with the teachings and values of the New Testament. They caution against involvement in such practices and emphasise the need for repentance, turning away from occult activities, and seeking a genuine relationship with God through Faith in Jesus Christ. They also advise pursuing holiness, discerning, and rejecting practices that involve seeking supernatural power through illegitimate means Terminology (See **Table 1**).

Table 1. Witchcraft, sorcery, and occult: A summary as in the old and new testaments.

	Old Testament	New Testament
Language	<p>Hebrew term: 1) Mekashsheph/mekashshephah = sorcerer/witch 2) nachash = enchanter/omen reader</p>	<p>Greek term: 1) pharmakeia = sorcery, witchcraft, magic via drugs/potions, 2) magos/mageia = magician, sorcery reader</p>
Focal Idea	<p>An attempt to gain spiritual knowledge or forbidden knowledge through illicit means and rejecting the authority of God.</p>	<p>Condemnation of manipulating spiritual forces or seeking forbidden knowledge, rejection of such practices, and spiritual battle against such forces</p>
Denunciation (NKJV)	<p>Deuteronomy 18: 12 Abomination to God, Exodus 22: 18 often resulted in severe penalties, including death. (leading to spiritual impunity and penalty)</p>	<p>Revelation 21: 8, Exclusion from the kingdom of God, Galatians 5: 20, Acts of the flesh, opposed to the Holy Spirit. (deception by an evil spirit)</p>
Stress	<p>The Old Testament stressed explicit legal prohibition.</p>	<p>The New Testament connected the activity more to demonic activity, spiritual warfare, and freedom from such practices through Jesus Christ.</p>

3.5. Analysing Biblical Interpretations of the Occult Practices: Witchcraft and Sorcery

The Biblical interpretation on this topic has been subject to varying perspectives throughout history. The Scripture explicitly warns against the practices of witch-

craft and sorcery. There is an explicit prohibition of engaging in occult practices, considering them as sinful and contrary to the worship of God. It discourages seeking supernatural guidance or power through means outside of God's revelation. A complete set of warnings can be found in the Scriptures against such practices.

John Warwick Montgomery, in his book titled "*Principalities and Power: The Occult*", discusses that the word "occult" conjures up a bewildering variety of images: telepathy, ghosts, mediums, secret societies, witches, fairies, mystics, fakirs, werewolves, vampires, astrologers and alchemists, magicians and miracle workers. Three elements seem to be present in most phenomena regarded as occult, though not to an equal degree. Taken together, they characterise fairly well this complex and amorphous subject [10]. He further discusses the Biblical teachings that caution against the involvement of the occult, elaborating on the potential spiritual dangers and the deceptive nature of occult practices. He highlights the proper discernment as a means of resisting the lure of the occult and its purported supernatural powers.

4. Conclusion

Ultimately, a biblical perspective on witchcraft, sorcery, and the occult reveals a consistent condemnation of these practices as deviations from faith and reliance on God. The Bible presents a worldview where spiritual power and authority reside solely in God, and seeking power elsewhere is viewed as both dangerous and idolatrous. The biblical warnings against these practices are not merely relics of an ancient worldview but carry enduring relevance for those seeking spiritual discernment and commitment to their Faith. The need to understand both the historical context and the theological implications of these prohibitions to apply them thoughtfully and responsibly in the modern world. Religious practices that honour the dead are being examined to address challenges of forming authentic living witnesses to the Faith through one's own cultural identity. Understanding diverse perspectives is vital for fostering mutual respect and learning among various religious traditions.

It is essential to approach Biblical interpretation with careful consideration of the historical and cultural context as well as the teachings of Jesus Christ, who emphasised love, righteousness, and the worship of God alone. The evil of witchcraft and sorcery is in the reliance upon the creature and in defiance of God's will, leading to the removal of God from His rightful place. (Isaiah 8: 19 NKJV) [2]. While the Bible does address the occult practices and strongly condemns them, its primary focus is on promoting a relationship with God and the pursuit of Spiritual truth through Faith, prayer and obedience to His commands.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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