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A table of contents for *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_bib-sacra\\_01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bib-sacra_01.php)

## ARTICLE II.

## WITCHCRAFT AND THE OLD TESTAMENT.

BY THE REV. CHARLES EDWARD SMITH, D.D.

THE responsibility of the Old Testament for the frightful crimes which have been perpetrated under the stimulus of the witchcraft delusion is a subject of grave interest to every serious mind. Every one who believes either that the Bible is the Word of God, or that the Bible contains that Word, must consider and decide this question, that he may keep his Bible, or at any rate find it.

There is no doubt about the fact, that those who have been under this delusion have appealed to the Old Testament in support of their ideas. In the famous trial of the Suffolk witches, in England, in 1665, when Sir Matthew Hale was the judge, and Sir Thomas Browne was the medical expert witness, the Chief Baron said that there were such creatures as witches, for the Scriptures affirmed it. He had reference, of course, to the command in Ex. xxii. 18, "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live," or he might have had in mind the account of the woman whom we call the "Witch of Endor" in 1 Sam. xxviii. No doubt such passages were commonly considered in past centuries to teach the reality and criminality of a diabolic art known by various names, as sorcery, magic, necromancy, or witchcraft.

But the question arises, Was this a correct interpretation of the class of passages referred to, or a mistaken interpretation, made possible, or rather necessitated, by ignorance and superstition? It is but a little while since the Old Testament was confidently quoted as justifying slavery,

but it is to be hoped that no fair mind now fails to perceive the impropriety of such quotations. The Mosaic legislation was an adjustment to the imperfect and sinful character of Hebrew civilization, as our Lord intimated when he told the Jews that the Mosaic permission of divorce had been granted them on account of the hardness of their hearts. The general spirit of the laws of Moses was in favor of freedom and against slavery, restraining and modifying its evils, and putting an end to it whenever practicable. It may be said that Moses was thousands of years in advance of the rest of the world in regard to antislavery, and to quote him as proslavery is as flagrant an instance of misinterpretation as can possibly be made. Such a mistake in the correct apprehension of the teaching of the Old Testament on that subject may well render us suspicious that an equally great mistake is likely to have been made as to the real position of the Old Testament on the subject of witchcraft.

It may be said, first of all, that nothing ought to be made of the mere fact, that the Bible contains frequent references to witchcraft and its kindred delusions. That it does that is really a confirmation of its veracity, since the universal prevalence of such errors in all ages and all countries makes it certain that these impostures must have been encountered, and had to be dealt with, in the countries and ages of which the Bible treats. If the Bible contained no such allusions, we might justly suspect it to be fictitious. But, as the case stands, it is certain that there were diviners and magicians in Egypt, where Joseph and Moses are said to have found them, and the evils produced by them were so great that no system of laws would have been complete which did not provide adequate treatment for them. That there were wizards in Palestine in the time of King Saul in such numbers that they were a public nuisance, and a menace to the nation, is exactly what

we should expect, as that in the time of that later Saul, who became Paul, his apostolic labors should have brought him into contact and collision with numerous professors of the black art, and given him signal triumphs in their conversion. I repeat, the mere fact that the histories of the Scriptures refer to the existence of men claiming to exercise supernatural power, and that its laws contain regulations with regard to the treatment of such persons, is not in itself to be construed as an indorsement of witchcraft, but only such natural and necessary reference as a true and proper book might be expected to contain.

However, while the Bible contains such allusions to witchcraft as are natural and necessary, on account of the prevalence of such delusions in Bible times and countries, it is well worthy to be noticed that there is a remarkable absence of *that kind of allusions which betray confidence in the reality* of those ideas. In this respect the Scriptures afford a *marked contrast* to other ancient books. For example, the Koran treats charms and incantations as capable of producing evil consequences when used against a man. Mohammed believed that magical practices of certain persons had affected him with rheumatism. The Talmud abounds in notices of contemporary magic among the Jews, showing that it survived idolatry, notwithstanding their original connection, and was supposed to produce real effects. There are Egyptian hymns against dangerous animals in the water, and spells for remaining in the country. The following is a sample: "I confide in the efficacy of that excellent written book, given this day into my hand, which repels lions through fascination, disables men, . . . which muzzles the mouths of lions, hyenas, wolves, the mouth of all men who have bad faces, so as to paralyze their limbs," etc.

But when we turn to the Scriptures we find a singular absence of anything of this kind. If the Old Testament

were only Hebrew literature, it would not be different from other old books. But it is strangely different. Reginald Stuart Poole of the British Museum remarks, that "it is a distinctive characteristic of the Bible, that, from first to last, it warrants no such trust or dread" as that appearing in the ancient books referred to above. "In the Psalms," he says, "the most personal of all the books of the Scriptures, there is no prayer to be protected against magical influences. Let those," he concludes, "who affirm that they see in the Psalms only human piety, and in Job and Ecclesiastes merely human philosophy, explain the absence in them, and throughout the Scriptures, of the expression of superstitious feelings that are inherent in the Shemite mind."

That the Hebrews were naturally fully as prone to the errors of witchcraft as other races has recently been made manifest by a very interesting discovery. A Hebrew book of magic which has been lost for a thousand years has been brought to light, entitled "The Wisdom of the Chaldeans." It is a collection of magical formulas and recipes belonging to many ages, and attributes magical power to Moses, Elijah, Elisha, Ezra the priest, and to later Jewish rabbis. It traces back the knowledge of these mysteries to Abraham, Noah, and Adam. The name of God is never mentioned, and there are no quotations from the Bible; but the work is "saturated with the principles that rule in the Oriental magic." In short, it is just the kind of book which the Bible might be expected to be, and certainly would have been, had not such error been kept out of it by some overruling influence for which we have no better name than "inspiration."

Mr. Poole goes still farther in his denial of such superstitious expressions when he says, "Notices in the Bible do not once state positively that any but illusive results were produced by magical rites." Fully to justify this state-

ment we should have to examine in detail all the instances in which magic is alluded to in the sacred books. But a fair examination of the most notable passages will be enough to satisfy any one of the fact, that there is no positive teaching of the reality of magic.

A passage which at first sight seems to affirm such a reality is the one in Gen. xlv.15, where Joseph asks his brethren, "Wot ye not that such a man as I can certainly divine?" But Joseph was here playing the part of an Egyptian to his unrecognizing brethren, and the passage only implies that both Egyptians and Hebrews believed in the possibility of divination. Joseph was taking advantage of this general belief to work upon the fears of his brethren. That he actually believed in the art of divination himself, or practiced it, the passage affords no evidence.

The account of the contest between Moses and the Egyptian magicians in the book of Exodus reads in the English versions as if for a time the magicians were able actually to duplicate the miracles of Moses. But commentators tell us that the real meaning of the original expressions used "implies a deceptive appearance, an illusion, a juggler's trick, not an actual putting forth of magic power. Moses describes the act of the sorcerers as it appeared to Pharaoh and the spectators," we are told; so that here again there is no positive teaching of the reality of magic.

The account of King Saul's visit to the Witch of Endor in the twenty-eighth chapter of First Samuel is, perhaps, the most plausible proof which can be adduced that the Old Testament teaches the reality of necromancy. But upon examination it turns out that the evidence is not satisfactory, since the narrative can be explained, and is generally explained, in either of two ways, neither of which allows the witch any power except that of deception. One explanation makes the story a piece of mere skillful acting on her part, since Saul did not himself see the alleged Samuel,

and the counterfeiting his voice and sentiments was by no means beyond the ability of an expert performer. The other explanation admits that there was a real apparition of the prophet, but holds that the witch had no agency in its production, since she had no time to use incantations, and was evidently as much astonished and dismayed at the appearance as the King himself. Thus does this notable passage refuse to take its place as proof that the Old Testament accepts the truth of the pretensions of witchcraft; and, if even this passage cannot sustain it, certainly no other passage can. These and all other references in the Old Testament to anything of the nature of magic, simply show that such a supposed art was widely practiced and credited in Bible times and countries; but, that the authors of the Old Testament shared that credulity, there is not a shred of evidence. If the Bible is to be convicted of error, it cannot be on this ground; on this it is wonderfully guiltless.

We cannot therefore infer, from the command to put witches to death, that their pretended exercise of supernatural power was acknowledged. If they called themselves witches, if they were professional sorcerers, they richly deserved to die, and there was no other proper method of disposing of them under the Mosaic dispensation. We must realize that, of all the criminals against human life and happiness, the professed sorcerer is, in every age and land, the most detestable. Of course he is a mere pretender, an unscrupulous and shameless impostor. "The great characteristic of magic," says Dr. Baylor in his article on "Magic" in the *Britannica*, "is its *unreality*." But the sorcerer is not only an impostor; in all partly civilized races, as well as among savage peoples, he is a black-hearted murderer, with the blood of many lives upon his soul. In addition to all this, he is invariably the representative and propagandist of a false religion; so that he not only

does his fellow-men the greatest harm in their bodies and estates, but inflicts irremediable injury upon their spiritual natures. Surely there could be no class of persons with a better title to be considered the worst enemies of the human race; and, for punishing them with death, the laws of Moses need no justification.

There is no reason to think that the Hebrew magician was any better than the magician of any other race. We may probably get a correct idea of his diabolic behavior from that of the medicine-man of our North American Indians or the *mganga* of African tribes. In his pretense of supernatural wisdom, this personage frequently points out the guilty man or woman who has bewitched a sick person, and his accusation is taken as conclusive evidence, to be followed by immediate execution. It is the *mganga* who decides whether the day of a child's birth be lucky or unlucky; and, if he declare it unlucky, the child is instantly destroyed. It is impossible for us to realize the reign of terror which exists where sorcerers are believed to have such malign power. They use the blind faith with which their claims are regarded, for the purpose of enriching themselves with the estates of their fellows, or advancing themselves to despotic preëminence. The means is as vile and cruel as the end is selfish.

But the Hebrew magician deserved death as the propagandist of a false religion. He was invariably an idolator, and the teacher of idolatrous rites. We do not comprehend the divine purpose of the Hebrew economy, until we realize that the Israelites were the forlorn hope of all true religion, sent forth to secure for the truth a standing-place in the world. We must remember that there was nothing else anywhere in the world of that day but polytheism and idolatry, and that it was a truly desperate struggle to establish in one small corner a single people who should maintain among them the worship of the one true God.



We must remember that, to do this, the divine plan was to organize the nation as a theocracy, and that Jehovah was solemnly and freely chosen by the people to be the Head of the state. Thus idolatry became treason against the executive, and punishable with death, as treason is everywhere down to our own time; and, if ever death was a justifiable penalty, surely it was then and there, when the hopes of mankind were trembling in the balance, depending upon the fate of the Hebrew experiment. The wizard or witch was therefore liable to capital punishment, not only on account of the atrocious nature of the business, but also because they were traitors, whose idolatrous rites and teaching were the most dangerous form of polytheism which the theocracy had to face.

We gain some notion of this antagonism to truth and religious progress by sorcerers, from their invariable opposition to the apostles in New Testament times. The first attempt of St. Paul as a missionary, to propagate Christianity in the island of Cyprus, was withstood by Elymas, the sorcerer. When St. Paul set his eyes upon him, and said, "O full of all subtlety and mischief, thou child of the devil, thou enemy of all righteousness, wilt thou not cease to pervert the right ways of the Lord?" he only pronounced a just sentence upon the uniform and universal character of the professional wizard. That the wizard was as obnoxious in the former days as the latter may be gathered from many passages in the Old Testament; such as, Isa. xlvi. 12: "Stand now with thine enchantments and with the multitude of thy sorceries wherein thou hast labored from thy youth"; and Isa. viii. 19: "And when they shall say unto you, Seek unto them that have familiar spirits, and unto wizards that peep and that mutter, should not a people seek unto their God?"

When now, in the days of the Salem witchcraft mania, and before and since in other countries far more fatally and

deplorably, the authority of the Mosaic law was appealed to to cover judicial murder, there were two flaws in the citation, either of which destroyed its force. The Puritans and Reformers, who found so much in the Old Testament to inspire and ennoble them, seem quite to have failed to distinguish between what was intended to be permanent and what was only provisional and temporary. They did not understand that a union of church and state was justified, and indeed necessitated, in the Hebrew theocracy, which might never again be legitimate in the history of the world; and they took, for universal application, legal enactments which were evidently intended originally only for a particular country and the Chosen People. It did not follow that, because Moses put witches to death, therefore all other lawgivers should do the same. What Moses might do in his time and country, and what he was compelled to do, might be utterly improper in any succeeding age.

But there was another and still greater flaw in the reasoning of the Salem witch persecutors, consisting in their definition of a witch. The witch or wizard whom the Old Testament denounces was undoubtedly a *professional sorcerer*; one who claimed to be able to practice diabolic arts, and abused and tyrannized over his fellow-men by taking advantage of their superstitious fears. The witch whom Samuel Parris and Lieutenant-Governor Stoughton hounded to death made no pretensions to such ability, and was the innocent victim of a murderous slander. In vain did Rebecca Nourse and the Rev. Stephen Burroughs disclaim any thought or desire to practice witchcraft, and stout old Giles Corey refuse to utter one word good or bad, in defense of himself against a charge which had no grounds whatever. The frenzy of fear and malice which superstition and ignorance reached, produced a new trade of witch-finders, as conscienceless and bloodthirsty wretches

as ever spawned on human depravity. If these villains, if Samuel Parris and the depraved children who learned from old Tituba how to go into convulsions when a good man or woman was to be defamed, had been punished according to the law of Moses, its true spirit would have been satisfied, and the world would not have cried out as it has against the Mosaic legislation. It is plain enough that the Salem delusion had' really no standing whatever under Old Testament authority.

One thing we may learn, as we survey the history of witchcraft, and perceive to our surprise, that no country or age has escaped it, and that good and wise men like Cotton Mather and Sir Matthew Hale were not superior to the general belief in the reality of magical pretensions. How remarkable becomes that old book written so long ago, among peoples who believed in witchcraft, on whose pages not even a shadow of superstitious fear of the magician can be found! All others trembled before the sorcerer, but not writers of this ancient volume. They alone apprized sorcery at its real value; they were as sure of its unreality as the writer of the article on "Magic" in the *Britannica*. Some may think that such a volume is nothing better than Hebrew literature; for my part I cannot withhold from it my reverence as a divine book, the Holy Scriptures, the volume written by holy men of old as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.