

FAITH
AND
THOUGHT

1977
vol. 104
No. 2

A Journal devoted to the study of the inter-relation of the
Christian Revelation and modern research

J. STAFFORD WRIGHT

THE BIBLICAL ASSESSMENT OF SUPERSTITION
AND THE OCCULT

In this paper, given at the V.I. Symposium on SUPERSTITION AND THE OCCULT at Chelsea College, Manresa Road, London S.W.3, on 14 May 1977 the author gives a bird's eye view of biblical teaching on the occult.

The Bible refers to superstition and the occult far more frequently than casual recollection would suggest. It would, in fact, be possible to make this paper an encyclopedic review of various practices and the texts that deal with them. Indeed almost every practice could form the theme of a complete paper.

One must therefore look for general principles, the chief of which is that the Bible sets its face against all forms of magic and the occult. It is consequently in striking contrast with almost every religion and society in the world. From the very earliest recorded time until the present day superstition and magic have been treated as legitimate for those who know how to use them.

In general the Biblical attitude is entirely consistent in its basic background, namely the supremacy of the One God, a jealous God who has made men and women for Himself. His jealousy is desire for their welfare. He has given them a material world in which to develop with Himself, but they have an awareness under the surface that life is more than material. The hunger of the heart is meant to find satisfaction in God, but it is possible to pull aside the blanket of the dark and to penetrate a sphere of non-material forces and experiences. One may even break into a world of entities that are as enticing as God, without making demands of moral and spiritual obedience. Superstition thus becomes a non-moral substitute for religion, in which walking under a ladder is more disastrous than telling a lie, and wearing a charm will cover a multitude of sins. Somehow non-material powers, personal or impersonal, assume the status of a capricious god.

Magic goes further. Either by his own inner resources, or by collusion with spirit entities, or both, the practitioner attains mysterious power that is not open to the average person, although the practitioner can distribute the benefits or curses to his clients and their enemies. The magician eats of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and becomes as God.

The consistent attitude of the Bible is that, while there are non-material and spiritual levels, it is for God to use them as He sees fit: it is not for man to intrude into their domain. For example, from time to time God uses angels to carry out His purposes. He may indeed use them invisibly more frequently than we realise, but certainly the Bible records their appearance on occasions. The angel simply acts and speaks as the messenger of God; indeed the word *angel* is identical with *messenger* both in Hebrew and Greek. But man is never to make contact with the angels from his side. Indeed Colossians 2, a chapter which clearly has magicians in view, condemns 'the worship of angels' (v.18).

So, to sum up this far, the Bible, claiming to speak as the revelation of God, and knowing man's weakness for substitute religious experiences, bans those avenues into the occult that at the least are blind alleys that obscure the way to God, and at the worst are roads to destruction.

What then are these avenues? There is a fairly comprehensive list given in Deut. 18.10,11, although admittedly the translator is not always certain how to express the practice that the Hebrew names. The verses begin with the offering of a son or daughter in the fire, a practice which was still rife in the time of Jeremiah (19:4). This offering to a pagan god is not part of our subject now. There follows a list of banned practitioners of the occult, which it is best to translate rather literally so as to see why modern translations vary over one or two of them:

1. Diviner. The root word, *qasam*, is connected with dividing or allotting, and here may refer to allotting someone's fate, perhaps by foretelling the future. Thus Saul asks the woman of Endor to divine for him (1 Sam. 28:8), and Jeremiah tells the people not to listen to diviners who were speaking of an early return from captivity (29:8).

2. Soothsayer. The Lexicon says that the origin of the Hebrew *aman* is unknown. If it is connected with a similar word meaning *cloud*, the soothsayer would be one who used natural phenomena to tell fortunes. Today he would read the tea cups

or the cards. Probably the objects induced a slight trance state in which clairvoyant capacities were released. Again Jeremiah condemns them as spurious predictors (27:9).

3. RSV has *augurs*; NEB *diviners*. The Lexicon suggests that the root word *nachash* means to learn by omens, and this would fit admirably what is said of Balaam, a natural psychic, in Num. 24:1; "he did not go, as at other times, to meet with omens" (RSV). He realised that "there is no enchantment against Jacob" (23:23); the Hebrew uses the same word. Balaam could find nothing to indicate that there would be any efficacy in such curses as he could muster.

4. *Sorcerer*. The AV translators, at a time when there was something of a panic over witchcraft, translated this as *witch*. There is no reason why witchcraft should not be included, but one doubts whether the Hebrews knew of witches in the modern sense. At the same time the root *kashaph* is thought to denote cutting plants to make a magic brew. If so, this is the first word in this list that speaks of magic that takes the offensive and casts spells. Thus Isaiah 47:9 speaks of sorceries and enchantments being used in vain to stave off the fall of Babylon.

5. The next word certainly indicates one who casts spells, and NEB adopts this translation. RSV has *charmer*, and its only other occurrence is in connection with snake charming (Psalm 58: 5b). The Hebrew *chabhar chebher* has the root meaning of *joining a joining*, presumably making magic knots like the women in Ezek. 13:17-23, who made magic armbands, although the words are not actually used of them.

6, 7, 8. I want to leave the final 3 words for consideration later. The RSV translates them, 'medium, wizard, or necromancer'. The NEB has 'one who traffics with ghosts and spirits, and no necromancer.' The words may thus be relevant for modern mediumship and spiritualism.

These two verses place a ban on the sort of practices that the Israelites were likely to meet. Indeed we know from objects and writings from Egypt and Mesopotamia that they could not have missed them. Whatever their precise meaning, they cover protective magic, which is what superstition mostly supplies; fortune telling with an eye to the future; and active magic in the form of spells. In the light of discoveries in the Near East, we should probably divide fortune telling into simple precognitive claims and the use of means, such as the inspection of the entrails of a sacrificial animal. A remarkable find

from Megiddo is a clay model of a liver marked all over with signs and symbols. This use of sacrificial animals is included in the list of means used by the king of Babylon to determine his course of action (Ezek. 21:21). Ezekiel also includes the use of *rhodomancy* here (i.e. divination through the fall of arrows or sticks) and the use of *teraphim*, which we shall consider later. Incidentally, it is surprising to find how many artificial forms of divination have been used down the ages. John Gaule in *Mysmantia* (1652) lists some fifty methods.

A significant omission from the list in Deuteronomy is astrology, although 4:19 warns against worship of the heavenly bodies. The Bible regards these as marking out the seasons of the year (Gen. 1:14), but it also shows that on occasions they served as special signs, e.g. the star in the East at the birth of Christ, the darkening of the sun at the crucifixion, and signs in the sun, moon, and stars to herald the Lord's return (Luke 21:25), although some believe that these latter signs are not to be taken literally, but symbolically. Astrology as such is treated chiefly as a subject of ridicule. Thus Babylon cannot be saved by "those who divide the heavens, who gaze at the stars, who at the new moons predict what shall befall you" (Isa. 47:13), nor need Israel "be dismayed at the signs of the heavens because the nations are dismayed at them" (Jer. 10:2). And in Daniel the astrologers cannot discover the king's dream (2:27) nor the writing on the wall (5:5-16).

If we divide methods of divination into non-mechanical and mechanical, we can count the false prophets in the former category. Probably they were basically psychic, that is, they had some clairvoyant gifts, and they went into a partial trance state when they received what they believed to be their messages. Some of them prostituted their gift in the service of pagan deities, as did the prophets of Baal in Elijah's day (1 Kings 18). Others regarded themselves as prophets of Yahweh, but their inner vision was clouded by what they wanted to believe. Thus the prophets in 1 Kings 22 urged the kings to go up to Ramothgilead and prosper, while only Micaiah saw the disaster that would follow. In Jeremiah's day the false prophets, especially Hananiah, affirmed a speedy return from exile. Jeremiah not only foresaw that the Babylonian domination would last for approximately seventy years from 605 BC, but also foretold correctly that Hananiah would die within a year (28:16,17).

There are two possibilities in considering false prophets. A man may have genuine precognitive capacities, but may use them in the interest of a false deity. This automatically excludes him as a prophet to be followed in spite of his true predictions

(Deut. 13:1-5). On the other hand a prophet who uses the Lord's Name, but makes a false prediction, is not inspired of God (Deut. 18:20-22). Modern experience shows that trance and semi-trance pronouncements often contain a blend of truth and of the speaker's own wishes. As Jeremiah says in 23:16, "They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord", and their dreams also are "the deceit of their own heart" (vs. 25, 26). We might prefer to speak of their subconscious or unconscious. Hence even prophets have to be included under the heading of messengers from beyond the veil. Some are genuine, but others are dangerous.

There is a little more to be said about mechanical methods. Some wish to include lots and the Urim and Thummim as forms of divination, but this is absurd. To toss a coin before a match is not divination. Lots were used to secure fair treatment in distributing the promised land among the tribes (Num. 26:55), to disclose guilty Achan (Josh. 7:14-18), and to choose Saul as king (1 Sam. 10:20-24), although in fact God had already chosen him through Samuel (1 Sam. 10:1). The last recorded use of the lot was in the choice of Matthias, (Acts 1:23-26), which, as some have pointed out, was before the pouring out of the guiding Spirit at Pentecost. After that it was the Holy Spirit who said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul..." (Acts 13:2).

The Urim and Thummim were worn on the high priest's breastplate. They were used on occasions to give a Yes or No answer. This comes out clearly in 1 Sam. 23:10-12, where David obtains Yes answers to two questions about his possible arrest. Again, all modern translations of 1 Sam. 14:41 follow a text which gives Saul's words as "If this guilt is in me or in Jonathan... give Urim; but if in Israel, give Thummim." This is the nearest we come to discovering how these two stones were used, but we note that they were used solemnly in the context of prayer, perhaps being drawn out of their pouch containers.

The interesting and still undiscovered technical piece of occult practice is the use of the teraphim. Although plural in form, the word is singular in usage. It was evidently an image, sometimes small enough to be easily concealed, as by Rachel, who stole Laban's teraphim (Gen. 31:34). Yet the image might also be large, though not certainly so, since David's wife put the teraphim in his bed to deceive the messengers of Saul into thinking that David had been taken ill (1 Sam. 19:13). Elsewhere teraphim are used for magical purposes. Samuel equates them with divination and iniquity (1 Sam. 15:23). The king of Babylon uses teraphim to discover his plan of action (Ezek. 21:21).

In Zech. 10:2 teraphim, diviners and dreamers prove to be ineffective liars.

Perhaps the best way to bring these passages together is to derive the word from *rephaim*, the dead (RSV. the shades) in Prov. 2:18, Isa. 14:9 etc. They may then have been images of departed ancestors, preserved for a similar purpose to the Chinese ancestral tablets. Records from Mesopotamia have shown that possession of the household idols gave a son or son-in-law the primal right of inheritance. This accounts for Rachel's theft in the interests of Jacob, and possibly for Michal's securing of teraphim from Saul's home, but we cannot tell how they were used magically.

Before turning to some more specific points in the Old Testament, we ought to see the very few references to the occult in the New. The term *Magos* is used of the wise men from the East in Matthew 2. We can only guess at who they were, but they had evidently studied Jewish traditions among the many Jews still living in Mesopotamia. They may or may not have been astrologers in the usual sense, and the star, or configuration of stars, which they observed, was something different from the reading of the heavens in the usual astrological manner.

The term is used again of the magicians Simon and Elymas and their magic (Acts 8:9,11 & 13:6,8). Later in Acts 19:19 we have converts who had formerly practised magic arts (*periērga*) bringing their books to be burned. The only other reference, if we omit the girl at Philippi, is the use of the word *pharmakos* and cognates to describe sorcery as one of the works of the flesh (Gal. 5:20) and one of the evils of mankind and of Babylon the Great in Rev. 9:21; 18:23; 21:8; 22:15.

Returning now to the Old Testament, we ought to note a few passages where the Bible might seem to countenance superstition and even occult practices. Thus Leah uses mandrakes to cause fertility (Gen. 30:14-16) with apparent success. There is so much to be learned about fertility drugs that I would hesitate to deny the power to mandrakes in view of their use down the ages. But one must distinguish between a biblical command and a simple record of what happened, mandrakes or no mandrakes. Leah does not seem to have had fertility problems.

There is the story of Jacob's peeled rods producing variegated sheep and goats (Gen. 30:37-43). Whatever Jacob may have thought about the rods, it has been pointed out that he secured the results by selective breeding (v.41).

Finally under this head, did Joseph practise hydromancy in Egypt? He told his steward to say that the cup in Benjamin's sack is the one by which he divined (Gen. 44:5). The word is *nachash* (No.3 above). The reference is undoubtedly to a form of scrying. By gazing fixedly into liquid, a psychically inclined person sees pictures taking shape, as in crystal gazing. The probability is that a light auto-hypnotism releases psychic vision. We cannot say for certain that Joseph actually used this method, since it comes as part of a series of incidents in which Joseph and his steward are deliberately deceiving the brothers. In fact in v.15 Joseph claims that he has been divining, whereas, as the story shows, his recognition of his brothers needed no divination at all.

Obviously there is much more that could be said on the whole subject of the occult, but most of it would be of purely academic interest, as is obvious from what we have already said. But mediumship and spiritualism, which we left on one side in Deut. 18:11, is obviously relevant today. We need the answer to several questions. Does the verse refer to mediumship as it is known today? If so, does the ban still apply? If not, to what does it refer?

The three practitioners are translated by RSV as *Medium*, *Wizard*, and *Necromancer*. If the first and third are correct, and refer to contacting the departed, the translation *wizard* is out of place in between. Hence NEB has one who "traffics with ghosts and spirits, and no necromancer". The weakness of this translation is that people do not traffic with ghosts. Similarly the Jerusalem Bible has "consults ghosts or spirits, or calls up the dead".

The first practitioner is one who consults an *obh*. We shall look for the meaning of this later. The second is *yiddeoni*, from the root *yadah*, meaning to *know*. Hence a *knowing one*. Is this a man, or, as the lexicon says, a familiar spirit who is believed to have superior knowledge? The idea still lingers that the departed speak ex cathedra, as it were. The third practitioner is one who inquires of the dead, which is the literal translation. This should not be translated as necromancer, which commonly suggests the use of a corpse for magical purposes. The word for *dead* here is the equivalent of our *departed*. There are two other Hebrew words for dead bodies.

Let us take the middle word first and note its use in Scripture. It is coupled with *obh* again in Lev. 19:31; "Do not go after the *obhoth* and the *yiddeonim*" (both plural). Lev. 19.6 speaks in similar terms, and adds that God will set His face

against one who does so. There is no question of a death penalty for a client. But in Lev. 20:27 the death penalty is prescribed for a man or a woman in whom, or with whom, (either translation is possible) is an *obh* or a *yiddeoni*.

It is thus a reasonable conclusion that an *obh* and a *yiddeoni* are very similar, and it is surprising that Leonard Argyle in *Nothing to Hide*, virtually ignores the latter. Leviticus suggests that both are sought after by a client *via* the person who possesses them. This is even clearer in Isaiah 8:19; "When they say to you, Consult the *obhoth* and the *yiddeonim* who chirp and mutter, should not a people consult their God? Should they consult the dead on behalf of the living?" Consulting *obhoth* and *yiddeonim* is here exactly parallel to consulting the departed. Isaiah notes the change of voice that is characteristic of some mediumistic communications today. He speaks of it as varying between the twitter of a swallow and the low pitch of the dove or even the growl of a lion, for the word translated *mutter* is used of both in 31:4 and 38:14. The swallow with its twitter and the dove with its moan both come together in 38:14 with the same two verbs as are used in 8:19.

One further passage will enable us to draw the case together. It is the famous incident of the woman of Endor, not a witch but certainly a medium, who was expected to contact the departed. She is twice called "a woman who is mistress of an *obh*" (1 Sam. 28:7). The word translated *mistress* is a feminine of *baal*, lord or owner, and it would make good sense if the woman spoke of 'my control'. It is true that she is taken over by the spirit, but the spirit is dependent on her ownership if it is to manifest.

This is the conclusion towards which these arguments have been working. We are bound to say that the passages refer to mediums who have contact with, or possession by, spirits. If we make a distinction, we could fairly conclude in the light of modern mediumship that the *obh* is the regular control, and the *yiddeonim* are other spirits who can be called up and who respond in voices that are different from that of the medium.

There are only two passages that might upset this interpretation. One is 2 Kings 21:6, with the virtual parallel in 2 Chron. 33:6, where Manasseh used (RSV) an *obh* and *yiddeonim*. The word translated *used* (*asah*) is frequently translated *made*, but it is almost as general in scope as our English *do*, with many different translations, amongst which *used* is perfectly legitimate. Manasseh need not have made some solid objects.

The other is a reference to kings putting away *obhoth* and *yiddeonim* (1 Sam. 28:3; 2 Kings 23:24), but one can put away the spirits by banning the mediums.

There are some earnest Christians who believe that, in spite of the Old Testament ban, there is a place for Christian mediums (or sensitives) today. They commonly quote some of the minor commands of the Law, and say that, since they have been set aside, we need not insist on retaining the ban on mediumship. There is, however, a difference between, say, food laws which were repealed by Christ when, according to Mark 7.19, 'He declared all foods clean', and by Peter's vision in Acts 10,15 -- a difference between these and laws which have to do with permanent spiritual relationships. Moreover this argument would allow me to use sorcery, magic, and divination, which are here standing side by side with mediumship.

However, we must obviously see what light the New Testament throws on a possible lifting of the ban. The spirit in the mediumistic girl at Philippi was treated as an enemy to be cast out even though it testified to the truth of the Gospel (Acts 16:16-18). But, more importantly, in 1 Cor.15 and 1 Thes. 4 where Paul consoles Christians for the loss of loved ones, he does not say, as spiritualists would, 'Next Sunday our prophet-mediums will put you in touch with them.' Instead, he assures them that in Christ, who has risen from the dead, they will meet their loved ones again. The ban on direct communication has not been lifted. The Old Testament speaks of false prophets, and the New Testament does the same. The spirits have to be tested to see their attitude to Jesus Christ's incarnation and deity (1 John 4:1-3). Note that the good spirit is the Holy Spirit, the bad one is some hostile or misleading spirit. The test is not concerned with establishing whether the communicating spirit is your pious grandfather, for the New Testament knows of no such communication.

There is another attempted line of justification for the use of Christian mediums. This is to pick out the word *obh* and interpret it in isolation from the two following words. This is the line followed by Leonard Argyle in *Nothing to Hide*. In one single place, Job 32:19, *obh* means a leather wineskin. Transferring this to the other passages, Argyle concludes that the so-called medium was the possessor of a bag which 'makes a piping sound when pressed'. The medium was thus a fake, herself a 'windbag'.

Argyle continues by quoting the LXX translation of *obh*, which in Greek is *eggastrimuthos*, a ventriloquist, one who speaks in the belly. Evidently thinking of stage ventriloquism, Argyle concludes that the alleged medium was a fake ventriloquist. I spent some time in the University Library going through references that cover the period of the Septuagint translators and the early centuries of the Church, especially the new Lexicon by Lampe. In every quoted example, the word refers to someone who is genuinely possessed. The question is in which part of the body the spirit settles, a question which is still unanswered, except that some seem to use the voice box. But, since ectoplasm commonly comes from the belly, it is at least possible that some people experienced the spirit there. Theodotus defines *eggastrimuthos* as "Certain people who are energised by demons, whom the Greeks called *inner seers* since the daimon seems to speak from within"(quoted in Lampe). Or, to quote Plutarch (*Moralia* 414E), "To think, as do the *eggastrimuthoi* Eurycles of old and now the Pythones, that the god himself clothes himself with the bodies of the prophets, and speaks using their mouths and voices as instruments." One might add Plato (*Sophist* 252c) who laughs at the wonderful *eggastrimuthos* Eurycles, who finds his own ideas contradicted by the voice from his belly.

So, when the LXX uses the word as an equivalent of *obh*, it uses it to mean medium, and as the third word it has *one who enquires of the dead*. Thus the LXX has no intention of introducing fraudulent mediums with skin bottles. As regards the exact meaning of *obh* this is still a mystery. The Book of Job contains many unusual words and usages. But it is quite in order to follow, amongst others, Gaster and Albright, and find a cognate in the Arabic *aba* meaning to *return*, a most suitable title for a spirit.

Even if we were to allow Argyle's interpretation, we have still not taken account of the *yiddeonim*, and, although Argyle, rightly objecting to the title *necromancer* for the final member of the three, points out that the words are used only here, this last phrase certainly means, 'One who enquires of the dead'. It is almost as though the verse rounds off its meaning by using this general statement to cover all that is meant by the previous two.

It would take far too long to discuss the reason for the ban. Obviously spiritualism easily draws people from God as the primary object of devotion. I believe that a majority of messages are accounted for by clairvoyance and telepathy between medium and client, and to that extent they are deceptive in their alleged origin. But when one goes deeper and seeks theological

and philosophical answers from advanced spirits, the messages are wholly destructive of the Gospel that is centred in the deity, unique incarnation, atonement, and bodily resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, and thus are likely to emanate from evil spirits, if we apply the tests as John does in his first Epistle.

At the same time one can allow that God permits the return of the departed if He sees fit. Moses and Elijah returned at the Transfiguration. Abraham did not say that it was impossible for Lazarus to return, but only that it would be useless. Jesus did not deny that there were such entities as ghosts when He was mistaken for one in the upper room, but pointed out that His risen body was of a different quality from that of a spirit (Lk. 24:36-40). While one knows the power of suggestible hallucination, one need not dispute the word of someone who claims to have seen a loved one after death. What is wrong, according to Scripture, is any attempt to obtain a second communication through a medium.

So we return to what we said near the beginning of this paper. Any communication from the unseen must be initiated by God and not manipulated by men and women. Even prayer is to be drawn out by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:26,27). I personally would include natural psychic capacities as part of the make-up of some men, women, and children. These gifts should be handed over to God, like every gift, and He will either use them or suppress them as He sees fit. Danger comes through developing these capacities within the context of spiritualism.

I have not made any reference to exorcism. Some would count belief in spirits as superstitious and attempts to expel them as magical. The Bible treats them as real, and, although secular literature indicates that pagan exorcisms were done by magicians, the Bible does no more than refer to Jewish exorcists, whom Christ admitted did cast out demons (Matt. 12:27), and who tried to obtain results by using the name of Jesus (Acts 19:13-17). Magical exorcism consisted largely in setting one spirit against another.

With this we must close a paper which could have gone on and on. Like the Bible, I am against these things!