

Fabracadabra!

SPELLS, SORCERERS AND SPIRITS:

Magic and the Occult in the Bible

By Kirsten Birkett

Latimer Trust. 103 pages. £5.99

ISBN 978 1 906 327 354

The topic of the occult is difficult, but this recent book by Kirsten Birkett, who lectures at Oak Hill, is one of the most helpful and biblical accounts I have read on the subject.

Ancient magic flowed out of two thoughts. The first is the idea of the interconnectedness of the universe and 'magic' tries to tap into this and control it in some way. The second is that words give access to the creative power of the gods. Language is not just a human invention but reflects an uncreated essence as eternal as the cosmos.

What is magic?

Already, with Genesis in our minds, a close relationship between religion and magic is being indicated. The book settles on the working idea that religion seeks to serve

a 'god' but magic tries to use the power of 'the gods' to achieve some end.

Birkett then goes on to survey ideas of magic in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia and the nations surrounding OT Israel. She clearly explains that magic was forbidden in Israel and opens up a number of Bible texts concerning divination and sorcery. The book then goes on repeat the exercise with respect to the NT looking a magic in the Graeco-Roman world.

Jesus and magic

To some observers it looked as if Jesus and other Bible heroes 'did magic.' The book points out the great difference between Jesus and sorcerers. 1. Christ operated by the power of God, the Holy Spirit, whereas others may have been charlatans or were using the powers of evil spirits. 2. Jesus was motivated by love,



not gain. 3. The work of Jesus brought good fruit rather than bad. In the end the fact that Jesus is God is what makes the difference between him and magicians.

Certainly this discussion is stimulating and it made me want to look again at the three occasions in the Acts where magic / occult practitioners are encountered – Simon Magus in Acts 8, Elymas in Acts 13 and the seven sons of Sceva in Acts 19. Are these passages we tend

to skip over too lightly?

This then leads on to a more systematic treatment of the subject of the demonic and the 'realm of the dead.' Birkett is unsure whether there is enough biblical evidence to be sure that Satan is a fallen angel, and locates that idea more in inter-testamental literature. She argues that the 'Western idea' of demon possession (in the sense of ownership) is wrong, but rather that demons do exercise influence. (I'm not sure how that relates to

the words of Jesus commanding demons to 'come out' of a person in Mark 9.25).

Today's battles

Christ is victorious over the devil and therefore Christians are not to be afraid of the powers of darkness but nevertheless should take care. Avoiding the devil's plans means forgiveness between Christians (2 Corinthians 2.9-11) and avoiding lies and all that is misleading in our dealings in church or elsewhere. Demons seek to undermine assurance of salvation. Pastors need to pray for confidence in Christ for their people. In the context of our contemporary situation it was also salutary to be reminded that in particular the demons are anti-marriage (1 Timothy 4.3). Jesus is stronger than the devil, as he showed by his triumph over Satan at his temptation in the desert. And Birkett tellingly reminds us that immediately afterwards Jesus preached a sermon about setting captives free.

This is a very worthwhile book which will get us thinking and perhaps get pastors preaching in a biblical and balanced way about spiritual conflict. **JEB**

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