

SPELLS, SORCERERS AND SPIRITS: Magic and Occult in the Bible

Kirsten R. Birkett

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Here is another short book in the excellent Latimer Studies series. Kirsten Birkett has written a very fine introduction to the important subject of the occult in the Bible and its implication for life today.

Birkett starts with a key methodological chapter on a definition of magic. She carefully notes the problem of defining magic in academic debates, but, somewhat disappointingly, declines to give her definition of magic, so the reader is left wondering what exactly magic *is*.

Birkett's following chapters are on magic in the Bible and its world. Birkett convincingly argues that magic is absolutely forbidden in the OT, but suggests that the positive use of so-called "magic" in the OT is in fact typological and dependent of true faith in the unique of power of God. She then investigates magic in the world of the NT. Birkett focuses on the issue that Jesus seems to use magic in his miracle ministry. Birkett correctly makes the crucial point that Jesus is God, and therefore the power is his. Birkett, rightly to my mind, cautions that we are not to emulate Jesus in this case (unlike many so-called miracle and "deliverance" ministries today.)

In Chapter 5, Birkett turns to discussing the nature and work of Satan and demons. Birkett downplays the speculation about the origin of evil beings in the pseudepigraphal writings. She misunderstands the origin of evil spirits in 1 Enoch. Contra Birkett, 1 Enoch does not assert that the demons are the offspring of fallen angels and human women, but, rather, that the demons are *the spirits of the dead* offspring of the angels and

women, who died in the flood. She is sceptical of the early Jewish ideas of the origin of evil and sees no reference to it in the NT. However, to my thinking, Birkett underestimates how widespread the ideas of writings like 1 Enoch and Jubilees are in the NT period. These ideas were "in the air" at this time. Indeed, we see allusions and echoes of these ideas in Mark 5; 1 Cor. 10:20; 11:10; 1 Pet 3:19; 2 Pet 2:4; Jude 6f.; Rev 9:20. Here the work of scholars like Archie Wright and Loren Stuckenbruck (not included in Birkett's bibliography) is important.

Birkett concludes this fine study with some good applications to our world today, with our obsession with the realm of the dead. She rightly argues that it is not for us to try to contact the dead, and that the future is in God's hands, not ours. Further, Birkett is right to be sceptical about the use of such "magic" as telepathy. Ultimately, Birkett quite rightly says, we Christians need not fear evil or demon possession because we can enjoy the true supernatural—by knowing Christ. Birkett has written a fascinating and intriguing study on this subject.

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