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WITCHCRAFT AND SORCERY: A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE WITH IMPLICATIONS FOR CHURCH MINISTRY

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Introduction

Many years ago, a primary school mate of mine was admitted into a hospital diagnosed with malaria. I visited her at the hospital. After a few minutes of conversing with her, I saw a funny looking necklace around her neck. I asked her what it was and she plainly responded, "This is my 'charm' given to me by my father for protection against harm and any other bad omen and eyes." With a smile, I asked, "Why hasn't it protected you from the malaria you are now suffering?" Well, instead of answering my direct question, she chose to change the subject of conversation.

The prevalent problem of witchcraft and sorcery in the traditional worship, whose beliefs and practices are firmly held in many parts of Africa and the world at large, has been carried over into the Christian church. Needless to say, we cannot make generalizations concerning this problem because beliefs vary from one people group to another. The usage of the term witchcraft here with its counterpart forms is found in popular speech to refer to all harmful employment of mystical powers. The belief in sorcery and witchcraft in Africa is indeed "a great tyranny spreading panic and death"¹ With wonder, one may ask, "How many people in Africa who like my school mate above are captivated by the fear of witchcraft and sorcery? What is the biblical perspective of these issues? What implications are there for those involved in church ministry? In attempting to answer these questions, the article is significant in providing implications for solving this problem in our churches today.

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¹ E.G. Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion* (London: Sheldon Press, 1974), 11.

Definitions of Sorcery and Witchcraft

Witchcraft is an evil thing which is often hereditary. It is an activity of the soul; often nocturnal and deal depending on dreams². “It is a social or rather an anti-social phenomenon.³ Some of those who confess witchcraft might be doing it for fear that they might have bewitched someone while sleeping, unconsciously and in ignorance. The belief has to do with a theory that the witch devours the spiritual life of the person and in the process causes physical death. In this line of thought, E. Bolaji Idowu writes that,

African concepts about witchcraft consist in the belief that the spirits of living human beings can be sent out of the body on errands of doing havoc to other persons in body, mind or estate; that witches have guilds or operate singly, and that the spirits sent out of the human body in this way can act either invisibly or through a lower creature – an animal or a bird.⁴

Witches are believed to be predominantly women helped by “devils” or “evil spirits.” They acquire their witchcraft through various ways: 1) Inheritance from mother or father. 2) Believed that witchcraft substance can be picked up, bought, or swallowed. 3) Purchased from old women who sell it at cheap prices so that the poor people can easily buy it. 4) Can be intentionally acquired from demons.⁵

Sorcery, on the other hand, is the use of black magic and medicines against others. Gehman points out that both activities “focus on areas of competition for personal gain within society.”⁶ The practitioners of these activities use medicine and/or mystical powers for harmful purposes. Witches are known to be doing the opposite of what is the norm in society because of the evil within them, which is more an act of the mind. Hence, they perform wicked deeds because of their nature. They are also associated with animal familiars, which are believed

² Parrinder, 123.

³ Parrinder, 132.

⁴ E. Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*, (London: SCM Press, 1973), 175-6.

⁵ E.A. Ade Adegbola, *Traditional Religion in West Africa*, (Ibadan: Daystar Press, 1983), 318.

⁶ Richard Gehman, *Africa Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective*, (Nairobi: East Africa Publishers, 1989), p.78.

to provide transportation (hyena) during their mission and actually used to accomplish the intended evil on the enemy (snake). It is also said their physical characteristics set them apart and they are often sitting alone and eating alone. Every misfortune in the community is blamed on them. Mircea Eliade states, "they are believed to harm others either because they possess powers that emanate from their aberrant personalities or because they perform anti-social magic technically referred as sorcery"⁷

Activities attributed to witches include, 1) eating human flesh. This is a symbol of bodily harm or destruction that can be inflicted on people through evil spiritual machination. 2) Infliction of material loss. 3) Cause of barrenness and sterility, and 4) infliction of incurable diseases, etc.

It is believed by many that witches meet together. In reference to this, Robert H. Nassau writes:

These meetings are secret; preferably in a forest, or at least distant from a village. The hour is near a midnight . . . their spirit bodies meet – not hindered by walls or other physical objects. They pass with instant rapid through the air, over the tree-tops. At their meetings they have visible, audible, and tangible communication with evil spirits.⁸

The Effects of Witchcraft and Sorcery

Nearly all over Africa, death from natural cause does not exist. Whatever ill befalls a man or a family, it is always the result of witchcraft.⁹ John Mbiti supports this statement and adds, "Some exceptions like epidemics are attributed to God."¹⁰ If they were not attributed to witchcraft and sorcery, then, the logical results would be neglect of the spirits.¹¹

Tokunboh Adeyemo, quoting Abrahamson who writes on the origin of death, says:

⁷ Mircea Eliade, "witchcraft" in *The Encyclopedia of Religion* vol. 15 (New York: Macmillan and Free Press, 1987), p. 424.

⁸ Robert Hamill Nassau, *Fetishism in West Africa* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), p. 123.

⁹ Nassau, p. 117.

¹⁰ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, (London: Heinemann, 1969), p. 44.

¹¹ Mbiti, p. 83.

By far the commonest cause is believed to be magic, sorcery and witchcraft. This is found in every African society, though with varying degrees of emphasis; and someone is often blamed for using this method to cause the death of another. The living-dead and spirits are another cause. The fourth cause of certain deaths is God, especially those for which there is no other satisfactory explanation, like death through lightning or the death of very old people.¹²

Gehman, in support of the above, writes that, "Every kind of misfortune and evil is blamed on witchcraft. The wasting of person's body and the swelling of his internal organs is evidence that a witch is eating his soul and drinking his blood."¹³ Since in several parts of Africa there is high rate of infant mortality, there are lots of suspicions, jealousies and fears attributed to witchcraft. Even with the pandemic problem of HIV/Aids, some communities see it as caused by witchcraft.

Those who are prone to accusations are 1) close relatives. When one gets sick, his mind immediately goes to people who have some grievance against him and naturally such people are those with whom he has close contact, his own relatives for that matter bear the blame. Witchcraft is very seldom leveled against distant acquaintances. 3) Women generally, especially in polygamous homes where there are co-wives who fight for the exclusive love of their husband. This problem is always rooted in jealousy. 4) Mothers and daughters-in-law. A woman whose child dies usually accuses her mother-in-law of being responsible (the envy that exists between them). If the wife falls sick, she believes that it is her mother-in-law who is bewitching her so that she could have all the love of her son for herself. 5) Old women are also accused of witchcraft because of their age. 6) Queer ugly people. Those people who are socially handicapped. They are liable to accusations of witchcraft and are usually held responsible for any outbreak of serious deadly disease or any misfortune.¹⁴

Gehman summarizes well the belief that the powers of witchcraft and sorcery breed deep fear and suspicion which undermine initiative and engender an underlying atmosphere where misfortune or some unusual event takes place.

¹² Tokunboh Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition*, (Nairobi: Evangel Publishing House, 1979), p. 66

¹³ Gehman, *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective*, p. 78.

¹⁴ Adegbola, *Traditional Religion in West Africa*, p.326.

It can also cause hatred and exacerbate antagonistic behaviour in social relations.

The Extent of Witchcraft and Sorcery

In observing the extent of witchcraft, Parrinder who is also echoed by Kato writes, "Witchcraft has appeared in many parts of the world, in one form or another. It became particularly prominent and developed in Europe in the later middle ages and Renaissance periods. Still in modern Africa beliefs in witchcraft is a great tyranny spreading panic and death."¹⁵ In support of this, Parrinder further describes, "witchcraft is still very widely feared and apparently just as much under the influence of modern civilization and Christianity as ever before."¹⁶ To protect himself against misfortune, sickness, unemployment, lack of promotion, failure in examination, and all ills of life, human has recourse to the diviner and witchdoctor.

It is unfortunate that when several traditional worshippers become Christians, though they do not wear fetishes; still believe in their power. They also dread their influence if possible they should be directed to them. Some think that white magic, which simply acts on the defensive, should be allowed. There are therefore those who wear them for defense while others hang them on the doors or garden fence to ward off evil spirits. The Zarean song expresses the dilemma experienced by these Christians as follows:

Miscrable Christian,
At mass in the morning
To the fortune teller in the evening
The amulet in the pocket
The Scapular round the neck¹⁷

There are those who have "no hesitation in going to the Juju man or to the fetish priest when it is considered expedient."¹⁸

¹⁵ Byang H. Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa* (Kisumu: Evangel Publishing House, 1975), p.22.

¹⁶ Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion*, p. 133.

¹⁷ Justin S. Ukpong, *African Theologies now, Spear head no.80*. (Eldoret: Gaba Publications, 1984), p. 9.

¹⁸ Ukpong 1984, p. 9.

From the above description one immediately concludes that witchcraft is prevalent in traditional worship and that several Christians still retain some fear of it. In fact some church adherents would hesitate when asked questions about it. Fear of illness and death has caused several persons to preoccupy themselves with protection by wearing charms and other anti-witchcraft medicines. This kind of fear calls for serious reflection on ways to remedy the situation. And the secularistic approach to supernatural powers must be rejected. In what ways, then, shall people solve this problem? This question brings us to the next section on the biblical perspective on the topic.

The Reality of Witchcraft and Sorcery in the Bible

The bible recognizes the existence of witchcraft and sorcery, and the reality of magical powers. The Egyptian magicians were able to perform similar miracles like those produced by Moses (Ex. 7:11, 22; 8:7, 18, 19; II Tim. 3:8). In the book of Daniel the reality of the power of Babylonian magicians is assumed (1:20, 2:27; 4:7, 9; 5:11). Satanic powers will also be experienced in the end time (Rev. 9:1-20). The authority of the anti-Christ will be supported by miracles and signs (II Thess. 2:9-12; rev. 13:13-18). On the same thought, Gehman rightly writes, "Scripture always assumes the reality of demonic forces even though it teaches the deceptive nature of many of the liar's servants."¹⁹

Mysterious powers exist (Ps. 91). We fight against principalities and powers of darkness (Eph. 6:10ff) and our Lord Jesus Christ claimed authority over these spiritual powers. It is also listed as one of the acts of the sinful nature in Galatians 6:20.

The Bible, too, recognizes the possibility of human beings in their free agency making pacts with the devil, in virtue of which he was allowed, under divine administration, to share with them some of his supernatural powers as prince of the power of darkness, and god of this world. God condemned such pacts as unholy. Those who made them were called witches and wizards.²⁰

Those who have been delivered from the power of witchcraft speak of its reality and of witches as existing in reality. They say that this is Satan's power at work, using demons and human agents to expand his wickedness and rebellion against God on earth. Some say that witchcraft exists and someone with a weak faith is vulnerable to the witches' attacks. A weak faith is one mixed with

¹⁹ Gehman 1989, p.90.

²⁰ Nassau 1969, 136.

doubts. Doubt is a powerful weapon of the devil. The fight against witchcraft and sorcery is a spiritual one, and those who hope to win must arm themselves with the sword of the spirit as Paul correctly states in Ephesians 6:17.

The witch of Endor in I Samuel 28:11-15 was a reality. Nassau says “she did ‘bring up’ real departed spirits; perhaps only on that one occasion, and then only by direct divine and not satanic power and will, and for a divine object [for] she herself seems to have been surprised (v.12) at the real success of divination which formerly may have been, in her hands, only deceptions”²¹

There are numerous other references in the Bible referring to sorcery, for example, Exodus 28:18 and Ezekiel 13:17-23, which require further study on the topic.

Warning against the Use of Witchcraft and Sorcery in Scripture

The scripture warns and actually forbids against the use of mystical powers. The first warning is given in the Old Testament book of Exodus 22:18, “You shall not allow a sorceress to live” (compare with Lev. 19:26; 20:6, 27). A complete warning is found in Deuteronomy 18: 9-12, which reads as follows:

There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire, one who uses divination, one who practices witchcraft, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer, or one who casts a spell, or a medium or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead.

In this passage the Lord warns Israel that they should not follow the heathen practices of the Canaanites which caused them to be destroyed.

As we saw earlier, in disobedience, the children of Israel turned to these pagan practices (I Sam. 28:3, 9; II Kg. 23:24). As a result, the judgment of God fell upon them and they were taken into captivity.

In the New Testament sorcery is listed among the works of the flesh (Gal.5:20) and is closely linked with idolatry. Simon the sorcerer was rebuked by the Apostle Paul and commanded to repent in Acts 8:9-24). Elymas the magician was rebuked as “the son of the devil” and “enemy of all righteousness” (Acts 13:6-12). When the gospel was received in Ephesus, the magical charms and medicines of the converts were burned. Gehman writes “the total value was

²¹ Nassau 1969, p. 136.

50,000 pieces of silver, representing a total worth of 50,000 working days (Acts 19:18, 19). Sorcerers are among those who are specifically excluded from the holy city, the new Jerusalem in Revelation 21:8 and 22:15.²²

Gelman continues to state that “divination was also condemned, for example, the shaking of arrows, consulting household idols and examining the liver (Ez. 21:21). Astrology (study of stars) was common in the ancient world even as it is today, compare Psalm 81:12; Amos 5:15, 26; and Acts 7:41-43”²³

The other reason why witchcraft and sorcery is forbidden in the scripture is because of their association with demonic activities. Sorcery is associated with practices of spiritism (II Kg. 23:24), spirit of harlotry (Nah. 3:4) and idolatry (Mic. 5:12). During the apostasy of Jezebel, witchcraft was revived (II Kg. 9:22). The evil of witchcraft is in the dependence upon the creature and in disobedience upon the will of God. It is demonic idolatry to seek for a wizard rather than God. If one does this, he removes God from His rightful place of preeminence (Isa. 8:19).

The scripture also teaches that there is self-deception brought by Satan. On the other hand, several of the specialists (diviners, witchdoctors, sorcerers, etc) considered in this article are liars whose concern is to acquire more wealth. Over 90% are liars.

Why is witchcraft and sorcery so tenacious in African communities? In response to this question, the next section will discuss syncretism as a result of failure to preach conversion and repentance in our local churches.

Syncretism the Failure to Preach Conversion and Repentance

Syncretism is defined as mixing of elements from religions; a function or activity that no one committed to the truth of Jesus Christ can accept. Yet without proper education of the church members, there are always nominal aspects of Christian teaching which can easily yield themselves to syncretistic elements.

While repentance is paramount in church ministry, Parrinder reminds us that in ministering to sorcerers [and witches], “no healing is complete until the

²² Gelman 1989, p. 90.

²³ Gelman 1989, 95.

horn of witchcraft is surrendered”²⁴ As ministers of the word, we need not fear because we have a Lord who sends us with a promise of ‘power . . . over . . . power (Lk.10:19), the ‘power with authority’ (exousia) over all the powers (dunamis) of the enemy, and this is the kind of Saviour the animist, nominal and syncretistic persons have been seeking. “The Christ of the animist conversion experience is a Lord of power.”²⁵

This is the power we are called upon to proclaim. We must be obedient to the great commission given to us by our Lord Jesus Christ (Mt. 28:18-20), which is threatened by syncretism in making the unique salvation of Christ non-effective. We are called upon to follow the example of the apostles who did not compromise though faced with tendencies to do so.

Paul in Ephesus did not compromise under the pressures of tradition, culture and religion; instead he called on the new converts to make a total break with magic. We read that the new converts volunteered to burn their magical books and objects, which were worth a large sum of money.

There was no compromise, as we saw earlier, for Simon the magician (Acts 8:4-24) who wanted to add the power of the Holy Spirit to his own powers.

Those who enter the church fold for the sake of whatever gain they could make through the Christians’ new influence, and the believer’s Holy Spirit but inwardly practices works of diabolism and sorcery must be rebuked.

In Colossae, Paul made no room for compromise. As Gehman writes, “To allow additions of asceticism and angel worship to creep into the Christian church would have changed the very nature of the Gospel.”²⁶ To accept the intermediaries along with Christ can only lower the position of Christ. Therefore, no syncretism is allowed or permitted.

Conclusion

Let me conclude by saying that like the prophets of old we need to fight against syncretism. Jesus must be preached as the only way to God (Jn. 14:6); there is salvation in no other name except that of Jesus (Acts 4:12).

²⁴ Parrinder 1974, 142.

²⁵ Donald McGavran, *Crucial Issues in Missions Tomorrow*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), p. 142.

²⁶ Gehman 1989, 95.

Secondly, follow-up ministry must be emphasized for the new converts.

Thirdly, conversion messages must be preached in the churches especially to second-generation Christians who are not converted and can easily revert back to old traditional religion because of boredom and dissatisfaction.

Fourthly, proper teaching on what the bible teaches about witchcraft and sorcery need to be considered seriously.

Finally, Christians need to understand that they are fighting against principalities and powers, against spiritual and wicked forces in the heavenly places (Eph. 6:12). They need to understand that prayer is a weapon against the wiles of the devil. The devil has used its powers to bind some lonely Christians with perpetual diseases, bad tempers, hatred, all opposed to God and his righteousness. But Christians must wake up and fight it in the name of Jesus Christ.

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