
Witches and Diviners

— learning from the biblical text

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Christians Addressing Witchcraft
and Witchcraft Accusations

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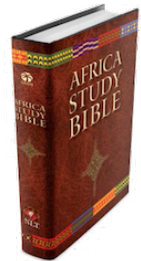
Witches and Diviners

— learning from the biblical text

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My Tanzanian pastor friend “Moses” had recently died. Through his ministry, dozens of churches had been planted. He faithfully trusted God even when several sons died, and in his sixties he had a motorbike accident, high blood pressure, stroke, and diabetes. Now I was visiting his home again, but to comfort his widow, “Mama Moses”. What could I say?

What is happening?

Everyone seeks ways to understand and control problems, especially death. In many parts of Africa, we will expect that someone is responsible for our problems. We will look for hints of a bad relationship to explain bad outcomes. Many people go to diviners to find out who caused their sickness, death, or misfortune. The diviner might blame an invisible spirit (for example: ancestor, genie) or a witch: a visible relative, neighbour or colleague — usually someone in a closer relationship. So a **diviner** is a public person who advertises that he is able to diagnose and heal people from various problems or help them find success, using spiritual power such as from ancestors or spirits as well as medicine. The **witch** is the person that the diviner or others accuse of causing the problem through invisible means and thus being evil.

Though only some cultures in Africa and other parts of the world blame witches for problems, every culture has people similar to diviners. In every culture there are a wide variety of magical and occult practices involving the spirit world and the world of the supernatural. The Bible is clear that God's followers should not participate in these. Christians should not attempt to contact the dead, should not consult diviners or mediums, should not make use of magic or witchcraft. While some needy Christians will be tempted, like King Saul under cover of night, to make secret visits to mediums and diviners, the Bible forbids this. Furthermore, people will often envy, hate, and wish harm on others. They may try and harm others using guns, poison, or magic and witchcraft. The Bible is clear that anyone who works to harm others is doing the work of Satan. In many societies there is the belief that someone who sacrifices their child, or simply who uses witchcraft, will be able to achieve great wealth and power or political success. God condemns all such practices in the Bible.

The Bible says sickness, death, weeds, work problems, lack of fertility, and lack of blessing, come from our sin as individuals and as groups (Genesis 3). Suffering can also be caused by rebellious spirits (demons and Satan). God is in control and will eventually use even suffering for his good purposes (as in the case of Job, Jesus on the cross, and the suffering of the early Christians — see ASB article on Suffering). We should pray to God in our suffering or sickness and persevere in trusting him no matter what happens (James 5:10–16). God alone has the power to give life, healing, blessing, success and revelation of the future. (See ASB note on Exodus 7:11) Therefore, ultimately only he also has the power of curse, sickness and death. His people inherit the promise to Abram that God will bless them, make them a blessing, and curse those who curse them. Jesus followers do not need to fear witches or even demons, but only fear God and avoid sin (see Numbers 22–25 and related ASB notes). Therefore go only to God through Jesus for insight and healing, not to other sources such as diviners who consult ancestors or spirits and accuse witches.

As we trust Jesus, we can use newer medicines or traditional herbs. We can get advice from medical doctors and local herbalists. The Bible does not forbid learning about and using God's physical creation for healing. Local herbalists can help us know which plants in what amounts can help what ailments. However, they become diviners and not merely herbalists when other spirits are consulted as part of the diagnosis. Sometimes even Christian pastors act like diviners by seeking who the witch is, interviewing deceptive demons, and bragging of their own power over witches and demons. Frequently the diagnosis blames a witch for the problem.

What about witches?

What is the result of such a diagnosis? People fear more, but fear or trust God less. The community gains confidence in the diviner, but greater fear and suspicion of the witch. They break relationship with the suspect. Gossip is spread. People may find more problems to blame on this suspect. Eventually this person may be neglected, ostracised, beaten, fined, or even killed. People murder suspected witches every day in some countries. Those who suffer abuse as suspected witches are most often the vulnerable with few defenders: the poor, the outsider, the elderly, women, widows — increasingly step-children and orphans. Family, neighbours, and pastors who should defend and care often lead the accusations and abuse. But these are the very people the Bible repeatedly says God defends and cares for, and commands that we do the same (Exodus 22:20–24, Deuteronomy 10:18–20, James 1:27)! The Bible does NOT say “unless they are a witch”. Even if they were our enemies, Jesus tells us to love our enemies (Luke 6:35).

As I left, Mama Moses pulled me aside and told me not to trust Pastor “Joshua” because he had killed Moses! What should I have done with this accusation that my friend Joshua was a witch? Should I warn others? Should I avoid or fear him?

Murder accusations like this require strong evidence, because if others accept the charge, then they will act towards the accused in ways that are harmful. Many African countries have laws against witch accusations that lead to harm, but unfortunately they are seldom enforced to protect the vulnerable because people fear the invisible power of witches and accusers (often

diviners) too much. Laws also exist against harming with witchcraft, but people seldom take a suspected witch to court because the evidence is not strong enough.

How would we know if someone is a witch? First, many of us have heard thousands of stories about witches so we believe strongly that for a serious problem like death, some person must be responsible. We highlight unusual circumstances. We search for signs of envy and anger to know who might have motive. Sometimes someone dreams about witches. God can communicate through dreams. But dreams often come out of daytime activities (Ecclesiastes 5:3). They can also lead us away from truth and God (Deuteronomy 13:1–5). Of course people envy and hate. Some even do believe in the power of witchcraft enough to put objects they believe are powerful (feathers, blood, fingernails) in a place they hope will cause harm to an enemy. But how would we know if these objects caused the harm?

What about confessions? A person almost never claims to be a witch. Occasionally some will confess to being a witch if threatened or beaten or possibly to make others fear them. Here is an experience from Rev. Samuel Kunhiyop, General Secretary of ECWA, in Nigeria:

Years ago, my wife and I went to visit a young pastor who was sick and dying. He told us that his own daughter who was about six years at the time was responsible for his ailment. We saw the small girl outside. She had been beaten with sticks, and a sharp razor blade had been used to lacerate her tender skin. Well, she confessed that she was responsible for the sickness and death of the mother and now her dad. The father later died. However, just before his death, he told his own family that he had HIV/AIDS. So definitely, though she confessed, it was not true that she caused the father to have HIV and AIDS. Actually, the father had been sleeping with prostitutes in the city and contracted the deadly disease. ... This girl is now a woman who has lasting brain damage from the beatings. ... These kinds of stories can be recounted over and over. The point is that there are many of these so-called confessions that are false and injurious and unfair.

Most often a diviner (or a “Christian” diviner like Balaam) is consulted to know who the witch is that caused harm. However, we know that many diviners deceive and at other times are deceived by the spirits speaking to them (see ASB notes on Deuteronomy 18:10–14, Ezekiel 13, Acts 13:6–9). Most often they do not predict future events like Biblical prophets, but just blame for a misfortune that already occurred. However, even if the diviner (or a scientist or a prophet) gives accurate predictions and performs miracles, but then encourages worship of any god other than Yahweh, Deuteronomy 13 says God’s people should not listen to them. Indeed it commanded the Israelites to kill them. This is how important it is that we follow and fear only Yahweh, the life giver. Exodus 22:18–24 (see ASB note) gives a similar command. However because “witch” or similar words have sometimes been used to translate Exodus 22:18, some of us have justified the killing of people we suspect are witches who harm people with sickness or misfortune. Does the Bible teach us to kill witches?

But in Exodus 22:18 and other passages that sometimes use a word like “witch” (secret killer or harmer), an accurate translation for African contexts would be something like diviner. In every biblical example, these people had public roles claiming to help people, assist the king, divine secrets, use spiritual power in amazing and beneficial ways. For example, in many African societies there was a diviner who the chief or king relied on to use spiritual power for defence, including determining who was a witch. Pharaoh and the King of Babylon and Persia also had such people (see Exodus 7:11, Daniel 2:2, and related ASB notes — compare with Elymas in Acts 13:6–9).

Have you ever read anywhere in the Bible where an evil person caused harm through invisible means, even with the help of a demon? There are many evil people who harm with a sword or oppression. There are examples of godly people such as Moses, Elijah, Elisha, Peter and Paul announcing God's judgment which caused everything from plagues to sudden death. These examples confirm that Yahweh (the Lord) God alone gives life, healing and blessing or withholds them. Sometimes the Bible tells of prophets, diviners, and mediums who use a source other than Yahweh. Many fear and awe them. But the Bible mocks even the greatest for their ignorance and weakness compared to all-powerful Yahweh. They might turn a stick to a snake, but they and all their gods cannot stop or start a plague, sickness, or death (Exodus 7:11 and related note).

The Bible shows many demonised people, but the demons harm them rather than being sent by them to cause others harm. There are problems caused by Satan and demons, but never because a person sent them. The Bible does not teach that demons serve or need any people. Do demons need any encouragement to kill, steal, destroy, lie, accuse, and tempt? Ephesians 6:10 tells us that our struggle is NOT against humans, including witches, but against evil spiritual powers. Accusing or cutting a widow does not defeat demons or make God happy.

Do like Jesus

Jesus (and the disciples he sent out) reached out to the vulnerable, marginalised, sick, and demonised in his society. When he met a person with a demon, he did not fear the person or the demon. He healed the oppressed person and cast out the demon. Jesus went toward and fully delivered even a naked, strong, Gentile living in a graveyard and filled with many demons. But the community did not appreciate what Jesus did in freeing this man and asked Jesus to go away (Luke 8:26–39). Jesus served the outcasts and healed them. He defended them even against community and religious leaders whose teachings oppressed them. He confronted those using religion to steal widows' houses and ignore their responsibility to their parents (the same often happens through witch accusations).

As a result of serving the marginalised and outsiders, the religious and community leaders accused him of being empowered by demons (Matthew 12:24). Actually they were partnering with The Accuser (the meaning of "Satan"), as we may be if we accuse witches. Their envy, anger, and defense of their power, led them to plot against Jesus. They used illegal court procedures and mob anger to have Jesus beaten, stripped, tortured and killed. This is exactly what many communities and religious leaders do to people suspected of being witches in Africa today. They say that chasing the "witch" from the community will take away evil, sickness and suffering. Like the high priest, they say it is better for one to die to save the community. The difference is that in Jesus' case, he was the true scapegoat (Leviticus 16:10), and his death DID take away evil, sin, sickness and death. Today we must trust his sacrifice to remove our sin, sickness, and death. He will fully remove it when he returns.

We must take his side in defending the widow, orphan, poor and vulnerable. Such a defense may be dangerous. As Jesus promised we may be suspected, persecuted or even killed. But we know that serving and carrying our cross will lead to eternal life and joy. We know that he is with us always and so we ultimately have no reason to fear.

In Tanzania, I took the accusation issue to the overseers. They met with Mama Moses to find out why she suspected Pastor Joshua. They helped her see that she should not trust the prophet with no reputation who told her that Joshua who her husband loved and trusted had killed him through envy. Pastor Joshua and his church have continued to show her love. Love, peace, and trust now exist in their church. Joshua is sharing his story as part of seminars to help communities respond to witch accusations and defend the vulnerable who are accused.

Points to Remember

- God alone has the power to give (or take) life, healing, blessing, success and revelation of the future. Trust only God through Jesus for insight and healing.
- Do not go to other sources such as diviners who consult spirits and accuse witches (even if they call themselves pastors).
- The Bible does not teach that there are witches in the sense of evil people who cause harm through invisible means.
- Do not accuse, gossip or preach about people being witches. This leads to fearing powers other than God and to neglecting or harming those God tells us to care for.
- If people come to you asking for prayer or advice and fearing that they have been bewitched, do not affirm or add to their fear. Reassure them that nothing can separate them from God's love.
- Defend and care for widows, orphans, the poor and the outsider, whether or not they are suspected to be witches, even if it is costly.

Note: in the *Africa Study Bible* (ASB) there are other helpful notes on the topic of witches and diviners. You can find them at the following references: Exodus 7:11, 22:18–24; Deuteronomy 18:10–14; Numbers 22–25; 2 Kings 21:6; Psalm 106:37–38; Isaiah 47:9–14; Jeremiah 27:9; Ezekiel 13; Daniel 2:2; Matthew 2; Acts 8:9, 13:6–9; Galatians 5:20; Revelation 9:21.

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