

Please, send Questions, Feedback and Comments to: E-mail: imoisilic@hotmail.com

MAGIC IS NO MIRACLE!

“And Moses and Aaron went in unto Pharaoh, and they did so as the Lord had commanded: and Aaron cast down his rod before Pharaoh, and before his servants, and it became a serpent. Then Pharaoh also called the wise men and the sorcerers: now the magicians of Egypt, they also did in like manner with their enchantments. For they cast down every man his rod, and they became serpents: but Aaron’s rod swallowed up their rods” [Exodus 7: 10-12]

A 98-year old comedian was once asked if he had ever encountered a miracle. He replied that he did everyday, especially in recent times. Asked how that could be, he replied, “if I go to bed tonight and can wake up tomorrow morning, that’s a miracle!”

*What is a miracle and how is it different from magic? According to the **Pocket Oxford Dictionary of Current English**, a miracle is a “marvelous event due to supposed supernatural agency; a remarkable occurrence.” The same dictionary defines magic as “the supposed art of influencing a course of events by occult control of nature or of spirits.” What a distinction without a difference! The outputs of both methods are signs and wonders, which defy natural explanation. In our selected Bible piece above, we see that rods (ordinary wood) were turned into serpents (animals), and the feat was achieved both miraculously and by magic. So, how can we differentiate one from the other?*

The fastest way to build a congregation today is through signs and wonders. Believers flock to “men of God” who can demonstrate them in abundance. Yet, Jesus has warned us that in the last days, “there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect” [Matt. 24:24]. Paul has also warned us about “false prophets, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ.” Like their master, Satan, who has transformed himself “into an angel of light,” his ministers have also transformed themselves “as ministers of righteousness” [2 Cor. 11: 13-15].

The danger is real and unless we are properly instructed in the matter, we could be toying with our faith and salvation. We tend to think that the magicians are among idol and devil worshippers, palm and card readers, etc. The bad news is that they may also be sitting up there in the altar of your church! In today’s lesson, we shall use the story of Moses’ contest with Pharaoh’s magicians to understand God’s word on the matter.

1. Moses versus Pharaoh

In last week's lesson, we read about Moses' encounter with God in Horeb, and how God commissioned him to deliver the children of Israel out of Egypt. The shepherd's rod that Moses had taken up to the burning bush, God had now converted into "the rod of God," and He assured Moses, "thou shalt take this rod in thine hand, wherewith thou shalt do signs" [Ex. 4: 17, 20]. Pharaoh, on the other hand, relied on his "wise men and the sorcerers" to do the spiritual battle with Moses [Ex. 7: 11], apparently to prove to his subjects that the gods that Egypt worshipped were as powerful as Moses' God. Let us follow the contest:

a) *Round One: Turning Rods into Serpents* [Ex. 7: 8-12]

Aaron cast down the rod of God before Pharaoh and his servants and it became a serpent. He did not use any enchantments. He simply did what God had commanded him to do. Pharaoh called his magicians who matched the feat. They used enchantments and their rods became serpents! You can imagine Pharaoh's standing in the eyes of his subjects at that point of the contest. But, wait a minute: *the rod of God swallowed up the rods of the magicians!* No other god can stand before the Almighty One!

b) *Round Two: Turning the Waters and Country into Blood* [Ex. 7: 14-25]

Pharaoh's heart was hardened and he was under the illusion that he had won the first round. God sent Moses and Aaron back to use that same rod to touch the waters of the River Nile, the main stay of the whole country. They did and the water turned into blood, so did the whole country. Fish died in the rivers of Egypt and everywhere stank. Without water to drink, the Egyptians went thirsty. Pharaoh again called on his magicians. Interestingly, they also used their enchantments to produce blood, not to clean up the mess made by Moses! Therefore, *even though the magicians could conjure blood to appear, they could not remove the plague that lasted for seven days!*

c) *Round Three: The Plague of Frogs* [Ex. 8:1-7]

God commanded Aaron to stretch the rod over the waters of Egypt. Frogs came out and took over homes and lands. Again, the magicians used enchantments and "brought up frogs upon the land of Egypt" [v. 7]. Pharaoh then begged Moses to ask his God to remove the frogs from homes and restrict them only to the waters. Moses did so that Pharaoh "mayest know that there is none like unto the Lord our God" [v. 10]. God heard his prayers, but the dead frogs stank as the people gathered them in heaps round their homes. Again, the magicians could not deal with that.

d) *Round Four: The Plague of Lice* [Ex. 8: 16-19]

God commanded Moses to tell Aaron to stretch out the now famous rod of God and strike the dust of the earth, “that it may become lice throughout all the land of Egypt” [v.16]. Aaron did so and both man and beast became infected with lice. A louse is a tiny insect that feeds on blood. It is worse on the head where it can easily blend with the colour of the hair and have a field day drinking the blood at the root of the hair. It causes the victim to itch. So, everybody and beast in Egypt, including Pharaoh himself, scratched the body day and night, without respite.

In order to match the feat of Moses, the magicians tried again to do so “with their enchantments to bring forth lice, *but they could not*; so there were lice upon man, and upon beast. *Then the magicians said unto Pharaoh, this is the finger of God*” [vv. 18-19]. Finally, the magicians admitted defeat. The last time they failed was when they could not interpret Pharaoh’s dreams, and that was what brought Joseph out of prison [Gen. 41:8].

2. The essential differences between miracle and magic

From the forgoing, we can see the essential differences between miracle and magic. Here are some of them:

a) *God is the source of miracles*

Moses and Aaron only did what God commanded them to do. They did not need to go into any *abracadabra* rituals! Therefore, God is the source of miracles. Nicodemus underlined this point when he came to Jesus by night, and said to Him, “Rabbi, we know that Thou art a teacher come from God: *for no man can do these miracles that Thou doest, except God be with him*” [Jn 3:2].

Magic, on the other hand, comes from Satan and his demonic forces. That is why they have to be invoked through enchantments and incantations, as the Egyptian magicians did. You will recall that during the temptation of Jesus, the devil took Him up to a high mountain and “shewed unto Him all the kingdoms of the world *in a moment of time*” [Lk 4:5]. A “moment of time” means in a flash. Therefore, Satan has the power to give magicians what they ask for. When God refused to speak to Saul, the king said to his servants, “Seek me a woman that hath a familiar spirit, that I may go to her, and enquire of her.” They led him to a witch at Endor who conjured up the dead prophet, Samuel, who spoke a prophetic message to Saul, concerning his battle with the Philistines the next day [1 Sam. 28:6-19].

b) *Magic deceives, miracle relieves*

Pharaoh tried to justify his intransigence by using magic to prove that whatever Moses did with the rod was not unique. As long as his magicians could match what Moses did, Pharaoh was deceived to believe that he was on the right course. In like manner, many believers have been trapped by signs and wonders only to discover in due course that they have been spiritually imprisoned.

Remember the story of a man called Simon who had “used sorcery, and bewitched the people of Samaria, *giving out that himself was some great one*: to whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, *this man is the great power of God.*” [Acts 8:9-10]. But, after Philip had come to minister the true word of God and preached Christ to the people, “unclean spirits, crying with loud voice, came out of many that were possessed with them; and many taken with palsies, and that were lamed, were healed.” The people, including Simon himself, received Christ and were baptized [vv. 7,12-13]. Magic had trapped them but miracles came to set them free.

c) *Miracles last, magic does not*

The Plagues of Egypt ran up to ten. By the third plague, the magicians had given up! Magic is nothing but temporary relief! That is because, Satan, the source of magic is not omnipresent but “going to and fro in the earth, and walking up and down in it” [Job 1:7].

The 450 prophets of Baal found themselves in a mortal combat with Elijah as to who was serving the true God. They cried from morning to noon, saying, “Baal, hear us.” They even cut themselves with knives while making incantations, and nothing happened. Then, Elijah mocked them and their god, Baal, saying, “cry aloud: for he is a god; *either he is talking, or he is pursuing, or he is in a journey, or per adventure, he sleepeth, and must be awaked*” [1 Kgs 18:26-28]. On the other hand, the God we serve neither sleeps nor slumbers [Ps. 121:4], and His eyes “run to and fro *throughout the whole earth*, to shew Himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward Him” [2 Chron. 16:9].

Satan is really not interested in the long-term benefits of magic to the practitioners because he came to kill, steal and destroy. Only Jesus came to give life and He gives it very abundantly [Jn 10: 10]. Thus, all the miracles of Jesus lasted [I have used the word, lasted, to recognize the fact that all those that He raised from the dead ultimately died again, in the manner of all flesh].

3. How then can we know a miracle when we see signs and wonders?

As we go from one crusade or revival to another, and we see supposedly lame people throwing away their wheelchairs and crutches, or the supposedly deaf and dumb now hearing and talking perfectly, we should first convince ourselves that we are seeing miracles, not magic. Otherwise, we could be putting ourselves on the road to deception. So, how can we then tell the difference?

J. Rodman Williams, a theology professor at Regent University [U.S.A.] has suggested the following criteria, which I share:¹

a) *It must glorify God*

Moses and Aaron sought to glorify God. On the very first day that they appeared before Pharaoh, Moses told him, “Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, let My people go, that they may hold a feast unto Me in the wilderness.” Pharaoh’s reply was “who is the Lord, that I should obey His voice to let Israel go?” [Ex. 5: 1-2]. The battle lines were drawn. Moses’ miracles would glorify God while Pharaoh’s magic would glorify man.

When Jesus had healed the paralytic man that was brought to Him in Nazareth, the people who had witnessed it “marveled and glorified God” [Matt. 9:1-8]. The lame man, healed by Peter, walked into the temple with the Apostles [Peter and John], “leaping and praising God” [Acts 3:1-8]. Therefore, when ministers of God put on television those who have received miracles through them to give testimonies, they must be careful it is not to advertise their spiritual power but to glorify God.

b) *It must stem from a righteous source*

Do not be deceived by the signs and wonders. Instead, pay attention to the medium being used because, as Jesus has said, “by their fruits, ye shall know them” [Matt. 7:20]. Look at the life style and spiritual disposition of the ‘miracle worker.’ Does he/she fear God? Is his/her lifestyle worthy of emulation?

c) *It must ring true to the Holy Spirit*

Magicians use the spirit of divination while miracle workers use the Spirit of revelation, that is, the Holy Spirit, for “holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost” [2 Pet. 1:21]. On seeing Jesus at the temple in Capernaum, an evil spirit cried out, “I know who Thou art, the Holy One of God” [Mk 2:24]. Certainly, it was not speaking by the Holy Spirit! Instead, like the damsel, “possessed with a spirit of divination,” who cried after Paul, saying, “these men are the servants of the most high

¹ J. Rodman Williams, “Which Miracles Are Real?” *Christianity Today* [May 21, 2001], <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2001/007/30.81.html>

God, which shew unto us the way of salvation,” [Acts 16:16-18], we need to have the spirit of discernment, one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit [1 Cor. 12:10] to know the difference. Paul knew that the damsel’s masters were using her magical powers to make money. So, he cast out the evil spirit from her. We need to do the same thing in the body of Christ, the church!

d) *It must stand the test of external verification*

Moses’ rod swallowed up the magicians’ rods. That was proof that one was true and the other was false. After Jesus had healed the ten lepers, He said to them, “go shew yourselves unto the priests” [Lk 17:14]. According to the Law of Moses [Lev. 14], there was a prescribed way by which lepers could be pronounced healed. After Lazarus had been raised from the dead, he was seen by everybody sitting on the high table at a dinner given to Jesus by Simon [Jn 12:2]. Therefore, a miracle cannot be lost. It endures. If it is a healing, medical doctors should be able to certify that, in deed, it is so.

e) *It must build up the church*

One of the key offices in the church is the working of miracles, which ranks only lower than the positions of apostles, prophets and teachers [1 Cor. 12:28]. Therefore, miracles are meant to build up the church, not to build a family enterprise for the leaders and key members of a congregation! After Pharaoh had witnessed the series of miracles performed through Moses, he said to Moses and Aaron, “Rise up, and get you forth from among my people, *both ye and the children of Israel; and go, serve the Lord, as ye have said*” [Ex. 12: 31]. The church of the wilderness was thus a product of Moses’ miracles.

4. Conclusion

Jesus has assured us of the signs that shall follow believers, and the early church demonstrated them in abundance [Mk 16: 17-20; Acts Chaps. 3-6]. As we enter the end times, the spirit of the antichrist has begun to attack the body of Christ, such that we pay more attention to the signs and wonders than to their sources. We stand the chance of being deceived, as Jesus warned us 2000 years ago. Miracles are good and desirable. But, magic? That is something else!