

Magical Thinking: Familiar/Cursed Objects

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Abstract

Magical thinking can take on many forms within Christianity. One of the aspects of the spiritual warfare and deliverance ministry worldview is that of cursed or familiar objects. Demons are attracted to these objects and may inhabit them. Cursed/familiar objects include items explicitly related to other religions, items that are implicitly connected, and even seemingly innocent items. A number of Scriptures have been employed to argue for the existence of cursed objects, the grave results of contact with such objects, and how to react to such objects. Key texts are: Deuteronomy 7: 25-26, Isaiah 2: 6, and Acts 19: 19. The aforementioned texts are taken out of context and haphazardly assembled to strengthen the argument. This is not a responsible interpretation of Scripture. The original language and historical context need to be taken into consideration. The magical thinking about objects hearkens to what used to be called fetishism. It is unfounded in Scripture and boils down to superstition that can have negative effects on the individual and society.

Introduction

When it comes to magical thinking, most people in the Western world would probably consider it doubtful to exist. In ancient times, the belief in magic was common, but through the advancement of science the belief in magic has dwindled. However, the belief in magic still persists even in modern society (Subbotsky 2011: 127, 137). Eugene Subbotsky defines magic as following fashion: it relates to the direct effect of consciousness over matter, such as affecting or creating physical objects through the effort of thought, will, wish, or word (mind-over-matter magic). It may concern the sudden acquisition of spontaneity by a nonanimate physical object (animation magic), or a violation

of the fundamental laws of object permanence, physical space, and time, such as one physical object inexplicably turning into another physical object in an instant (nonpermanence magic). It may also indicate when certain objects or events affect other objects or events in a nonphysical way, through similarity or contagion (sympathetic magic) (2011:127). Haydn J. McLean has a wider definition that defines magical thinking as consisting of the following four aspects: (1) “A conviction that thinking is equivalent to doing...”; (2) “...the ability to influence events at a distance with no known physical explanation”; (3) “...the interpreting of two closely occurring events as though one caused the other, without any concern for the causal link”; and (4) “...that one’s thoughts, words, or actions can achieve specific physical effects in a manner not governed by the principles of ordinary transmission of energy or information” (2009: 5). Magical thinking can take on many forms within Christianity. This article focuses on an aspect of spiritual warfare, namely, the belief in familiar or cursed objects.

Spiritual warfare is mostly found within the Pentecostal and charismatic traditions (Smith 2011: 4) but can be found among people of any tradition. The notion of spiritual warfare has been in circulation since at least the 1970’s (Howard 2009: 159). A well-known and popular book about spiritual warfare is *Pigs in the Parlor: A Practical Guide to Deliverance* by Frank and Ida Mae Hammond, first published in 1973. In the 80’s and 90’s there was a surge in media attention to Satanic influence (Frankfurter 2001: 352; Howard 2009: 163). The term “Satanic Panic” refers to that period in which conspiracy theories regarding an outbreak of Satanism sparked the formation of parent groups and action from police and counsellors (Wallace 2015: 37; cf. Ellis 1990: 29, 39-40; Ivey 1992: 41; Victor 1990: 53). It should be noted that the kind of Satanism envisioned in the conspiracy theories is not the kind of Satanism proposed by Anton LaVey. Even though Satanic Panic has been debunked, it enjoys revivals from time to time and remnants of the beliefs still remain to this day. There are links between the beliefs of Satanic Panic and the beliefs of the QAnon movement: “A belief in ritualistic human sacrifice and Satanic worship is a fundamental tenet of QAnon - over time, that paranoia managed to trickle into the mainstream, accelerated by a general distrust of authority and institutions” (Di Placido 2022). Rebecca Brown’s fantastical books about spiritual warfare between herself and servants of Satan were published during the Satanic Panic of the 80’s and 90’s. In South Africa, the Occult Related

Crimes Unit was formed in 1992 and Kobus Jonker published his book *Satanism in South Africa: Knowledge, insight, hope, help* (Wallace 2015: 37).

In 2022, the popular Netflix science fiction horror drama *Stranger Things*, set in the 80's, refers back to Satanic Panic in their fourth season, when a group of teenagers gang up against schoolmates who play Dungeons & Dragons. The game is an adventure storytelling game where players form parties that explore fantasy worlds with the dungeon master acting as storyteller and referee (Wizards of the Coast 2022). The game includes "a mix of Tolkien fantasy tropes, with some folkloric and religious influences" (Di Placido 2022). Denis describes the Satanic Panic as the "a paranoid belief that orgies and ritualistic murder played out to metal music and in worship of fantastic creatures" (2022). The main target in *Stranger Things'* Satanic Panic is the leader of the Dungeons and Dragons players, a character who is a metalhead (Di Placido 2022, cf. Denis 2022). This character is loosely based upon the story of Damien Echols who was wrongfully imprisoned for a triple homicide (Denis 2022). Bob Larson, a staunch anti-rock music preacher, is one of the frontrunners to claim that any non-Christian belief system is demonic (Howard 2009: 163). This is one of the prominent beliefs that influence the perceived need to be cautious about certain objects.

According to the doctrine of spiritual warfare, Christ did have victory over Satan, but the war is not over yet. The main weapon of Satan is sin and spiritual warfare is primarily aggressive prayer (Gross 1990: 112, 116). According to spiritual warfare teachings, spiritual bondage can happen in a variety of ways, including: generational curses, involvement or experimentation with the occult, occult objects, wilful sins, unforgiveness, demonic vows, spoken self-curses, points of weakness, etc (cf. Els & Jonker 2000: 290-291). Familiar or cursed objects are also called occult objects. In South Africa there exists a following of this kind of spiritual warfare belief system. One of the current national bestsellers on the Exclusive Books website is *A Divine Revelation of Satan's Deceptions & Spiritual Warfare* by Mary K. Baxter (2022). The description of the book reads as follows:

In 1976, Jesus took Mary K. Baxter on a spiritual journey for thirty nights to witness the torments of hell, charging her to reveal the terrible reality of God's judgment and to relate the urgent message of salvation through Jesus Christ. Mary wrote

about her journey to hell in her best-selling book *A Divine Revelation of Hell*, which has sold nearly 1.4 million copies. After those thirty nights, Jesus told Mary, “I will close up your mind, and you will not remember some of the things I have shown and told you. But I will reopen your mind and bring back your understanding in the latter days.” Recently, God brought back to Mary’s remembrance many of those experiences because these revelations are particularly for our day. *A Divine Revelation of Satan’s Deceptions* contains new images of hell that Mary has not related in her other books, as well as crucial insights into the deceptions Satan uses to destroy people and the tactics he employs to defeat believers. Our choice is between allowing Satan to deceive and rob us—or claiming our spiritual inheritance and conquering the enemy in the power of God.

In *A Divine Revelation of Spiritual Warfare*, you will learn more about how to receive divine protection and use the spiritual weapons that are rightfully yours so you can take back what Satan has stolen, break free from generational curses, know what spiritual warfare is and is not, conquer entrenched sins and habits, see healings, and release others from spiritual bondage. The enemy seeks to conquer and destroy your spirit, soul, and body, but the devil has far less power than God has made available to us. Learn the enemy’s strategies and be equipped to engage in spiritual battles—and win! (Whitaker House 2022).

A local proponent of spiritual warfare and “spiritual house cleaning” in specific is Tiaan Gildenhuys from Authority in Christ Ministries (Outoriteit in Christus Bediening) who has 10.5 thousand subscribers on YouTube. Other South African churches that teach spiritual house cleaning are Kanaan Ministries with 13,406 followers on Facebook, and Choose Life Church with 46, 012 followers on Facebook. On 14 Augustus 2022, Choose Life Church burned “various occult and items of bondage [sic]” during their “Revival in Acts” services (Choose Life Church 2022).

Familiar or cursed objects are broadly defined as any objects used in the service of Satan. “These must be removed from the house as they provide legal ground for the demons to use to bring a continuing evil power into the house” (Brown 1992: 159). Rebecca Brown states that demons cling to these objects (1992: 142). Tiaan Gildenhuys argues that idols and demon spirits are linked (2022 46:18) but that demons cannot live inside objects and can only dwell around these objects (2013:17). Demons do not indwell the object but remain in close proximity to it. An example of this is that spirits of “murder, death, and aggression” hanging around objects such as war memorabilia and weapons (Gildenhuys 2013: 46). These familiar or cursed objects are also called “contact points” or “crystallisation points” which allow demonic spirits to enter your home (Kanaan Ministries 2019: 4; Koch 1986: 288). These objects are said to open up a door in the spiritual dimension (Gildenhuys 2013:24). Occultic objects are believed to actively attract demons (Baxter 2006: 43; Hammond & Hammond 1992: 175; Mostert 1992:84). Rebecca Brown and Daniel Yoder state that even just touching “unclean and unholy things” can cause a person to become cursed (1995: 47). Occultic objects and idols are any objects that are worshipped by other religions and belief systems (Gildenhuys 2013:23). They also included items related to or used in the practices of other religions. These are items such as Buddhas, statues of Hindu gods, dream catchers, items depicting Satan or demons, or items with pagan or occult symbols on them. Items used in occultic or New Age practices such as Ouija boards, Tarot cards, and crystals, are also included (cf. Mostert 1992:84). Even seemingly innocent items are said to be occultic and give demons legal rights in your home, e.g., wind chimes, suns and moons with faces, African artefacts, playing cards, dreamcatchers, incense, hearts, images of certain animals, dolls, and even certain geometric designs like spirals (Van Rensburg 2005, cf. Els & Jonker 2000: 290).

It is also said that “if you bring an artefact into your home, it is not just an idol, it is an altar where demons can feed in your home” (Van Rensburg, 2005). It is believed that such items must be destroyed by fire, following the instruction in Deuteronomy 2: 5 “But thus you shall deal with them: you shall destroy their altars, and break down their sacred pillars, and cut down their wooden images, and burn their carved images with fire” (Kanaan Ministries 2019: 10, Gildenhuys 2013: 15). If an object cannot be burned, it should be destroyed in another way. Kanaan Ministries advises that it should still be passed through

the fire first “as an act of obedience” (2021:11). The object should then be smashed (Kanaan Ministries 2019: 11, Gildenhuis 2013: 15).

Fetishism and contagious magic

In this section, two relevant magical concepts are examined. The first concept is what used to be referred to as fetishism. The term originated in 1481 with Portuguese seafarers’ description of the cultic images and beliefs of the indigenous people of West Africa (Von Stuckrad 2006: 731). The English term fetish comes from the Portuguese *feitiço*, derived from *feito*, the past participle of *fazer* “to do, to make” (Radermacher 2019: 169). The term later became so broad that it included almost all aspects of the religion of West Africa (Pool 1990: 116). Charles de Brosses introduces the term in his 1760 book *Du Culte des Dieux Fétiches*. It was meant to designate the “primitive” first stage of religion (Radermacher 2019: 170). Likewise, Auguste Comte’s Enlightenment view of the evolution of religion, fetishism was also the first stage (Von Stuckrad 2006: 371) The first criticism of this term and the concepts behind it came from Marcel Mauss as far back as 1907 (Iacono 2016: 75). Vernon argues that the term should be abandoned but could still be used to describe small objects such as charms and talismans (2009: 209). This is relevant for the current discussion. These items can also be referred to as cultic images. Cultic images refer to objects which are “inhabited by spiritual power,” or images or statues that are believed to be “material representations of transcendent beings” (Radermacher 2019: 169, 170). As argued by Ann Taves, these objects do not act by their own accord, but “have the capacity to produce an effect” (Radermacher 2019: 173). This slots into the notion that cursed or familiar objects attract demons which give them the capacity or potential to have real consequences for those who interact with these objects. Another definition, by Marianne Vedeler, is that these cultic images “have the ability to arouse awe within a given cosmological frame ... within a cosmology where objects are considered to have properties animated by a holy or magical power” (Radermacher 2019: 176). It logically follows that in a worldview where objects are seen as completely inanimate, these objects would have no power. Objects with no power could not attract demons. The notion that handling or viewing a cursed object could impart one with a demon reveals a worldview associated with cultic images and fetishes.

Another kind of magic is “contagious magic”, which is a belief in “things once joined together to affect or have a contagious, contaminating influence on each other, even after their separation” (Thorpe 1992: 110). In the area of cursed objects, there seems to be a notion similar to the idea behind contagious magic at work. AKLAS (Kommissie van Leer en Aktuele Sake of the Dutch Reformed Church) poses a thought-provoking question (2011): If it is dangerous to own a Buddha statue because the demon spirits would gain entrance into the owner’s home and life, would a New Testament Bible in the possession of a Buddhist not cause Jesus to gain entrance into that person’s house and life? Jan de Jongh van Arkel states that: “It seems to me that the people who become involved in demon exorcism have very often settled for mythical concepts and prefer mythical thinking... A mythical religion is very easily degraded to the level of magic with a whole set of rituals. Magic is, in essence, a refined form of domination. It is used to avert disaster, to influence the forces of nature, and to influence or even manipulate other people” (1987: 144).

Isaiah speaks about the worthlessness of the heathen gods and especially their idol statues in 44: 6-22. Jeremiah 10: 5 agrees with how useless idols are: “They *are* upright, like a palm tree, And they cannot speak; They must be carried, Because they cannot go *by themselves*. Do not be afraid of them, For they cannot do evil, Nor can they do any good.¹” Living in the victory of Christ, should this not be every believer’s attitude toward idols? The objects have no power within them (Kruger 2007). James Kirkpatrick states that we should reject this magic-oriented superstition (Oosthuizen 2011: 3) which is in dire need of the message of freedom in Christ (Kirkpatrick et al 2011: 12). He also says that “we lose our theological integrity” when such practices are allowed (Oosthuizen 2011: 3).

Scriptures

Many Scripture verses are cited as proof texts and guidelines on cursed objects, what they are, and what to do with them. These include Exodus 20:2-4, Numbers 23:8, Deuteronomy 7: 25-26, 14:7-19; 21:23, 23: 14, 32:5, 17, Joshua 6:18, 24: 21-24, II Samuel 7:29, Psalm 81: 9; Proverbs 3:33 Isaiah 2: 6,

¹ All Scriptures are quoted from the NKJV

Jeremiah 10:2, 48:10, Acts 19: 19, I Corinthians 10: 19-29, and Revelations 9: 20-21 (Brown 1992: 143; Gildenhuis 2013: 12, 15, 16, 40; tiaan gildenhuis 2022; Schmoyer 2010: 31, 72). In this article, I focus on three texts for the sake of brevity: Deuteronomy 7: 25-26, Isaiah 2: 6, and Acts 19: 19. These texts display three different arguments and come from both the Old and New Testaments.

Deuteronomy 7: 25-26 (NKJV)

25 “You shall burn the carved images of their gods with fire; you shall not covet the silver or gold that is on them, nor take it for yourselves, lest you be snared by it; for it is an abomination to the LORD your God. 26 Nor shall you bring an abomination into your house, lest you be doomed to destruction like it. You shall utterly detest it and utterly abhor it, for it is an accursed thing.”

In these verses, Israel is told not to take the idols of Canaan, lest they be spoiled by them. It is only in Deuteronomical law where the idols should be burned with fire. The phrase “for it is an abomination to the LORD your God” serves as the final ground for a prohibition (Driver 1996: 105). Abomination is the opposite of holy and Israel is supposed to be a holy nation. It has to do with the identity of Israel (Versluis 2017:80, 137); it creates a distinction between Israel and the other nations (Macdonald 2003:121). A concept similar to abomination is that of *hērem*. In the Old Testament the term has a twofold meaning: firstly, that of destruction and devastation and secondly, that of the sacred (Benovitz 2020:74, Stern 2020: 104, Versluis 2017:46-47).

In Deuteronomy the *hifil* form of the verb *haram* always means “to kill, destroy, exterminate” (Versluis 2017: 69). The chapter of Deuteronomy 7 emphasises the ban on the Canaanites, which is expressed in its sharpest terms in the book of Deuteronomy. In Deuteronomic law, the Canaanites are not to be expelled, but exterminated, whereas other texts prefer expulsion from the land (compare Exodus 23: 27 with Deuteronomy 7: 23 and Exodus 23: 28 and Joshua 24: 12 with Deuteronomy 7: 20). The reasons found in the Deuteronomical law for the Canaanites to be expelled or exterminated are religious (Weinfeld 1991: 384). In Deuteronomy *hērem* is to serve as a safeguard against Israel turning to Canaanite gods and Canaanite religious rituals (Benovitz 2020:81, 107; cf. Stern 2020: 104). It is about contamination (Macdonald 2003:117). *Hērem* is contagious and those who come into contact with such objects themselves become *hērem* (Benovitz 2020:75, 80, Versluis

2017:50, 122). In the Ancient Near East it was customary for the victors to take over the cultic sites of the vanquished. Israel is prohibited from doing this (Versluis 2017:79). Idols from other nations were also “recycled” and repurposed, as is evidenced in a text from Alalakh, which states that silver objects were made from an idol (Versluis 2017:121). In Deuteronomy 12 the religious rituals of the Canaanites are mentioned and “an explicit connection is made between divination and child sacrifice of the nations of Canaan and their extermination” (Versluis 2017:255). The specific motive found in Deuteronomy 7 is not found elsewhere in the Old Testament (Versluis 2017:285). Deuteronomy 7 is seen as the expression of the radical nature of obedience and loyalty to YHWH (Macdonald 2003:116, 123).

Isaiah 2: 6 (NKJV)

6. “For You have forsaken Your people, the house of Jacob, Because they are filled with eastern ways; They are soothsayers like the Philistines, And they are pleased with the children of foreigners.”

The relevant part here is that they are filled with eastern ways. Isaiah 2:6 is interpreted as pointing to objects from what we today know as “the East,” e.g. China, Japan, India, etc (Gildenhuis 2013:40). The phrase “they are filled with eastern ways” is not clear. The Hebrew מְלֵאוּ מִקְדָּם is problematic to translate. The verb מל, “to be full” seems to lack an object. The Septuagint and the Targum insert “their land” or “your land” and JJM Roberts uses that as a clue that the original text might read “full of Arameans from the east” (1985: 300). The reason for this is that in Isaiah 9:12 the same expression occurs and points to the Arameans from the east.

Reading the next few verses gives more context:

6 For You have forsaken Your people, the house of Jacob,
Because they are filled with eastern ways;
They are soothsayers like the Philistines,
And they are pleased with the children of foreigners.
7 Their land is also full of silver and gold,
And there is no end to their treasures;
Their land is also full of horses,
And there is no end to their chariots.
8 Their land is also full of idols;

They worship the work of their own hands,
That which their own fingers have made.
9 People bow down,
And each man humbles himself;
Therefore do not forgive them.
10 Enter into the rock, and hide in the dust,
From the terror of the Lord
And the glory of His majesty.
11 The lofty looks of man shall be humbled,
The haughtiness of men shall be bowed down,
And the Lord alone shall be exalted in that day.

Shawn Aster reads it as “full of practices from the East” (2007: 259) and states that this would lead to “hubris and arrogant pride” (2007: 260). Idolatry, accumulation of wealth, and soothsaying would cause the people to be lofty and haughty, as stated in verse 11 of the same chapter (Aster 2007: 260). Aster (2007: 260) goes on to say that when compared to texts regarding idolatry in Deuteronomy, the focus in Deuteronomy is on disloyalty, but the focus in this text from Isaiah is on interfering with the sovereignty of God.

To be filled with the East could refer to the trade which Israel did with other nations (Gray 1975: 51). Verse 7 does speak of silver, gold, treasures, horses and chariots. It could be that Isaiah condemns the hoarding up of material possessions and implements of war. This would agree with other prophets who condemn these things because of their blinding effect on the minds of people to the things of YHWH (Gray 1975: 54). Roberts holds a different view and argues that the text refers to the build-up to war and not to trade (1985: 304) and that the pericope of Isaiah 2: 2-22 was written to reassure Judah (1985:308).

Acts 19: 19 (NKJV)

19. “Also, many of those who had practiced magic brought their books together and burned *them* in the sight of all. And they counted up the value of them, and *it* totalled fifty thousand *pieces* of silver.”

Ephesus was a large and prosperous cosmopolitan city in Asia Minor and the goddess Artemis has been worshipped there since the 11th century BCE (Brinks 2009: 783). The Temple of Artemis just outside of the city was one of

the seven wonders of the world and played an important part of the economy in Ephesus, even functioning as a bank (Brinks 2009: 781-782).

Ephesus was well-known for its magicians and magical practices (Munck 1981: 191). It was also known for magical books and the term *Efésia grámmata* was commonplace (Barrett 1998: 913; Talbert 2005: 169; cf. Klauck 1994: 100). The word translated with “magic” is *περίεργα* and it originates with “things better left alone”, as used by Plato and is a semi-technical term for magic (Barrett 1998: 912). Matthew Bates states that “it’s semantic domain includes abstract notions such as curiosity and more concrete activities such as astrology and poisoning” (2011: 412). Frederick William Danker uses the term “misdirected curiosity” (2000: 800), while Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott use the term “curious arts” (1891: 548). It could also be translated as “dark arts” (Bates 2011: 412).

Carl R. Holladay states that there are contexts in which magic is regarded in a negative light in Roman society (2016:181). An example of this is Pliny the Elder opposing magic in his *law against pharmakeia* (Otto 2013: 324). *Pharmakeia* includes the use of medicines, poisons, potions, or spells (Danker 2000: 1050; Liddell & Scott 1891: 751). Plato and Pliny the Elder also devalue and oppose *mageia*, Plato because of religious convictions and Pliny because of the inefficacy of the practices (Otto 2013: 328). *Magos* is originally a word referring to Persian priests, but the terms *magos* and *mageia* soon came to be used to refer to any abnormal religious practice (Edmonds 2008: 24; cf. Hornblower & Spawforth 1996: 908, Klauck 1994: 95; Strelan 2004: 66). Within ancient Greek culture, *magoi* are foreign to the Greek traditions (Strelan 2004: 66). Dirk Rohman refers to the Twelve Tables, which were the first codification of Roman law (2013: 116). Within this law, harmful magic was punishable by death. Non-harmful magic was often absorbed into Roman religious ritual, but harmful magic was illegal, yet it was practiced privately (Adkins & Adkins 1996: 138; cf. Hornblower & Spawforth 1996: 910). Bernd-Christian Otto points out that people have been persecuted for *crimen magiciae* since early times in the Roman Empire (2013: 311). There are also cases of people being persecuted for *magica mallificia* (Masoga 2002: 166). Harmful magic included curse tablets (Otto 2013: 312), as well as poisons (Hornblower & Spawforth 1996: 909). Astrologers, magicians, and philosophers were expelled by various emperors, but Rohman argues that the reasons were mostly political in nature (Rohman

2013: 145). Yet there are also positive uses of the terms *magos* and *mageia* (Edmonds 2008: 25; Ahmadi 2014: 488) and thus it is a nuanced concept. Harold Remus describes the variety of practices mentioned under the umbrella term of *mageia* as: “everything from humble supplication to sublime praise of deity to threats and strict injunctions to deities and daemons, from ways to make people well to make them ill, from divination through spirits of the dead to ways to ascend to the heavens” (1999: 268).

The burning of books in this Scripture verse is not a unique event. Other book burnings in Roman times are known to be mandated by rulers and not voluntary like the one in Acts 19 (Holladay 2016:374). However, book burnings were a rare occurrence (Rohman 2013: 145). In 181 BCE, books that were deemed to be subversive to religion were burned (Rohman 2013:120-121). It was of great concern that Roman tradition could be contaminated by foreign influences (Rohman 2013: 121), e.g. Greek and Babylonian influences (2013: 118). Books were also burned for political reasons, for example slander (Rohman 2013: 125, 129; Talbert 2005: 169). Luke’s portrayal of magic is negative (Bates 2011: 412). Holladay postulates that Luke, the author of Acts, seeks to portray the church as not only harmless, but as also beneficial to Roman society (2016:57).

Hans-Josef Klauck explains the message as follows:

But there is a certain danger of confusing magic with Christian miracles, therapies and exorcisms, and, still worse, of taking Christian belief for a more powerful manifestation of magic. That may lead to a blasphemous usurpation of Christian holy names for magical purposes. It may provoke conversions to Christianity mixed up with dubious motives, and it may, worst of all, cause sincere believers to relapse into their old life and take up magic once again, but now hidden under the veil of the newly acquired faith. In short, what Luke fears most is a syncretism, a religious mix that swallows up everything: paganism, Judaism and Christianity, which is an obstacle to the Christian mission and a continuing threat to the established local churches (1994: 100-101).

Johannes Munck summarizes this episode as follows: “Where Christ was, there was no room for magic, and now they not only confessed their sinful use of demonic names and powers, but they burned their magic books as an act of faith” (1981: 191). Charles H. Talbert states that the book burning in Acts 19 is “an expression of repentance, symbolizing one’s leaving the old life behind” (2005: 170).

Scriptures: Conclusion

Deuteronomy 7: 25-26 was intended to keep Israel from falling into idolatry. It is not said that the idols are objects to which demons cling or even that they attract demons. Demons are not mentioned at all. It is simply a case of purity and impurity, of obedience to YHWH, and resisting idolatry.

To use Isaiah 2: 6 as a condemnation of objects originating from the Eastern cultures like Japan and China (Gildenhuis 2013:40) is a gross misinterpretation of the text. It is doubtful that Israel was even aware of the existence of the far eastern lands and their culture. When Isaiah refers to the “east”, he is more likely to be referring to the nations of Ammon and Moab, since these lie directly east of Israel (May 1975: 69), or like Roberts argues, Arameans (1985: 300). If the phrase “they are filled with eastern ways” refers to magical practices, the specific practices are unclear.

In Acts 19: 19, the new converts in Ephesus burned their magic books to show the seriousness of their commitment and the break with their previous life (Kee 1997: 231; Malina & Pilch 2008: 138). Dirk van der Merwe points out that Luke juxtaposed miracles and magic to prove “the victory of the proclamation of the Gospel over the practice and involvement in evil practices (e.g. magic)” (2010: 83). Regarding Acts 19: 19, it is not possible to infer that the burning of the books by the Ephesians had anything to do with Deuteronomy 7: 25. To see a connection would be to take the texts out of their contexts.

Texts have to be read in their contexts (Versluis 2017:139). One cannot simply take a text out of its context and string it with other texts taken in a similar fashion. As Arie Versluis states: “A theological evaluation of the Deuteronomic command should read it both against its own historical-cultural background, and in its canonical context” (2017:346). This is true for all three texts in our

discussion. William P. Brown sees eye to eye with the statement by Versluis by saying that “[n]o text stands on its own, isolated and hermetically self-contained. Rather, a text stands in line with other texts, before and after it, all interconnected, explicitly and implicitly” (2017: 145).

Within hermeneutics, there are three worlds that interact when one reads a text. These are:

(1) the world behind the text, (2) the world in or of the text, and (3) the world in front of the text. The world “behind” the text refers to the historical context of the text’s origin, retrieved through the work of historical investigation. The world “of” or “in” the text designated the text itself, disclosed through close readings. The world “in front of” the text includes the contexts in which the text is interpreted and appropriated, its history of interpretation or reception, including the world of the reader (Brown 2017: 7).

Brown refers to the hermeneutic circle originally defined by Friedrich Schleiermacher and developed by Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer, which acknowledges the role that the reader plays in interpreting the text. He goes on to call it a “hermeneutical convolution,” because it isn’t a “tidy circle” (2017: 8).

When watching the videos of Tiaan Gildenhuys or reading a number of books on spiritual warfare, there is one thing that immediately stands out: a large amount of Scripture verses are quoted in short succession, without adequate explanation or exegesis. As an example, in the introduction of his first spiritual house cleaning video, Gildenhuys quotes nine texts within the first ten minutes and sixteen by the twenty-minute mark (2022).² The verses are just stacked one upon the other, as if the sheer number of verses will be what makes the argument strong. In his article “Biblical Interpretation Is More than Stacking

² These texts are: John 10: 10 II Tim 3: 16, Is 28: 9-10, II Cor 1: 13, Ex 20: 2-3, Ps 102: 27, Mal 3: 6, Heb 13: 8, Jos 24: 21-24, Ps 96: 4, Ps 60: 4, Deut 18: 9, Jer 10: 2, Deut 7: 25-26, Is 30: 21-23, and John 16:8

Verses,” Brandon D. Smith compares stacking verses to how Satan used Scripture to tempt Jesus in the desert:

We cannot merely stack up Bible verses, making biblical claims based on a handful of verses that are isolated from their immediate and broader biblical contexts.... Satan shows us that quoting out-of-context phrases and sentences that seem handy in the moment can be a dangerous game. Obviously, he was nefarious, but even if he were innocently quoting the verse, the type of application he suggested would have been inappropriate. ... Indeed, one can quote the Bible extensively and still teach the Bible wrongly (2022).

Stacking verses in this manner is like building a tower with Jenga blocks. It might look like it makes sense. It might look impressive to an onlooker, but when the texts (bricks) are taken out and examined, the tower will eventually collapse.

Consequences of belief in cursed objects

The consequences of a belief in cursed objects also needs to be looked at. The first aspect examined is paranoia. In his doctoral thesis titled *The Church Militant: A Study of “Spiritual Warfare” in the Anglican Charismatic Renewal*, Graham Russell Smith refers to a “paranoid universe” that could lead “to an insecurity that often demonises others” (2011: 164). In addition to paranoia, anxiety could be another result as people keep returning to identify “demonic strongholds” which do not exist (Smith 2011: 167). There is also the risk that one has not “discerned the spirits” correctly (Marshall 2016: 106). With regards to the history and development of spiritual warfare, Ruth Marshall points to an “almost obsessive focus on demonic spiritual entities” (2016: 100). She also references that it can absolve people from their personal responsibility for their own sin (2016: 100): the infamous “the devil made me do it” angle. In his case studies, Smith finds that paranoia and fear are mitigated through a “strong undergirding of taking personal responsibility for personal failure and confidence in the victory of the cross” (2011: 169). However, he does emphasise that training and close monitoring are needed to avoid exposing people to fear (2011: 169-170).

In the case of the spiritual house cleaning videos of Tiaan Gildenhuis, it is noticeable how more and more things are added to the list of familiar objects. Gildenhuis states that as soon as Christians realise that something is an idol, Satan ensures that new idols come up (2013: 17). What begins with items such as Buddha statues and items depicting creatures from folklore, proceeds to people inspecting everyday items like clothing and curtains for spiral patterns. It can develop into an unhealthy preoccupation with finding and avoiding familiar or cursed objects. Another aspect of possible paranoia is how it can take only one object to attract demons, even after a person completed (often lengthy) processes of destroying the cursed/familiar objects.

In our modern age, the internet and internet communication plays a big part in most people's lives. Robert Howard writes specifically about the phenomenon of spiritual warfare on the internet and states that

[t]heir use of the Internet, which enables them to locate geographically dispersed individuals who share this understanding, creates an insular enclave where repeated exposure to their shared ideas reinforces their beliefs. Because they view many ideas that diverge, challenge, or conflict with their own beliefs as deceptions created by Satan and his demons, the Internet functions not only to support their convictions but also to give them greater access to individuals whom they believe deserve to be the targets of their spiritual attacks. By allowing them to find these potential targets, the Internet seems to enable a particularly active kind of intolerance (2009: 160).

The media publications mentioned at the beginning enabled those with extreme views to find literature that support their views, but the internet greatly increased the ability to support these views and allows people to interact with others who hold the same beliefs. Howard states that "they create a vernacular web of expression that supports, extends, and encourages their intolerant beliefs and practices without publishers, editorial boards, or institutional religious figures to temper their intolerance" (2009: 165-166). It results in an echo chamber. This intolerance sees other belief systems and views as demonic in nature (Howard 2009: 163), and can also lead to the

demonisation of other people (Howard 2009: 174). We come full circle, back to Satanic Panic, albeit in a less mainstream incarnation.

Concluding Remarks

The belief in familiar / cursed objects is a form of magical thinking. It has links to fetishes and contagious magic, which are not Biblical concepts. The lack of exegesis from most proponents of this belief is concerning. Scripture verses are taken out of context and haphazardly assembled to strengthen the argument. This is not a responsible interpretation of Scripture. The original language and historical context need to be taken into consideration. From the exegesis of three main texts, we can deduce that the practice and beliefs are not grounded in Scripture. Belief in familiar / cursed objects can lead to paranoia and an unhealthy preoccupation with the perceived dangers of such objects. It can also lead to intolerance and the demonization of other people.

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