

The Antidote to Animism

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How do you fight animism? With a robust gospel and the wise use of the Word.

1. Creation to Christ evangelism

Preach and proclaim the Gospel, and tell the whole story from Creation to Christ. You can't overcome animism by starting in the middle of the story. In my earlier talk I said that animism is a coherent system, a world view. You need to replace the animistic world view with another world view. And the only way to do that is to tell the whole story as one story, from Genesis 1. You must get God on the other side of creation and demons and angels, in a time when none of those things existed, only God. He must be seen as totally other, totally sovereign, totally holy.

Paul started from creation when he preached the gospel to animists in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13) and Athens (Acts 17). When he preached to Jews he didn't need to start with creation and God's attributes; they already knew all that and believed it. But when preaching to animists, he had to start at the beginning of the story. In fact, what we call the Roman's road is not the Roman's road. Our Roman's road starts in Romans 3. Paul's Roman's road started in Romans 1 with creation, and Romans 2 with the law and conscience.

Get on to New Tribe's Mission's website and buy a copy of *Firm Foundations: Creation to Christ*, by Trevor MacIlwain, and read it a couple times, especially the introductory material that explains why we need to start our gospel presentation at the beginning of the story. The only solution to animism is the gospel told from beginning to end, and believed from beginning to end. If you just tell the heart of the gospel, that is, the death, burial and resurrection of Christ, the animist will simply add that part of Christianity to his animism, and you get the worst monster of all, syncretism: a "Christian" who still privately fears and appeases the spirits. And the missionary will be the last to know that his main preacher still has a few gods and fetishes buried in his backyard just in case.

2. Wise use of Scriptures that counter animism

When we start looking at Scripture through our majority-world eyes rather than our western, secular eyes, we begin to see how often God included verses and stories that counter animism and syncretism. They're all over the place, but since that topic doesn't scratch our western itch, we're often blind to this important arsenal.

Most obvious are verses that explicitly forbid animistic practices like divination and sorcery, such as Dt. 18:10, 2 Kings 17:17; Ezekiel 13:18-20 (magic bracelets), Acts 8:9 (Simon); Acts 19:19 (burning magic books in Ephesus), Galatians 5:20 (list of works of the flesh mentions sorcery).

Less obvious, but perhaps even more effective, are stories like Balaam the Sorcerer.

Balaam the Sorcerer

Numbers 22-23

You remember the story. God dealt a devastating blow to Egypt when Israel left Egypt and crossed the Red Sea. Now after 40 years of humbling in the desert, Israel is at the edge of the Promised Land; the new

generation is poised to take it all. Recently, God gave them one victory after another against the small kingdoms on the east side of the Jordan, first the Kingdom of Arad in the Negev, then a decisive victory over Sihon, king of the Amorites, then finally the decimation of Og and his kingdom of Bashan. Three down, two to go on this side of the Jordan: 1) The kingdom of Midian with its five city-kings, and 2) allied with them, the powerful Kingdom of Moab with its proud king Balak.

But Balak's not so proud now; he's quaking in his royal sandals. He knows he's next, and he knows he is no match for Israel. So he does what every Asian, African, South American, European leader would do in a similar situation back then; he calls a sorcerer and pays him to put a curse on your enemies. And in this situation it can't be just any sorcerer; there're plenty of sorcerers in Moab, but none of them will do. It has to be the most powerful, the most famous witch doctor in the ancient Middle East: Balaam of Aram.

Balaam lives quite a distance, way up in Syria, near northern Iraq, on the Euphrates River. But only Balaam will do. And he's not cheap. Let's see what happens.

Read Numbers 22:4-6 Balak was wrong about that last sentence. There is a Creator God who does what he pleases, before whom Balaam and all his demonic spirits are as but ants.

Read 22:7-8 Verse 8 brings up the most confusing part of this story. Balaam talks about the Lord (Yahweh) as if he knows the Lord. This is not surprising. Sorcerers and other animistic practitioners want all the power they can from as many sources as possible. Many shamans talk about God and use God and his name in their sorcery, and want his power (e.g. Simon the magician in the book of Acts).

The big question is why did God answer back? God doesn't tell us explicitly, but I believe God was just using Balaam. Balaam thought he was using God—sorcerers always think that they are the ones manipulating the powers—but God's intention was to use Balaam to teach a valuable lesson to us, and especially to our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world who are fresh out of animism, fresh out of the fear of sorcery and curses. God wants to break third world Christians of this fear of sorcery once and for all, and he's going to do it by using the most powerful sorcerer in the ancient Near East. Watch how God does it

Read Numbers 22:9-13 This just broke Balaam's heart. One thing I've learned about sorcerers is that they are a greedy bunch. They're in it for the money, and Balaam is no exception. (In fact, when the NT talks about Balaam, it emphasizes his love of money, and especially his use of religion to get rich.) He wanted that money so bad.

Numbers 22:14-18 That doesn't sound so bad, does it. Maybe Balaam's a decent guy after all. But Balaam's greedy heart of unbelief is revealed in the next verse:

Numbers 22:19-21 Why have them wait around if Balaam already knew God's will in the matter? Balaam knew he couldn't beat God in a war of curses and blessings. My opinion is that it was on this trip down to Moab that Balaam began to spin a web of wickedness in his mind—let's call it plan two—in case things didn't work out with plan one, which was to curse Israel. (We'll find out later what plan two was.) God saw Balaam's heart of greed, and the wicked scheme that he was hatching to harm Israel; that might explain God's unusual behavior in the next few verses. Let's see what happens on the way.

Numbers 22:22-31 If this were on the web, this is where you'd insert "lol." Isn't it obvious to you that God intends this story to be funny? He wants us to laugh out loud at Balaam. Here is the most powerful sorcerer in the entire Near East, and a donkey has more spiritual insight than he does. The donkey sees the angel of the Lord, and he can't. It's obvious to me that this story is calculated to take the teeth out of sorcery and witchcraft. It is calculated to cure believers who are fresh out of animism of their fear of curses and sorcery. This brings us to our first main point:

I. Don't be afraid of sorcerers.

At this point you might say, "O, thanks, JD. That's real practical. Glad I came to SGI to help me cure my lifelong fear of sorcerers." You and I don't understand this crippling fear—unless you're from Miami. This story doesn't resonate with us the same way it resonates with my Asian and African and South American brothers and sisters. But we in the secular west are the ones in the minority. If you're going to be a world Christian and go all over the world, you need to know that the majority of the people in this world live in abject fear of curses, sorcery, ghosts, and magic. They are terrified of sorcerers.

And as the secular west continues down the road of rejecting God and the gospel, we will slip back into our default religion, animism, with its crystals and spirits and reincarnation and horoscopes. More and more of your neighbors are going to need this story.

Read Numbers 22:32 God knew what Balaam's "plan two" was and it was a perverted and reckless plan. We'll find out more about it later.

So Balaam arrives and Balak scolds him for taking so long, so they go up to a mountain that overlooks part of the armies of Israel encamped down below. They do all the sacrifices and rituals.

Read Numbers 23:6, 7a Later, Moses tells us that Balaam's intention was to open his mouth and pronounce a curse on Israel; But God wouldn't let him.

Numbers 23:7b-8 Verse 8 brings us to our second point.

I. Don't be afraid of sorcerers.

II. If God has blessed you, no one can curse you.

(cf. Romans 8:31-34)

(I was putting gas in my car in Oklahoma City. A man who had noticed a Christian sticker on my car came up to me. He was terrified that two ladies had put a curse on him. He asked me, "Do you believe in curses?" "Of course," I answered, "But a Christian is protected by God. No curse can ever touch him." I went on to tell him that the curse he really needed to be afraid of is God's curse, not Satan's. I told him that by his sin, he had joined Satan, and Adam and Eve in their rebellion against God, and he is now under God's curse. Don't be afraid of Satan and men who can only kill your body. Fear God who can throw both body and soul into hell. This happened right here in the United States. I guarantee you that in the next year or two, some of you are going to use this passage to help someone here in the States be set free from slavery to Satan.)

Read Numbers 23:11-13 Balak takes Balaam to another high place. This gives us insight into animism. If it doesn't work here, it might work there. As I told you in the previous talk, in animism, as in real estate, the three most important words are location, location, location. The enemies of Israel said, "Their God is the God of the mountains, so let's fight them on the plains and we'll win" (1 Kings 20:23).

Read Numbers 23:18ff Second oracle (especially verse 23) You can't curse people that God has blessed!

Read Numbers 23:25 – Balak says, "Ok, so you're not going to curse them. But don't bless them!"

Read Numbers 24:3-9 Third oracle (especially verse 9b) This brings us to our third point:

- I. Don't be afraid of sorcerers.
- II. If God has blessed you, no one can curse you.
- III. God puts a curse on those who try to put a curse on you.**

I call this the boomerang effect. You are God's child. You not only cannot be cursed, all those who curse you will themselves be cursed.

Read Numbers 24:10-11 Balak tells Balaam to go home, and according to 24:25 he does begin to make his way home. And that seems to be the end of the story of Balaam.

But no! Read Numbers 31:8 What's Balaam still doing there? I thought he went home? To find the answer we have to go to Numbers 31.

Read Numbers 31:15-16 Evidently, Balaam had started home. But what was he regretting with every step he took? The huge sum of money he lost when he was unable to curse Israel. Evidently, that was when he decided to go back and put "plan two" into action. He went back to Balak and the five kings of Moab with some wicked, perverse advice that would cause them to still have a huge measure of satisfaction, a huge measure of victory over Israel, even in the midst of defeat. And his idea went like clockwork. It was wickedly brilliant because it played on two weakness of Israel: sexual looseness and a penchant for animism. Let's go back to Numbers 25 and read about it.

Read Numbers 25:1-9 And God sent a plague and 24,000 people died (v. 9)! 24,000 people! Only a tiny fraction of that died in the actual combat. Balaam killed more Israelites with this wicked and immoral advice than he could have ever killed with his curses, and many more than ever died in battle.

My fourth and final point comes from Moses' wrap up of this event in Deuteronomy 23.

Read Deuteronomy 23:3-5 This brings us to the most amazing truth of all:

- I. Don't be afraid of sorcerers.
- II. If God has blessed you, no one can curse you.
- III. God puts a curse on those who try to put a curse on you.
- IV. God turns all curses against his people into blessings.**

Only a sovereign, all-powerful, almighty, all-knowing, omnipresent God can accomplish this.

When I teach this in Cambodia to believers who have lived all their lives until recently in fear of curses and sorcery, I say to them words that they have never heard anyone ever say before, and they listen in disbelief. I tell them this: "If I heard that some powerful sorcerer in town had put a curse on me, I would say, 'Praise the Lord! Do it again! Bring it on! Do it a thousand times! Because God will take each of those thousand curses and turn them into blessings for me, and I want all the blessings from God that I can have!'" The world can't talk like this.

Conclusion

I conclude with a story that powerfully reminds you of the authority that you have in this world because of Christ in you, the hope of glory.

Story of Choueng and his daughters: When my friend Choueng and his wife and kids all became Christians in Battambang, Cambodia many years ago, they lived next door to his in-laws. One day his father-in-law became gravely ill, so Choueng's mother-in-law did what any good Buddhist would do, she called the local shaman to come and divine why he was sick. Choueng's young daughters, around age 7 and 9 asked Choueng if they could go watch. Choueng said, Why not? So the two girls climbed up the steps of their grandma's house to join the relatives who were gathered. Soon the shaman came with his retinue of musicians. They lit incense and started playing their instruments, calling on the name of the demon to come possess the sorcerer. But nothing happened. So they cranked up the music again and called again. Still nothing happened. A third time they played their music and did their chants and incense. Still nothing. The two girls got bored and left the house to go play. The moment they left the house, the demon began to speak through the shaman. Of course, the first question that everyone asked the demon was, "What took you so long?" The demon answered in his awful, guttural voice: "Because Jesus was here."

The tiniest Christian is more powerful than the strongest sorcerer. "Greater is he who is in you, than he who is in the world." All authority belongs to Christ who is in you. When you go to the darkest island in the Pacific, go boldly in Jesus' name. When you go to China, you go with authority; go in Jesus' name. Not a hair of your head will perish! The world is yours, and The Lord Jesus Christ is with you till the end of the age.

Prayer: "Omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent God, who blesses and no one can curse. You rescued us from the curse of our sin and rebellion, and transferred us into the kingdom of your beloved Son. Lord Jesus Christ, you have tied up the strong man. Give us courage to go all over the world and plunder his house for your glory. In Jesus' name, Amen."

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