

# MAGIC

Belief in gods, [demons](#), spirits and various other forms of supernatural powers was a prominent characteristic of the first-century A.D. [worldview](#). Through the widespread practice of [magic](#), one could find protection from this realm and even control it. People who became Christians and joined the early Christian churches would have been tempted to bring their magical beliefs and practices with them, as we see in the Acts account of an incident in [Ephesus \(Acts 19:18–19\)](#). These people needed perspective on their past and a changed attitude toward it in the light of Paul's interpretation of the [gospel](#).

- [1.](#) Definition of Magic
- [2.](#) Sources
- [3.](#) Magic and the Spirit World
- [4.](#) The Uses for Magic
- [5.](#) Jewish Magic
- [6.](#) Paul and Magic in Acts
- [7.](#) Paul and Magic in the Letters

## 1. Definition of Magic.

In the world of Paul's time, [magic](#) was not a form of entertainment consisting of the skilled use of illusory tricks. It was far more serious and corresponds closely with what we might today call sorcery, witchcraft or the occult.

Magic was based on the [belief](#) in supernatural powers which could be harnessed and used by appropriating the correct technique. Magic can therefore be defined as a method of manipulating supernatural powers to accomplish certain tasks with guaranteed results. Magicians would not seek the will of the deity in a matter, but would invoke the deity to do precisely as they stated.

There is also a sociological aspect to the definition of [magic](#). Magic was illegal in the Roman Empire and regarded as socially deviant, outside the boundaries of acceptable religious practice. Accusing another person or group of practicing [magic](#) was a powerful tool of social dominance in the ancient world. Although the motives of those who accused people of [magic](#) and witchcraft need to be evaluated carefully, the sociological definition of [magic](#) by no means exhausts its definition (see Betz 1990, 212–19; pace Segal). Magic was characterized by a set of objective characteristics and its own positive self-definition.

## 2. Sources.

By Clinton Arnold, in Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid, eds., *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993).

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The most important witnesses for our understanding of magical beliefs and practice are a collection of Greek [papyri](#) originally discovered in Egypt (abbreviated *PGM*). These have recently been translated into English (see Betz 1986). Most of these [papyri](#) date to the third and fourth centuries of our era (although a few date as early as the first century B.C.), but the contents reflect the way [magic](#) was practiced during Paul's time and earlier (Luck, 14, 16).

Hundreds of lead curse tablets (*defixiones*) have also been unearthed from throughout the Mediterranean world by archeologists. The tablets using the Greek language date between the fifth century B.C. and the sixth century A.D. and contain formulae similar to the [papyri](#). In addition, numerous magical amulets have been discovered which shed much light on magical practices. Our understanding of [magic](#) is also enhanced by the many Greek and Roman authors who describe the practice (see Luck, 3–131).

### 3. Magic and the Spirit World.

The wearing of amulets, recitation of magical formulas and performance of magical rites were carried out in the [belief](#) that these words and actions could exert a compelling influence over one or more spirits. Practitioners would try to “conjure” (*orkizō*) well-known deities (e.g., Mithras, Isis, Helios), but more often the “[angels](#)” (*angeloi*) or “assistants” (*paredroi*) of the gods. Note the following magical formula in a recipe that reputedly “accomplishes anything”:

I call upon you, holy, very powerful ... assistants of the great god, the powerful chief daimons, you who are inhabitants of Chaos, of Erebus, of the abyss ... dwelling in the recesses of [heaven](#), lurking in the nooks and crannies of houses ... leaders of those in the underworld, administrators of the infinite, wielding power over earth ... lords of Fate ... adverse daimons ... rulers of daimons ... do the matter [which I demand]. (*PGM* IV.1345–75)

This formula is to be recited after performing an elaborate rite using, among other things, some fat and hairs from an ass, a female goat and a black bull. The person who performed the rite and uttered the formula would expect the spirits to fulfill the demand if the recipe was followed in precise detail.

Magic also drew on nonpersonal powers and forces for its purposes. It assumed the principle of cosmic sympathy—that the microcosm is bound to the macrocosm in a system of correspondences. What affects one part affects the other in this integrated whole of life forces. The magician would therefore make use of animal viscera, plants, herbs, precious stones and metals, believing that there was a cosmic correspondence. Even the seven vowels in the Greek alphabet had their cosmic counterpart in the seven planetary deities.

### 4. The Uses for Magic.

People who used [magic](#) sought self-serving aims. There are no [extant](#) examples of people using [magic](#) to accomplish the will of a deity. Rather, [magic](#) was used precisely to influence the will of a deity or spirit.

**4.1. Protection.** One of the primary uses of magic in everyday life was for protection. In a world thought to be populated by hordes of evil spirits bent on bringing harm in every conceivable way, people sought supernatural protection. This was perhaps the chief use of the magical amulets, which frequently bore the inscription “protect me!” Many recipes for constructing these kinds of amulets appear in the magical papyri as, for example, the following:

The protective charm which you must wear: Onto lime wood write with vermilion this name “[50 Greek letters] Guard me from every daimon of the air on the earth and under the earth, and from every angel and phantom and ghostly visitation and enchantment, me [space for name].” Enclose it in a purple skin, hang it around your neck and wear it. (PGM IV.2694–2704)

This text vividly illustrates the fear of evil spirits from which people sought relief.

**4.2. Altering Fate.** In Paul’s day many in the Mediterranean world were convinced that the course of their lives was directly affected by the alignment of the stars in the heavens at their time of birth. This reflected the principle of cosmic sympathy and represented the basis for astrology. In the worldview of the masses, however, the stars either embodied or represented personal powers (see [Worship](#)). Thus, the names of deities were given to the sun, moon, planets and stars. Magical practitioners believed that a foul fate could be altered by influencing these astral deities through the appropriate magical formula. Also through magical means, a prominent deity could be invoked to thwart the grip of fate. For example, in one text Sarapis is invoked for this purpose:

I call on you, lord, holy, much hymned, greatly honored, ruler of the cosmos (*kosmokratōr*), [Sarapis] consider my birth and turn me not away. ... Protect me from all my own astrological destiny; destroy my foul fate; apportion good things for me in my horoscope.” (PGM XIII.618–40)

**4.3. Other Uses.** Magic was also used for less honorable purposes. Spirits could be invoked to compel the physical attraction of another person (aphrodisiacs), to gain favor and influence with people, to heal various kinds of illnesses (see [Healing, Illness](#)) and to gain an appearance from a deity who could reveal special knowledge. There was also a malevolent kind of magic, represented especially by the curse tablets (*defixiones*). This form of magic sought to inflict pain and harm on opponents and enemies.

## 5. Jewish Magic.

Magic was by no means practiced only by pagans. Jewish [magic](#) flourished in antiquity (Alexander, 342). There are many testimonies to Jewish involvement in magical practice in the apocrypha, pseudepigrapha, [Qumran](#), [Josephus](#), the earliest traditions within the [Talmud](#) and the midrashim, early Christian writings, pagan authors and even in the NT itself ([Acts 19:13–20](#), “certain itinerant Jewish exorcists”). The Greek magical [papyri](#) also contain many magical formulas of probable Jewish origin.

An interesting example of Jewish [magic](#) is the *Testament of Solomon* (first to third centuries A.D.). Essentially a manual of magical formulas, the *Testament* ostensibly records how Solomon directed

[demons](#) to build the Temple at Jerusalem by manipulating them through magical means. Another important early Jewish book of [magic](#), translated into English and published under the title *Sepher ha-Razim* (“Book of Mysteries”), probably comes from the fourth century A.D. However, the book likely contains traditions and reflects the magical practices of certain segments of [Judaism](#) dating to the first century A.D. The work describes the seven heavens and gives the names of the [angels](#) populating each of the heavens. Within this framework are numerous magical formulas instructing how the [angels](#) can be invoked to fulfill the desires of the conjurer. Although the [angels](#) appear to take the place of pagan gods (in comparison with pagan magical texts), there are a few examples of invocations directly to the pagan deities (e.g., Helios, Aphrodite, Hermes).

Speaking of the various Jewish magical texts, P. S. Alexander concludes that, “As an indicator of the spiritual atmosphere in which large sections of the populace lived—rich and poor, educated and ignorant—their importance can hardly be overestimated” (Alexander, 342).

## 6. Paul and Magic in Acts.

Luke records one incident in which Paul was confronted with a magician ([Acts 13:4–12](#)). This magician was Jewish and yet was attached to the Gentile proconsul of the Island of Cyprus. Paul encountered him on the island at the outset of his first missionary outreach. When the proconsul showed interest in the [gospel](#) which Paul preached, Elymas (the magician) strongly opposed Paul. According to Luke, Paul denounced Elymas as a pawn of the devil and the Lord immediately struck the magician with blindness.

Acts recounts another dramatic episode that occurred during Paul’s Ephesian ministry ([Acts 19:13–20](#); see [Ephesus](#)). Luke narrates a situation involving itinerant Jewish exorcists who invoked the name of Jesus as part of their magical rite for exorcism (see [Demons and Exorcism](#)). On one occasion they were tragically unsuccessful as they applied this method to a demonized man. Luke says they were physically assaulted by the man and forced to flee the house naked and bleeding. As word spread among Christians about this incident, those who continued to practice [magic](#) came under strong conviction. Gathering all of their expensive books of magical formulas and incantations, they burned them. This account reinforces the reputation of Ephesus as being something of a center for magical practices during the first century. It is also important for understanding the pre-Christian background of many of Paul’s converts. Early Christians faced a strong temptation to combine their magical beliefs and practices with their Christianity. It is clear that Luke regards [magic](#) as evil and the domain of the devil (see Garrett, 101–9). In this respect, he also accurately reflects the convictions of Paul.

## 7. Paul and Magic in the Letters.

Very little has been written on the theme of [magic](#) in relation to Paul’s letters. This is probably due to the fact that he explicitly mentions it only once ([Gal 5:20](#)) in his undisputed letters. Furthermore, his [theology](#) betrays nothing of a magical [worldview](#).

**7.1. “Witchcraft” (Gal 5:20).** If [Galatians 5:20](#) is any indication of Paul’s overall attitude toward magic, we can conclude that he believed it to be inconsistent with life in the Spirit. He roundly condemns “magic” (*pharmakeia*) in [Galatians 5:20](#) as on the same level as idolatry; both are acts of the “flesh” which should have no part in the life of a believer (cf. [Rev 21:8](#) where it is said that those who practice magic will experience the “second death”).

**7.2. “Magicians” (2 Tim 3:13).** The text of [2 Timothy 3:13](#) predicts that “evil men and impostors [*goētes*] will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived” (NIV). The term *goēs* is commonly used in literature as a derogatory reference to a magician—a person who is a charlatan or a swindler. Although it is possible that [2 Timothy 3:13](#) uses the term in a general sense, it is more likely that a magician is in mind, perhaps of the same sort as Apollonius of Tyana (Philostratus *Vit. Ap.*). This interpretation is rendered more likely because the deceivers are compared in [2 Timothy 3:8](#) with magicians who opposed Moses (Jannes and Jambres). Here again, the practice of magic is viewed in the worst possible light.

**7.3. Principalities and Powers.** Practitioners of magic were obsessively interested in supernatural powers for utilitarian reasons. Paul’s letters, especially [Colossians](#) and [Ephesians](#), provide his readers with a new outlook on the spirit realm (see [Principalities and Powers](#)). Paul never denies the real existence of evil spirits (but cf. [1 Cor 8:4](#)); rather he is careful to describe them as minions under the control of the prince of evil, [Satan](#) (e.g., [Eph 2:2](#)). Most importantly, Christ has defeated all these forces by his work on the cross ([Col 2:15](#); see [Triumph](#)) and is now exalted far above them to a position of sovereignty ([Eph 1:20–22](#); see [Exaltation and Enthronement](#)). Nevertheless, the powers still exert their influence and are hostile to the church. Christ’s parousia will bring an end to their tyranny over the world ([1 Cor 15:24](#); [Eph 1:10](#); [Col 1:20](#)). Because of their dangerous hostility to the church, these powers are not to be invoked or manipulated by Christians, but rather resisted through the [power](#) of God ([Eph 6:10–20](#)).

The terms Paul uses for the powers reflect the wide array of vocabulary shared by people of all religious traditions during the NT era. Some of these terms are used in magical texts (e.g., *dynameis*, *kosmokratores*, *thronoi*), although his vocabulary for the powers more closely reflects the angelology and demonology of [Second Temple Judaism](#). Paul draws on this reservoir of terminology with which his readers would be familiar, lumping together all manner of spirits, when he speaks of the supernatural realm of evil (see [Principalities and Powers](#)).

**7.4. The “Elemental Spirits.”** It is possible that Paul’s terminology for “elemental spirits of the world” (*stoicheia tou kosmou*, [Gal 4:3, 9](#); [Col 2:8, 20](#)) comes from a background of usage in astrology and magic (of course, it is also possible that the meaning “elementary principles” is more appropriate to these contexts; see [Elements/Elemental Spirits](#)). The expression appears, for instance, in the astrological section of the *Testament of Solomon* (*T. Sol.* 18:1, 2; cf. also 8:1–4), a portion that probably had an independent existence and use as early as the first century B.C. It is used there to refer to the astral decans, thirty-six spirits controlling every ten degrees of the heavenly sphere. The expression is used similarly in the magical papyri (*PGM* 39.18–21). If Paul was drawing the phrase *stoicheia tou kosmou*

from the tradition represented in this literature, he did so strictly because it was part of the wide array of vocabulary shared by Jew and Gentile alike to refer to the spirit world. In this case he may have chosen this particular expression for the powers because it was well known to the readers of [Galatians](#) and [Colossians](#). Paul does not necessarily give credence to the notion that astral spirits hold the keys of fate; rather, he is more concerned to subsume them under the category of the demonic and assert that by participation in Christ's death, believers have died to their enslaving influence (see [Dying and Rising](#)).

**7.5. Addressing a Magical Worldview (Ephesians).** Many aspects of the teaching of Ephesians about divine power and supernatural spirits seem particularly appropriate for people who have come to Christ from a background of involvement in magical practices (Arnold 1989, esp. 167–72). That such people were entering the churches is certain because of the widespread use of magic at the time. This is corroborated by Luke's account of the burning of the magical books at Ephesus ([Acts 19:18–19](#)), which is especially relevant for understanding the struggles of the Asia Minor churches.

In Ephesians Paul declares the superiority of the [power](#) of God and the supremacy of Christ over all spiritual powers, indeed, over “every name that is named” ([Eph 1:19–23](#); [4:8–10](#)). For those who lived in constant fear of the dreadful workings of evil spirits, this would have provided much comfort. Fate is not in the hands of capricious powers, but rather is determined by the loving Father who “chose us in him before the [creation](#) of the world” ([Eph 1:3](#)). The will and purpose of this benevolent heavenly Father is being worked out in history ([Eph 1:5](#), [9](#), [10](#), [11](#); [2:10](#)); he is not a deity to be manipulated according to one's carnal whims. One approaches God with humility and thankfulness and prays according to his will ([Eph 3:14–19](#); cf. [1:15–19](#)). In contrast to the self-serving attempts to use divine power in [magic](#), Ephesians stresses the believer's reception of divine power to manifest [love](#) to other people in a selfless manner ([Eph 3:16–17](#); [5:2](#)). The letter also gives a new perspective on the powers by highlighting their collusion with the devil and exposing their objective of attacking the [church](#) ([Eph 2:2](#); [4:27](#); [6:12](#)). Ephesians assures believers of the availability of God's power for resisting these forces. God's power, according to Paul, is not obtained through incantations and formulae, but by virtue of a close union with the resurrected Christ ([Eph 2:5–6](#); [6:10](#)).

See also [DEMONS AND EXORCISM](#); [ELEMENTS/ELEMENTAL SPIRITS OF THE WORLD](#); [EPHESIANS, LETTER TO THE](#); [PRINCIPALITIES AND POWERS](#); [RELIGIONS, GRECO-ROMAN](#); [SATAN, DEVIL](#); [TRIUMPH](#); [WORLD, COSMOLOGY](#).

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