

Can Satan Perform Miracles?

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It's distressing to read posts and comments on Facebook about the power of Satan. When I question this preoccupation, I was told I didn't believe the Bible. "What about the magicians in Pharaoh's court? They produced bloody water and frogs." Haven't these people ever watched Penn and Teller? I'm no magician, but I can make a card float inches from you. I'm doing it here:

It's a trick. I'm using deception, and I show my audience how the prestidigitation is done.

"Then the LORD said to [Jeremiah], 'The prophets are prophesying falsehood in My name, I have neither sent them nor commanded them nor spoken to them; they are prophesying

Papa's Magic Trick

Edited by Paul DeMar

to you a false vision, divination, futility and the deception of their own minds” (Jer. 14:14). We are told, “do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God” (1 John 4:1). There’s a very good reason for these precautions: “Because many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1). Claims of supernatural abilities and special knowledge are legion, so much so that even the best minds are fooled, “so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect” (Matt. 24:24). Christians in Ephesus in the first century were commended because they didn’t take a person’s word as being the final authority. “I know your deeds, and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot endure evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false” (Rev. 2:2). The Ephesian Christians investigated what they heard and saw to learn the truth. They didn’t just believe because some authoritative figure said it or did it.

Scripture describes the spiritual counterfeiters as “false prophets” (Matt. 24:11, 24; 2 Peter 2:1) and their so-called miracles as “false wonders” (2 Thess. 2:9, 11). Bible commentator R.C.H. Lenski characterizes the nature of their supposed “powers” as “lie-signs”:

This explains Matt. 24:24: “pseudo-Christ and pseudo-prophets (none of them real) and they shall give great signs and wonders so as to deceive,” etc.; none of these great signs and wonders are real, all of them are deception only, or, as Paul qualifies: “lie-signs and wonders.” This is the extent of Satan’s power.[1]

Here’s the question? Do Satan and his minions have supernatural powers that manifest themselves in precognition and the physical manipulation of people and things? What does the Bible say?

The Babylonian Magicians

There were “magicians, conjurers, and sorcerers” in Babylon who served under Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 2:1). If they truly had supernatural powers, they would have been able to interpret the king’s dream as well as to tell him what he dreamed. This they could not do (2:4-14). In fact, they admitted that it was impossible: “There is not a man on earth who could declare the matter for the king...” (2:10). Daniel tells us that only God has the power to reveal “the profound and hidden things; He knows what is in the darkness” (2:22). The devil has no such power. Daniel not only was able to interpret the king’s dream, but he also told the king what he dreamed in great and exact detail (2:27-49).

If the “magicians, conjurers, and sorcerers” had psychic abilities, then how could Daniel have distinguished himself as a true prophet? Their demonic powers would have been equal to his. There was no contest. Nebuchadnezzar did the right thing by testing the spirits. Christians need to follow his example and do the same. The magicians and conjurers in Babylon knew they did not have supernatural powers made available to them by the demonic world. They told King Nebuchadnezzar that reading a person’s mind was impossible. “There is not a man on earth who could declare the matter for the king...” (Dan. 2:10, cf. v. 27). The king thought otherwise:

The Chaldeans answered the king and said, “There is not a man on earth who could declare the matter for the king, inasmuch as no great king or ruler has ever asked anything like this of any magician, conjurer or Chaldean. Moreover, the thing which the king demands is difficult, and there is no one else who could declare it to the king except gods, whose dwelling place is not with mortal flesh.” Because of this the king became indignant and very furious and gave orders to destroy all the wise men of Babylon (2:10-12).

The “mediums and spiritists” are ridiculed by God because all they can do is “whisper and mutter” (Isa. 8:19). Those who call on the “ghosts of the dead” through “mediums and spiritists” receive no answer (19:3). Those who claim to have powers bestowed upon them from demonic forces can only hope that there are enough people out there who are gullible enough to believe them. But God calls on His people to put such claims to the test.

Stand fast now in your spells and in your many sorceries with which you have labored from your youth; perhaps you will be able to profit, perhaps you may cause trembling. You are wearied with your many counsels, let now the astrologers, those who prophesy by the stars, those who predict by the new moons, stand up and save you from what will come upon you.... There is none to save you (Isa. 47:12-15).

To put it simply, God says, “Put up or shut up.” If the agents of the devil really have powers, they would be able to demonstrate them.

Satan had a perfect opportunity to display his power when Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal by devising a simple test. Elijah called on the one and only God, and the prophets of

Baal called on the powers of their mythical gods to act on command. The prophets of Baal “cried with a loud voice and cut themselves according to their custom with swords and lances until the blood gushed out on them” (1 Kings 18:28). They did this for hours, “but there was no voice, no one answered, and no one paid attention” (v. 29). When Elijah called on God, He acted without hesitation: “Then the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stones and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces; and they said, ‘The LORD, He is God; the LORD, He is God’” (18:38-39). If Satan truly had power to duplicate God’s miracles, then this would have been the perfect time to imbue the prophets of Baal with supernatural powers. It did not happen, because it could not happen.

The “Magicians” of Egypt

Christian commentators often turn to the story of Moses and Aaron and their encounters with the magicians of Egypt as evidence that demonic miracles are real and can rival God’s miraculous works. If miracles are a way to demonstrate God’s power and authority over the created order, then “if something or someone other than God can perform miracles, then the value of miracles for attesting to Christ’s divinity is negated.”**[2]**

When Aaron threw down his rod before Pharaoh (Ex. 7:8-12), it became a serpent by the power of God. We shouldn’t be surprised that God can perform such a miracle since He created man from the dust of the ground (Gen. 2:7). For God, turning a dead stick into a serpent is child’s play. Could Pharaoh’s sorcerers and magicians also perform creation miracles? The Bible describes their “powers” as “secret arts,” or more accurately, “deceptive arts” (Ex. 7:11). These were developed skills—conjurers tricks—that were concealed from Pharaoh and the public. The livelihood of the magicians depended on their ability to convince Pharaoh that they had miraculous abilities. Pharaoh’s tricksters had no more power than the “magicians” who served in Nebuchadnezzar’s court and could not tell the king the contents of his dream.

Turning a staff into a serpent was a simple magician’s trick. Jannes and Jambres—the names that Paul gives to Pharaoh’s court magicians (2 Tim. 3:8)—probably performed this spectacle quite often. It was their signature trick. But how did they create the illusion? Dan Korem, a trained magician, reminds us of similar illusions performed today. “The most practical method to duplicate the magicians’ feat is similar to a trick performed today where a magician changes a cane to a silk handkerchief, rope or a handful of flowers.”**[3]** Modern magicians regularly work with animals, so we shouldn’t be surprised if ancient magicians did the same. Here’s how it could have been done. Susan Schaffer, a reptile curator at the San Diego Zoo,

explained that to measure the length of a snake, she takes a tightfitting tube and coaxes the snake into it, as snakes like dark, tight-fitting environs. To replicate the illusion of changing a rod into a snake, a telescopic shell must be constructed to house the snake. Given the materials available during that time period, such as a piece of pliable papyrus, this could easily be made. With the snake concealed inside the “staff,” the magician would simply have to pass his hand over the shell, collapsing it at the same time, leaving the snake in its place. This action could be covered by the motion of throwing the staff to the ground, creating the illusion that the staff visibly changes to a snake.[4]

Lighting would have been poor indoors, so the sleight of hand would have been easily concealed. A good magician could come up with several ways to perform this trick in a way that would convince the casual observer who probably saw what happened around Pharaoh’s court from a distance.

But didn’t Pharaoh’s magicians turn water into blood and produce frogs on command, replicating the miracles brought about through Moses? The miracle performed by Moses turned the Nile into blood as well as the “rivers ... streams ... pools ... reservoirs” as well as the water in “vessels of wood and in vessels of stone” (Ex. 7:19). Pharaoh’s magicians did the same “with their secret arts” (7:22). (Stage magicians keep their techniques “secret.”) Their trick was to turn a small amount of water into blood. They must have gone to Pharaoh with a small pot of water and showed him how they too could turn it into blood. Magicians turn milk into confetti, a common trick performed by many stage illusionists.[5] Turning clear water into “blood” would be simple. Holding a pouch of blood in the palm of the hand—there was enough of it around—it would have been a simple thing to open it into the water. “Presto-change-o”—water into blood! The real miracle would have been for the magicians to turn the bloodied water throughout Egypt back into freshwater! This they did not or could not do.

The plague of frogs, like the bloodied waters, occurred throughout Egypt. Once again, the court magicians went to Pharaoh and showed him that they could also produce frogs. “Magicians today produce live doves in the middle of a stage from handkerchiefs; and doves are far more difficult to handle than a docile frog.”[6] Like with the bloody water, the real miracle would have been to rid the land of frogs.

Reginald Scot, author of *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584), takes an equally skeptical view of miraculous demonic powers being attributed to Pharaoh’s magicians. “If Pharaoh’s

magicians had suddenly made frogs, why could they not drive them away again? If they could not hurt the frogs, why should we think that they could make them?... Such things as we are being bewitched to imagine, have no truth at all either in action or essence, beside the bare imagination.”**[7]** If someone begins with the assumption that the devil can impart the ability to perform miracles, then he will see miracles in what is the ancient art of stage magic. The replication of frogs was the last trick performed by Pharaoh’s magicians. They ran out of tricks. By the third miracle, “the magicians said to Pharaoh, ‘This is the finger of God’” (8:19). They knew a miracle when they saw one.

[1] R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon*(Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, [1937] 1961), 427

[2] André Kole and Jerry MacGregor, *Mind Games: Exposing Today’s Psychics, Frauds, and False Spiritual Phenomena* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1998), 79.

[3] Dan Korem, *Powers: Testing the Psychic and Supernatural* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 174.

[4] Korem, *Powers*, 174.

[5] Korem, *Powers*, 175.

[6] Korem, *Powers*, 175.

[7] Reginald Scot, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (New York: Dover Publications, 1972), 180. Scot’s work was originally published in 1584, and only 250 copies were reprinted in 1886. It was reprinted once again in Great Britain in 1930. The 1972 Dover edition is the latest reprint, retaining the spelling of the original edition.