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# Now You See It, Now You Don't: Biblical Perspectives on the Relationship between Magic and Religion

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Shawna Dolansky. *Now You See It, Now You Don't: Biblical Perspectives on the Relationship between Magic and Religion.*

Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2008.

Reviewed by David A. Allred

Defining terms is a foundational task in academic studies, and a clear example of its importance is in the ongoing debates on the relationship between magic and religion. Because of the various ways in which magic has been defined over time and because of the negative connotations that can accompany some definitions, explorations of magic and religion are rife with misunderstanding and ethnocentrism, most famously dating back to the milieu of cultural evolution that characterized nineteenth-century anthropology, especially in the works of Edward B. Tylor and James G. Frazer. However, questions about the relationship between magic and religion go back much further, even into biblical times, and it is these difficult issues that Shawna Dolansky explores in her monograph *Now You See It, Now You Don't: Biblical Perspectives on the Relationship between Magic and Religion*.

Dolansky, who teaches religious studies at Northeastern University, explores magic in the context of ancient Israel and the Old Testament. Readers should not be misled by *Now You See It's* playful titles (in addition to the book's title, chapter 3, for example, is titled "Magic: For Prophet?"). The book is written for scholars of biblical studies; it employs discipline-specific language, delves into the specialized scholarship, and is published by a press with an emphasis in this academic area. Still, it is a brief book (107 pages) that can be accessed by nonspecialists, and its conclusions should be interesting for students of Old Testament culture and biblical texts. The book also has value for those interested in reports about Joseph Smith's treasure digging and other magic-related practices. These issues came to the fore with Mark Hofmann's forgeries and D. Michael Quinn's book on magic in early Mormonism, but of course accusations about the "problem" of Joseph's treasure digging date back at least to Eber Howe's 1834 anti-Mormon tract *Mormonism Unveiled*. While the cultural contexts of ancient Israel and frontier America differ widely, Dolansky's methodology and theoretical stance make the book valuable in considering these issues.

Foundational to Dolansky's approach is avoiding ethnocentric definitions of magic that rely only on social distinctions of structurally similar practices like divination and prophecy. Put another way, she strives to move beyond definitions that exhibit the attitude of "what we practice is religion; what they practice is magic." Instead, she defines magic more objectively, as "an act performed by a person (as opposed to theophany or direct acts of God), with or without attribution to God, that has no apparent physical causal connection to the (expected or actual) result" (14). This definition helps to move *magic* beyond negative connotations and broadens the concept considerably. Thus, it opens the way for her argument, which corresponds with recent scholarly trends, to see magic and religion as concepts that are inescapably intertwined.

The book opens with an introduction that reviews biblical and anthropological literature about magic and religion. The second chapter analyzes the Hebrew used in the legal texts of Deuteronomy 18 and Leviticus 19–20 to explore prohibitions about magic. Her argument grapples with the problems of translation; a word like *mēkaššēp*, which is used in Deuteronomy 18:10, can be translated as *sorcerer* or *magician*, and deciphering which English word is appropriate for the connotation in the biblical text is a difficult task. (An even more difficult translation in verse 10 is the magical practice that the KJV presents as "[passing] through the fire," a concept with no easy translation into modern English.) Notwithstanding these linguistic difficulties, Dolansky reconstructs some of the cultural context of ancient Israel, and she concludes that these legal texts do not "categorically [condemn]" magic. Instead, they restrict activities like prophecy and divination to the divinely authorized (54).

This insight about divine authority determining whether an act is magic or religion raises interesting questions in the case of Joseph Smith. While one must avoid simply equating attitudes about magic in these two different times, Dolansky's insight might be used to explain why Joseph distanced himself from using seer stones to find buried treasure but used a similar practice to translate parts of the Book of Mormon. Divine authorization distinguishes the two situations. Stated another way, if a particular practice—like Moses and Jannes and Jambres turning rods into snakes before Pharaoh—differs primarily in the authority used to enact the practice, then concerns about "magical" acts of Joseph Smith have more to do with his authority claims than his supposed "contamination" with the occult.

After the second chapter, Dolansky uses two more substantive chapters to find other structural similarities between some magical practices and Israelite religion. In chapter 3, Dolansky documents different attitudes among the

Priestly, Elohist, and Yahwist sources about what practices constitute prohibited magic and who is authorized to perform acts that mediate divine will for the people. In chapter 4, Dolansky argues that magic—according to her definition—is widespread in both the attitudes and rituals of ancient Israel. A final chapter helpfully summarizes the conclusions the book has made.

In making these arguments, *Now You See It, Now You Don't* makes two especially salient points. First, Dolansky argues that too often magic is defined solely by etic criteria, or outsiders' views on the meaning of a magical practice. While an outside definition, which can be standard across space and time, is crucial for cross-cultural comparison, Dolansky also uses emic, or insider, perspectives when exploring the meaning of a magical act. This is an important move because insider perspectives help calibrate the culturally specific meaning and significance of such acts.

In a related vein, Dolansky identifies an important issue in the scholarship of Old Testament magic. She argues that by using an etic, cross-cultural approach, the scholarship on biblical magic has overused classical views, leading to false comparisons. She writes that because “by the Greco-Roman period, there was a definite dichotomy between magic and religion,” the many examinations that use classical studies along with New Testament and rabbinic scholarship overemphasize a magic-religion distinction that “is not represented in contemporary ancient Near Eastern literatures” (26). Dolansky argues Egyptian and Mesopotamian views on magic are more productive comparisons in understanding the views in ancient Israel on the matter, and using these comparisons leads to her conclusions of less distinct lines demarcating magic and religion.

Those interested in Mormon studies will find value in Dolansky's ideas because of the controversial debates about Joseph Smith's involvement in treasure digging and other magic-associated activities. Despite her focus on a different time and place, her approach is helpful because it expands the reach of magic by pointing out the inescapable structural overlaps it has with religion. Applied to Joseph Smith, Dolansky's book encourages scholars to use both etic and emic ideas in considering the complexities in accounts of Joseph's practice of folk magic and in his use of divinely sanctioned powers.

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