

## Missiology, the Witch, and the Idol

“Ascribe to the *LORD* glory and strength,”  
or, The garden limit on humanity’s creative license

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Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. And the LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. *In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. A river watering the garden flowed from Eden; from there it was separated into four headwaters.* — Genesis 2.8-10,<sup>1</sup> italics added

It is obvious from the text that humans are not supreme rulers, autonomously free to do whatever they wish. Their dominion is a delegated authority: They are representatives of the Supreme Ruler, called to reflect His holy and loving care for creation. They are to “cultivate” the earth—a word that has the same root as [*cul-ture*.] The way we express the image of God is by being creative and building cultures. — Pearcey (2005b:47-48)

### 1. Introduction

Priest (2010), Gilbert (2007), and Wright (2006) are recent sources that deal in whole or part, directly or indirectly, with the issue Priest calls “missiology and the witch.” They make four points that I engage or build on in this paper to try to help Christian churches and missiologists deal biblically with what “the witch” represents here. These four points are (1) that Scripture is silent about—that it does not speak directly concerning—witch and other interpersonal causal ontologies for explaining misfortune, sickness, and death;<sup>2</sup> (2) that an idol, biblically, is *nothing*—even though it is also clearly something; (3) that one of the categories of things from which people tend to create idols is things they *fear*; and (4) that the initial chapters of Genesis are foundational to the biblical worldview<sup>3</sup> for the witch and related matters the present paper concerns.

What I suggest is that Scripture is silent about witches and witch ontologies only because it treats them clearly enough via the paradigm of the idol.<sup>4</sup> An idol, which Jeremiah 10.5 com-

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<sup>1</sup> All of the present paper’s Bible quotations are from the New International Version (see *Oxford NIV Schofield Study Bible* 1984). By “Bible” throughout the present paper, given the subject matter and my own Christian faith, I intend the Christian bible.

<sup>2</sup> Concerning interpersonal, biomedical, moral, and other causal ontologies, see Shweder (2003), chapter 2.

<sup>3</sup> I say “*the* biblical worldview” where I do not believe Scripture grants believers freedom to differ. I hope to make clear in the present paper that I do not see scriptural freedom to differ concerning witches as scarecrow idols.

<sup>4</sup> *Paradigm* is intended in its normal dictionary sense of “an outstandingly clear or typical example or archetype” (Merriam-Webster Online, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/paradigm>, accessed July 16, 2011).

Gilbert (2007) accomplishes the same witch-related work as the present paper, though more generally and simply, by seeing Genesis 1.1 as with a particular, vitally important point for Israel just out of Egypt. I take the liberty of quoting Gilbert at length here for the great relevance of this point to the present paper’s argument:

pare to a scarecrow in a garden, acquires what phenomenological reality it has by people ascribing to it attributes that don't belong to the God-created nature of its constituent materials—i.e., to the God-created nature of wood, stone, precious metals and such—but that belong rather to that of living beings. I make my suggestion—that the idol is a paradigm that includes the witch—in relation to an analysis of Genesis prologue myth that has God, in the garden, giving humanity a cultural mandate with a limit. This mandate has humanity, clearly in obedience to God, largely creating its own cultures, but with a limit. This limit—on humanity's creative license, so to speak—is symbolized by three things noted one after another in consecutive verses of Genesis 2; these three things—viz., the two trees at the center of the garden and the river that flowed from Eden—represent God as “Supreme Ruler” in differing respects (see the prefatory quote from Pearcey 2005b).<sup>5</sup> By eating of the forbidden fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, humanity declares itself morally independent of God—in which self-idolatry, in Wright's words, “lies the root of all other forms of idolatry” (2006:164). Barred, then, from eating also of the tree of life (Gen 3.22-24), yet insisting throughout its history on attempting to do so, humanity makes idols, witches, and other such illegitimate constructs by ascribing to God-created beings and things life and other attributes that belong to God alone (my analysis below).

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The Creation account, by virtue of its literary genre, was designed to provide the blueprint of a new worldview. Its primary function was to propose an alternative to the Canaanite/Mesopotamian plausibility structure the Israelites had absorbed in 400 years of captivity in Egypt. ...

As for the reality of magic and occult powers, the key passage is found in Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (NIV). This deceptively simple sentence can best be described as a cosmic “vacuum cleaner.” It is a thundering declaration that rids the universe of the multitude of gods and demons that populated the ancient world.

For ancient Mesopotamians who lived under the constant threat of hostile deities and who sought to immunize themselves against these powers and gain some control over their destiny through the use of magical formulas and rituals, the opening sentence of the Creation account is earth shattering. By draining the physical universe of its divine essence, this text performs an extremely important task. It annihilates the conceptual framework that made belief in magic possible. ...

The notion that magical powers could mysteriously influence human life was one of the beliefs the author of the Creation account was challenging. The text could not have been more explicit. By emptying the physical universe of its deities, the author was in fact destroying the theoretical foundation for the existence of magical power and, by extension, the possibility of manipulating it. It was a way of stating: “A piece of wood is just a piece of wood!” No gods . . . no magic!

But the old text does not simply dissolve the underlying structure needed to support the belief in magic in the ancient world. As importantly, it fulfills a similar function in our culture. It effectively leaves no room for the kind of underlying psychic energy grid that is presumed to give real effectiveness to magical and occult practices or any other kind of [extra-biblical] supernatural phenomena (2007, no page numbers available).

<sup>5</sup> I include the river that flowed from Eden here as the last of the three garden symbols I've come to treat in the present paper's analysis. Having recognized it as belonging with the others only recently, I've not had time to integrate my thinking about it neatly into the present paper. Its symbolism I see, at this point, as with regard to God sustaining the physical and spiritual life of the peoples of the entire earth, and this by means of a single source river that first waters Eden, then *divides into* four major, even world-class, rivers—which I believe is rather *opposite* the way that major river systems naturally and normally work! But I do little with it in the present paper beyond connecting it with the river of the water of life of Revelation 22 and suggesting that there being *these three* garden symbols may have Trinitarian significance.

Thus, as I argued in an earlier paper,<sup>6</sup> prologue myth provides believers an epistemological charter for the two types of reason—theoretical and practical—that C. S. Lewis treated in *The abolition of man* (1965). And it also, as I develop that paper’s argument further in the present paper, treats idolatry in relation to the garden’s three symbols for God, and in a manner that judges idols and witches alike as scarecrow constructs. While I do not pretend that my analysis thereby addresses or resolves all problems concerned with “missiology and the witch,” I believe it is yet a major step in this direction.

With regard to how I understand the term *witch*, the definition used by Priest (2010) is adequate for my purposes in the present paper:

As used by anthropologists the term [*witch*] applies to *either a male or female human being who is said to be the cause of another’s misfortune, sickness, and/or death by means of psychic or other occult power*. In ethnographic writings this is also the meaning of sorcerer/sorceress—although sorcery generally also implies that the harm is caused through learned and acquired, self-consciously exercised powers, which is not necessarily true of witch (2010:1, italics in the original).

I illustrate the paper’s witch-related analysis by four examples that I believe the biblical worldview parses clearly enough as idols—viz., the Mangbetu witch, a Zande oracle, Suku elders, and naturalistic-materialistic Western science’s version of evolution.

Beyond its witch-related analysis, I see my paper, including the one from which it’s been birthed, doing four things important for my own still-developing Christian anthropology. First, given how it recognizes in the cultural mandate ground for a basic respect that every person owes the cultures of others, it offers other than a constructed, ad hoc condemnation of ethnocentrism. Second, given how it recognizes in prologue myth an epistemological charter that provides for objective as well as subjective value, it offers other than a constructed, ad hoc way around the moral-ethical deathtrap of cultural relativism. Third, per the subtitle of McKee (1998) and in relation to the prologue’s epistemological charter, it offers a “golden mean” resolution to the creation-evolution debate. Fourth, it offers a definition of religion—humanity’s exercise of its kingship in the realm of value—that recognizes every normal human person (e.g., myself, Francis Collins, Richard Dawkins) as religious.

## 2. Scripture is not silent about idols—nor about the living God

Priest (2010) discusses what he sees as a number of difficult challenges faced by Christian missionaries and pastors working in societies with witch ontologies. That of greatest interest to the present paper is “the fact that while the Bible is filled with stories of infertility, affliction, and death, the very subject matter [that] in many cultures triggers witch discourses, the Bible

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<sup>6</sup> The earlier paper is McKee (1998). In it I treated relevant symbolism of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil but nothing of either the tree of life or the river that flowed from Eden. I developed the initial form of its analysis during the first two years of my Ph.D. program in Anthropology at the University of Rochester (academic 1983-1985). I completed its first written version to fulfill a theory seminar requirement of that program. Here, I again thank Ayala Emmett for her patience in waiting for me to complete the course version of the paper and for her comments on it.

makes no reference to interpersonal causal ontologies purporting to explain misfortune.”<sup>7</sup> This Priest calls “a serious handicap,” given that, “when [missionaries and pastors] encounter interpersonal causal ontologies, they find no biblical passages [that] directly address such a cultural logic” (2010:3).

While I readily grant the *fact* of this challenge, I wonder if its difficulty hasn’t been a function of simple failure to recognize *why* the Bible is silent in the manner it in fact is. The answer, I believe, in brief, is because witches and witch ontologies are cultural constructs—i.e., they are human cultural creations—of the same class as idols, about which the Bible is *not* silent. A good number of biblical texts do treat *idols* directly—and debunk them as ontological nothings. Outstanding among these direct texts are Jeremiah 10.1-16, Isaiah 44.9-20, Habakkuk 2.18-20, Judges 6.25-32 (“If Baal really is a god, he can defend himself when someone breaks down his altar”), 1 Kings 18.16-40 (“Shout louder!” [Elijah] said, ‘Surely [Baal] is a god!’), Psalm 106.19-23, 28-31, 34-39 (“They yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor and ate sacrifices offered to lifeless gods”), Psalm 115.2-8, Acts 14.8-18 (“We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things [the great Greek gods Zeus and Hermes included!] to the living God”), Acts 17.16-31, Acts 19.11-41 (“[This fellow Paul] says that man-made gods are no gods at all”), 1 Corinthians 8 (“We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one”), and 1 Corinthians 10.16-33.<sup>8</sup> Thus viewed, the problem is *not* that the Bible is silent about these matters; it is rather that it addresses them indirectly via a paradigm.

While Priest clearly recognizes the relevance to witch matters of what Scripture says about idols,<sup>9</sup> he only touches on this in Priest (2010). There he illustrates, by referring to Jeremiah 10’s debunking of idols, his point that the Bible calls Christians to critical judgment concerning matters alleged to involve demonic power. He says, “[W]hen Jeremiah reflects on folk notions of spiritual power and associated practices by surrounding nations in chapter 10, he insists that these “customs of the peoples are worthless” and that the people of God should not give credence to them” (2010:6). The following are just two points I would develop a bit from this rich Jeremiah 10 passage, since they illustrate so well what Scripture as a whole says about idols versus the living God.

First, in verse 5, Jeremiah compares idols to a scarecrow in a garden. A scarecrow, by nature, has two realities. Its ontological reality is the inanimate, non-mystical material creation of a normal human person; its phenomenological reality, whether as alive and a threat or as lifeless and therefore harmless, is in the mind of the beholder. Thus, even though a scarecrow can’t speak, walk, or stand on its own, it can still scare birds—but only as long as the birds *mistakenly* regard it as a living, dangerous-to-them person rather than a dressed-up, propped-up bunch of straw. While they *need* not fear it, since it *cannot* do them harm, some of them still sometimes

<sup>7</sup> Priest presented most of a more recent version of this same 2010 ASM conference paper (see References) in the witch-related session of the February 26, 2011 Evangelical Missiological Society conference at which I presented the initial version of the present paper.

<sup>8</sup> Priest (2010) refers to the Jeremiah passage noted here, Gilbert (2007) to the Isaiah one, and Wright (2006) to probably all those noted and more.

<sup>9</sup> I say this in view of various witch-related statements in Priest, Campbell, and Mullen (1995) as well as for having talked with Priest about witch matters in Nairobi in August 2008. I here acknowledge his having stimulated some of my own thinking in this area. In this same regard, I also acknowledge one or more discussions with each of Steve Rasmussen and Caleb Kim, both of Africa International University, within about a year of the same time. Needless (meaning strangely, in fact, *necessary*) to say, the thoughts presented in the paper are my known and I bear sole responsibility for any that are mistaken.

(apparently) do fear it. This, Jeremiah says, is what an idol is like, and the comparison I find incredibly instructive.

Second, starting from verse 6, Jeremiah contrasts idols with the true, living, eternal God. It's the latter who made the heavens, the earth, and all things in them; it's the former—"these gods"—who didn't! It's God who is King of the nations; it's God who controls the clouds, rain, lightning, thunder, and wind; it's God to whom no god compares in greatness, wisdom, or power; it's God who is the Maker and Portion of Israel. Idols, Jeremiah says, unlike God, are worthless, perishable, a shame to the skilled craftsmen and goldsmiths who make them, a fraud, without breath (i.e., *lifeless*), and objects of mockery. In sum, God has *life*; scarecrow idols don't.

### 3. Manufactured from things we *fear*—toward the witch as an idol

With regard to scarecrow idols versus the one living God, Wright (2006) spells out the very important biblical entailment that humanity constructs not just idols, but also the gods behind them:<sup>10</sup>

*The alleged gods are in fact no different from the idols that represent them; they are both human constructs.* In worshipping them, we give allegiance, we attribute power and authority, we submit ourselves to something that we ourselves have created. In the final analysis the satire of Isaiah 44:9-20 is not off the mark. There is *in principle* no difference between the domestic fetishist and the sophisticated iconic worshiper of the great gods of Babylon [e.g., Bel, Nebo, Marduk]. Whether addressing the piece of wood he has carved for himself as if it were actually a god (Is 44:17) or calling out to the invisible state gods supposedly represented in the gilded statues (Is 46:7), the worshiper is engaged in an exercise in futility. The one is as much the product of collective human imagination as the other is the work of individual human hands. There is no salvation in either (2006:153, italics in the original).

By this, Wright does not deny either the ontological reality or powers of the demonic; in fact, he sees explicit (albeit scarce) Old Testament warrant for the idea that idolatry is the worship of demons,<sup>11</sup> and he definitely sees the demonic *behind* the gods and idols: "The Old Testament (occasionally) and the New Testament (more clearly) recognize the presence and power of [evil] spiritual forces behind the gods and idols" (2006:162). In sum Wright's view is, that while gods might be demons or human constructions or both, the fact that they are human constructions is "the more significant theological truth and the more dangerous deception" (2006:162).

This very important point made, Wright considers the equally important problem of "identifying and analyzing the gods that may be said to dominate modern cultures—especially in Western societies" (2006:165). I welcome Wright's Western focus here, since, where the making

<sup>10</sup> See especially Wright (2006:147-61).

<sup>11</sup> Wright sees this explicit OT warrant in just two passages—Deuteronomy 32.16-17 and Psalm 106.35-38. I'm not convinced that *explicit* warrant is present even in these, since I'm not convinced by what Wright presents on the subject that 'demons' is the best or only gloss for the rare Hebrew word *šēdîm* in these passages (see Wright 2006:144-147). Not assuming that I'm correct, but for the sake of argument: If 'demons' is *not* in fact warranted here, this would be *another* case, in addition to ones cited by Priest (2010), where a mistranslation has been the source of a difficulty in the area of "missiology and the witch."

and worshiping of idols is concerned, it rightly indicts modern Westerners along with the rest of fallen humanity through the ages. At the same time, what strike me as of greater relevance to the present paper are two *other* things Wright says in this context. First, he recognizes that there are “different kinds of gods” (2006:166), such that our gods, in truth, are whatever *dominate* our lives—i.e., whatever significantly structure or order them.<sup>12</sup> Where Wright speaks of a people’s huge investment in its gods and of the people’s consequent strong resistance to seeing them debunked, such gods clearly dominate and structure their lives:

... if it is indeed true that the gods we exalt so highly are resplendent products of our own creativity, then it is not surprising that we defend them so belligerently. And in our own jealous protectiveness of the gods we created for ourselves, we display a parody of the true jealousy that is the prerogative of the only true God whom we did not create. We invest so much of ourselves in our gods, spend so much on them and blend our identity and significance with theirs that it simply will not do for us to have them unmasked, mocked or toppled (2006:160).

Second, Wright identifies things we *fear* as one of the primary categories of things from which we tend to manufacture our gods.<sup>13</sup> These two other things together—the fact of different kinds of gods and the fact that it’s from things we fear that we can tend to manufacture our gods—allow for varying senses of “worship” of gods. These senses range from (1) adoration, praise, and reverential fear—as of a holy, loving God (the sense likely most familiar to Westerners), through (2) extremely annoyed or angry preoccupation—as of Zande witches as analyzed by Evans-Pritchard (1976:18-19), to (3) anxious or neurotic fear—as of Western security measures that can’t guarantee the protection we seek (Wright 2006:168), to yet other kinds of fear, including (4) fear in what appears to me close to the primary English dictionary sense—as of Navajo witches as treated by Kluckhohn (1967).

As an extended parenthesis in this regard—my impression, even from anthropological sources, is that more peoples somehow *fear*, in the primary dictionary sense, their cultures’ witches, sorcerers, and the like than are, to whatever extent, annoyed or angered by them. Kluckhohn (1967) is a wonderful anthropological example—e.g., “[Ghosts and witches] are the two things which the Navajo fear most” (1967:29); “Navajos who resolutely denied the very existence of witchcraft, when they knew me only casually, years later, after they knew me really well, poured forth deep-seated fears and very detailed materials” (1967:14); and, in relation to “a series of [observable] behaviors (largely negative) which make sense only on the assumption that witchcraft is actually believed in” and that illustrate well the ways in which gods can structure or order our behavior,

There is no doubt that almost all Navajos dislike going about alone at night. This is due partly to fear of ghosts but partly also to fear of witches. There is equally

<sup>12</sup> In this regard, I’m strongly reminded of *the dominant* of Prague School linguistics, about which I learned in the anthropological linguistics I did during my graduate studies. According to Jakobson (1971), “The dominant may be defined as the focusing component of a work of art: it rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components.” Jakobson called it “one of the most crucial, elaborated, and productive concepts in Russian Formalist theory” (1971:82). I see the concept as apt with regard to the role of any idol or god in a person’s life.

<sup>13</sup> There are three other primary categories that Wright suggests and discusses—viz., things that entice us, things that we trust, and things we need (2006:166-71).

no doubt that most Navajos are very careful to dispose of materials which could be used in Sorcery. I have seen highly acculturated Navajos scrupulously gather up every hair after a haircut. Navajo secrecy about urination and defecation (contrasting sharply with Pueblo Indian behavior in this respect) is partly to be related to the Navajo modesty configuration, partly to fear of witchcraft. Care in the disposal of the placenta, menstrual blood, etc., and secrecy about the personal name are similar instances. The Navajo practice of always giving hospitality to the aged, no matter how unpleasant the aged individuals may be, is commonly explained by the fear that otherwise the old would witch them. The only sanction against cruelty to dogs (not a very effective one, it must be admitted!) is that the animals will perform witch activities against their tormentors. Fear of refusing a request repeated four times (náná-ʔčo-skan) is explained on similar grounds. There are likewise a number of ceremonial behaviors based upon belief in witchcraft. That the singer must always taste a medicine before giving it to the patient is sometimes regarded as the singer's demonstration that he is not putting witchcraft materials in. That only close relatives are trusted to dispose the more important objects in a chant may be partially based upon fear of witchcraft. I know of three cases where individuals were abandoned by relatives on the ground that they were hopelessly bewitched. Finally, there are the series of acts which most Navajos are careful to avoid committing lest they become suspects. Thus, for example, one Navajo will normally be careful not to step over another (1967:54-55).

One further example of peoples' fear of witches I take from Sterelny (2006) as quoted by Dawkins (2008), to show their shared secularist evaluation of the beliefs and fears concerned:

Hunter-gatherer peoples such as Australian aboriginal tribes presumably live in something like the way our distant ancestors did. The New Zealand/Australian philosopher of science Kim Sterelny points up a dramatic contrast in their lives. On the one hand aboriginals are superb survivors under conditions that test their practical skills to the uttermost. But, Sterelny goes on, intelligent as our species might be, we are *perverse*ly intelligent. The very same peoples who are so savvy about the natural world and how to survive in it simultaneously clutter their minds with beliefs that are palpably false and for which the word "useless" is a generous understatement. Sterelny himself is familiar with aboriginal peoples of Papua New Guinea. They survive under arduous conditions where food is hard to come by, by dint of "a legendarily accurate understanding of their biological environment. But they combine this understanding with deep and destructive obsessions about female menstrual pollution and about witchcraft. Many of the local cultures are tormented by fears of witchcraft and magic, and by the violence that accompanies those fears." Sterelny challenges us to explain "how we can be simultaneously so smart and so dumb" (2008:193-94).

Returning now to the main argument—it is not that Wright says anywhere that witches are a kind of idol or god; what he does say is, that in various of the world's religions, such phenomena as death, the sea, and other "most fearsome faces of evil, anger, vengeance, blood lust,

cruelty and so forth are divinized”; that “many routine ritual practices, such as avoiding [“the evil eye”], the wearing of protective charms, the use of apotropaic magic and mantras and the like, are manifestations of the deified power of fear”; that, “[s]ince there are a great many things in this world for puny human beings to be afraid of, here surely lies one of the roots of polytheistic worldviews.” Wright also, concerning the central role of the fear of the Lord in the biblical worldview, says that “those who live in the fear of the Lord need live in fear of nothing else. Other objects of fear lose their divine power and their idolatrous grip” (2006:168). It is my own conclusion, developed to completion in the next section, that witches are among these “[o]ther objects of fear”—objects that humanity constructs by a process of divinization, that can become strongholds by their idolatrous grip,<sup>14</sup> and that, in what Wright sees as part of God’s mission, require debunking the same as all other idols.

#### 4. The prologue’s cultural mandate, its garden limit, and the witch as an idol

Gilbert (2007) is a set of critical reflections on Hiebert’s (1982) “flaw of the excluded middle.” Concerning Hiebert’s idea, Gilbert concludes differently than Hiebert that “[t]he difficulty does not derive as much from an indiscriminating concession to Western [modernist] assumptions as from a lack of clarity about how the biblical worldview addresses the supernatural and, consequently, a lack of confidence in it.” For missionaries to address this difficulty, Gilbert says, “They need to determine more precisely what constitutes a biblical worldview and be in a position to parse its implications for an animistic culture.” With this task in mind, then, of determining with requisite precision what constitutes the biblical worldview so as to be adequately positioned to parse its implications for cultures replete with witches, magic and the like, Gilbert turns to the initial chapters of Genesis. He does so, he explains, because he sees these chapters as “the theological foundation of the entire Bible,” intended by Moses to provide Israel with God’s alternative to the Mesopotamian worldview they had absorbed during their Egyptian captivity (see again the Gilbert 2006 material in note 4).<sup>15</sup> Wright (2006), for his part, goes to the same chapters of Genesis for “the primary and most crucial distinction” of the biblical worldview—that between the Creator and the creation—in the self-idolatrous breach of which (as already noted) he locates “the root of all other forms of idolatry” (2006:164). As an anthropologist without formal training in missiology or theology, I begin this section as I do—by noting how Gilbert and Wright look to the initial chapters of Genesis as *they* do—to place myself in theologically credible company as I now turn to the same chapters to analyze witches as scarecrow idols.

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<sup>14</sup> I thank Bob Priest for sharing with me his view of the strongholds of 2 Corinthians 10.4 (now my view as well)—as incredibly, tenaciously strong products of the human imagination.

<sup>15</sup> Page numbers are not supplied in the online version of Gilbert (2007) that I consulted.

I do *not* agree with Gilbert’s view, expressed in the same piece’s postscript, that, “The power of demons ultimately hinges on the belief system of the culture in which they navigate,” such that, “Demons can only terrorize those who attribute to them the power to do so”; I believe, rather, on the basis of various scriptures, (1) that demons have limited, God-given powers neither completely nor clearly delineated in Scripture, (2) that they exercise these powers in whichever cultural context in highly appropriately/contextually deceptive fashion, (3) that they work thereby to attempt to thwart God’s purposes, and (4) that, in agreement with Wright (2006), their powers are entirely circumscribed by God’s authority over them—so that they accomplish nothing thereby that God doesn’t permit them to.

In McKee (1998), I analyzed Genesis prologue myth from the perspective of the anthropologist and Christian that I am—without judging it as divorced from history,<sup>16</sup> as with both symbolism and charter functions, and in the context of the Bible as a whole.<sup>17</sup> With regard to charter functions, I analyzed it as providing believers with sound bases for both theoretical and practical reason—for both science, on the one hand, and moral value judgments, on the other. To arrive at this, I posited *naming* (or *calling*) and *eating* as acts with the same basic symbolic value of exercising *dominion* in relation to God’s mandate to humanity to fill and subdue the earth and rule over its creatures (Gen 1.28). It was in keeping with this mandate that God brought animals to Adam to see what he would name them, with whatever Adam called them becoming their names (Gen 2.19).<sup>18</sup> This is science, quintessentially, with humanity classifying and naming the works of God’s hands, studying and coming to understand the creation and thereby exercising its dominion over it. It was again in keeping with this mandate that God gave humanity for its food—i.e., for humanity to *eat*—all the seed-bearing plants and all the trees that have fruit with seed in it (Gen 1.29). Seed entails multiplication of offspring, it contains the germ of change, and thus it was absent, albeit by silence, from the *sui generis* tree of the knowledge of good and evil at the center of the garden from which God *forbade* humanity to eat. This, by contrast to the science above, is biblical morality, with the tree of the knowledge of good and evil representing the eternal, unchanging God in his holiness. Consistent with this analysis is the fact that it was God, on the first day, who *called* the light “day” and the darkness “night”; and thus, humanity’s knowledge of good and evil is not by its own naming—i.e., not by categories of its own making or desires—it’s rather by reference to God’s holy, immutable nature. Such a morality allows for absolutes, for objective as well as subjective value, and thus for other than culturally-positioned, man-made limits to cultural relativism. In sum, science belongs to humanity, as long as humanity grants due respect to the Creator; morality, by contrast, belongs to the holy Creator who is the ultimate Fact.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> I believe C. S. Lewis would have called prologue myth in each of its parts by the same qualified term that he used for the story of the Fall in Lewis (1962)—viz., “a “myth” in the Socratic sense,” which he explained in a note to mean “an account of what *may have been* the historical fact.” This sense of myth Lewis did not want confused with Reinhold Niebuhr’s sense of “a symbolical representation of non-historical truth” (1962:76-77). (See Edwards 1992 for a classicist’s contrasting of Protagorean and Socratic myth helpful to me at several points as I consider Lewis’s use of “a “myth” in the Socratic sense” for the story of the Fall.) While I understand Waltke’s (2007) rejection of the term *myth* (2007:188), I am not, as an anthropologist, persuaded by it, nor do I believe it helpful to scholarly discussion of the matters concerned. Middleton’s (1967) definition of myth is more or less that of the discipline of anthropology:

[Myths] are statements, made deliberately and consciously by the people who tell them. The popular notion that a “myth” is in some way “untrue”—indeed, that its untruth is its defining characteristic—is not only naïve but shows misunderstanding of its very nature. Its “scientific truth” or otherwise is irrelevant. A myth is a statement about society and man’s place in it and in the surrounding universe. Such a statement is, in general, a symbolic one, so that an important anthropological problem becomes one of understanding the reality that the statement is used to symbolize (1967:x).

For what it’s worth, Lewis said he had “the deepest respect even for pagan myths, still more for myths in Holy Scripture” (1962:71-72).

<sup>17</sup> See the appendix’s Figure 1 for something of the fuller analysis of McKee (1998).

<sup>18</sup> With regard to the act of naming showing dominion, see, e.g., Waltke (2007:183-84, 186).

<sup>19</sup> See Lewis (1978:95) for this description of God, in relation to the possibility of miracles.

This much of a prologue analysis, while I found it even highly significant at the time I presented it as a conference paper,<sup>20</sup> I couldn't convince myself treated enough of what was in fact there in the text; so, I continued thinking about and trying to develop it further. I recognized that I hadn't treated *at all* any symbolism of the tree of life—yet this too, like the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, was a one-of-its-kind tree at the center of the garden, it *became* forbidden for humanity to eat of after God expelled them from the garden, and so it too, surely, had somehow to symbolize God.

While this part of my paper's analysis—that having to do with the symbolism of the tree of life—didn't occur to me until years later and is a part I've developed only recently, I was yet encouraged by what I saw as other bits of occasional progress in my understanding of prologue myth. As I thought about the image of the Creator in the creature he made ruler over the works of his hands, I believe I became consciously aware for the first time, or conscious in a new way, that this image included humanity's incredible creativity. (This creativity is something that many, anthropologists among them, have long recognized as an outstanding distinctive of *homo sapiens sapiens*.) At the same time and in relation to this, I was developing a fresh appreciation for the significance of the *dominion* or *cultural mandate*—of God's command to humanity to fill, subdue, and rule over the earth.<sup>21</sup> I'd not alluded to the mandate as such in McKee (1998), but I'd since been coming to see it as the basis for the essential respect we owe the cultures of others. Biblically, we, the earth's peoples, have created and continue to create our cultures—and we've done so in basic obedience, whether or not conscious, to a command God gave us all through our common first ancestors. "Fill the earth," which command God repeated to Noah and his sons after the Flood and then facilitated humanity's obedience to at Babel, has taken us into different, challenging environments throughout the world; then, as we've obeyed the rest of the mandate, we've created our differing cultures in environments as richly diverse as rainforest, arctic and tropical seacoast, high and coastal plain, and so much more. Thus, it's *humanity* that has been immediately responsible for by far the greatest part of the world's cultural diversity. Ethnocentrism, then, biblically, stands essentially condemned, with the Jeremiah 10.3 judgment that "the customs of the peoples are worthless" only ever true to the extent that these "traditions of men" or "of the elders" do indeed, as in the Jeremiah 10.3 case of idolatry, nullify, break, set aside, or let go of the commands of God (Mt 15.1-20, Mk 7.1-23). Biblically, the idea that *God* is the au-

<sup>20</sup> Sources such as Schick (1997), Cray (2006), and Dawkins (2008) would have one think that secular philosophy and science have Christianity on the ropes, if not already knocked out; others such as Lewis (1965), Reppert (2003), Pearcey (2005a), D'Souza (2007), and Stark (2007) would have one think rather that, at least arguably, neither secular philosophy nor science have a reasonable leg to fight on. As I developed the analysis of McKee (1998), I found all of the essence of the Christian side of this argument to be there implicit in Genesis prologue myth as it appears in the context of the Bible as a whole, and I also found it convincing.

<sup>21</sup> Concerning the dominion or cultural mandate, see, among others, Morris (1984), Hoekema (2003), and Pearcey (2005b). Where the analysis of the present paper is concerned, I do not consider the mandate to be the least bit controversial. Where Pearcey, in the following, has a first phrase of the mandate—"[b]e fruitful and increase in number"—concerned with developing the *social* world and a second phrase concerned with harnessing the *natural*, I see the first as part-and-parcel (or a logical entailment) of the second:

In Genesis, God gives what we might call the first job description: "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it." The first phrase, "be fruitful and multiply," means to develop the *social* world: build families, churches, schools, cities, government, laws. The second phrase, "subdue the earth," means to harness the *natural* world: plant crops, build bridges, design computers, compose music. This passage is sometimes called the Cultural Mandate because it tells us that our original purpose was to create cultures, build civilizations—nothing less (2005b:47, emphasis in the original).

thor of cultural diversity—as opposed to, that cultural diversity was part of God’s will and plan—has support only with regard to things like certain of God’s revelations to Moses for Israel. We, created humanity—highly creative because created in the image of the God who created the heavens, the earth, the seas, and everything in them—don’t just construct our idols and gods; we construct our cultures.

In a chapter on the myth of the Fall, Lewis (1962) referred to a “primitive” version of this myth—a “version which emphasises the magic apple, and *brings together the trees of life and knowledge*” (my emphasis, for its relation to the Pearcey prefatory quote; see also below)—that Lewis suspected to be far more profound than that on which developed doctrine was based (1962:71-72). In this regard, it only occurred to me in the lead-up to the conference for which I prepared the present paper’s initial version that, biblically, humanity can be seen to have created witches by disrespecting part of the limit on the cultural mandate—that symbolized by the tree of life. I’d long seen witches as human constructs, behind and in deceptive relation to which demons can act as they’re able;<sup>22</sup> I hadn’t seen them as constructed in the same basic way as idols—viz., by peoples ascribing attributes of the Creator to one or more categories of persons created in his image. An idol must be ascribed both life and whatever its (the idol’s) powers; a witch—already a living person—must simply be ascribed powers. Worldwide, the powers ascribed to witches appear especially ones of life and death, sickness and health. In each case (of both the idol and the witch), the attributes concerned—life and certain powers—belong to God alone and can be comprehended by symbolism of the tree of life. By the same analysis—prevented from eating of this tree by expulsion from the garden (Gen 3.22-24), humanity’s yet-insistent *attempts* to eat of it can only ever result in idols—in scarecrow gods, witches, and other such constructs, which Jeremiah rightly tells us not to fear, since they can do us neither harm nor good.

Biblically, *life* in every respect belongs to God. It is greatly concerning *life* that Wright (2006), in relation to “[a]rguably the most fundamental distinction in all reality,” says, “God alone is uncreated, self-existent, non-contingent. God’s being depends on nothing else outside God’s own self. All other reality, by contrast, is created by God and therefore is dependent on God for existence and sustenance. The creation is contingent on God” (2006:163). Toward the end of the Pentateuch, Moses exhorts Israel to choose *life* (Deut 30.19), in which context he reminds Israel that *God* is their life (Deut 30.20) and where “life” in fact symbolizes comprehensively the covenant’s blessings. Thus, productivity, fertility, prosperity; rain in season, health, victory over our enemies—all of these are parts of the *life* symbolized by the tree of life and are God’s alone to give and take away. The human brain with its creative intelligence, all true wisdom and knowledge—these too clearly have their roots in the tree of life.

“Woe to him who says to wood, ‘Come to life!’ [o]r to lifeless stone, ‘Wake up!’” (Hab 2.19); “In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I will not be afraid. What can mortal man do to me?” (Ps 56.4)—yet we persist in creating idols.<sup>23</sup> For Israel under Canaanite influence, the paradigmatic idol-making process was to take a block of wood or stone, ascribe “life” to it, then treat it as a rival god to the one living God. We see the same basic process in the divinization by

<sup>22</sup> As I explain in a previous note, I do *not* share Gilbert’s (2007) view that the powers of demons are a function of those attributed to them (or not) by this or that cultural context.

<sup>23</sup> Where this persistence is concerned, Wright concludes his chapter on the living God confronting idolatry with reference to “the human addiction to idolatry” (2006:188), while 1 John concludes with the warning, “Dear children, keep yourselves from idols” (5.21).

various peoples of the sun, moon, and stars. By the present paper's analysis, it is by this same process that we get all witches, magic, oracles, ancestors, and other idols of Hiebert's "excluded middle"—with masks and other material culture items allegedly infected by demons fully included.<sup>24</sup> To call these other than superstitions can indeed be culturally sensitive;<sup>25</sup> to conclude, biblically, that they are other than idolatrous human constructs is to miss a vitally important message of prologue myth. Humanity has neither the right nor power to play God by creating things or persons with "life." Biblically, a witch is a normal created person to whom we, illegitimately, inefficaciously, and mistakenly, ascribe powers that are God's alone to give.<sup>26</sup> In doing so, we *attempt* to eat of the tree of life, from which God, this side of heaven,<sup>27</sup> has mercifully prevented

<sup>24</sup> If demons somehow get an exemption from Habakkuk 2.18-20 and other key idol-related scriptures and are thus able normally to infect objects of wood, stone, or whatever else, then all of these scriptures become effectively meaningless. "You people can't create an idol to be feared—but a *demon* can; and you people can't make wood or stone come to life so as to help or harm people—but a *demon* can." This is not Scripture—it's idol-making. According to Paul in 1 Corinthians 8, it's not any ontological reality of demon-infected meat, but rather lack of knowledge on the part of the weak—of believers of weak conscience "still so accustomed to idols that when they eat [food sacrificed to idols] they think of it as having been sacrificed to an idol"—that would have us refrain from eating such meat. In Matthew 8.31, Mark 5.12, and Luke 8.32, the demon(s) called Legion begged Jesus to be allowed to enter the herd of pigs—evidently lacking the power or authority to do this on their own; and the result was *not* pigs who became dangerous to people, but rather a herd of drowned pigs. The public burning of sorcery scrolls in Acts 19.19 is presented as part of public confession of faith in Christ and of sincere, costly renunciation of past evil involving the scrolls; it's not presented as because the early believers alleged or believed such items infected by demons through their proscribed (idolatrous, by the present paper's analysis) use.

<sup>25</sup> See Gilbert (2007) in this regard, where he uses the *s*-word ("superstition") in noting the need of Christian academics to give due weight to critical analysis and needed parsing according to the biblical worldview vis-à-vis cultural sensitivity and outreach strategy. In this regard, then, *feelings* of believers and others about masks and such—even strong feelings of demonic oppression—can be considered appropriately without their being allowed to supersede needed parsing according to the biblical worldview.

<sup>26</sup> I grant that such a normal, God-created person may be demon-possessed and thus demon-empowered; but Scripture nowhere contains evidence of which I'm aware of demon-empowered people acting mystically or being deemed capable of acting mystically to visit misfortune, sickness, or death on others. Further, Scripture is *wonderfully* clear as to Christ's authority over demons, so that to burn or in *any* way abuse an alleged witch is effectively to deny that authority.

<sup>27</sup> See the appendix's Figure 2 concerning the divinizing, idol-making process described here.

With regard to the possibility of humanity ever eating *successfully* from the tree of life, there are several relevant passages in Revelation—plus the fascinating-to-me fact that the fruit-bearing tree of life in Revelation is the ξυλον *xulon* 'tree' (in context, the hanging or crucifixion tree) of Acts 5.30, Galatians 3.16, and 1 Peter 2.24, not the δένδρον *dendron* 'tree' (in context, the more normal fruit-bearing tree) of Matthew 3.10 and 7.17. Speaking to the church at Ephesus in Rev 2.7, Jesus says, "To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God." In Rev 22.2, John writes of the tree of life in the new Jerusalem, standing on each side of the river of the water of life, "bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations." In Rev 22.14, Jesus says, "Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city." Finally, in some translations of Rev 22.19, John warns, "And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book." Thus, in the new Jerusalem, there will be a *right* to eat from the tree of life, the tree will bear its fruit each month, and the tree's leaves will be for the healing of the nations.

Whereas there is no mention in Revelation of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, there is prominent mention, in Revelation 22.1-2 and 17, of the river of the water of life, which flows "from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city"—with the tree of life bearing its fruit every month on each side of the river, and with the invitation, "Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life." One or many theologians or students of Scripture may have thought of this before, but it struck me, in a March 11, 2012 conversation about the two garden trees with GIAL graduate student

us success in doing. More finely, attempting *oneself* to eat of the tree of life might better be distinguished as self-divinization; attempting to force-feed its fruit to others, as constructing witches and such; attributing this or that part of the tree's power to inanimate objects, as constructing magic; and so on. Our attempts, in any case, while they cannot create other than scarecrow witches and other idols (since our attempts can succeed only in our idolatrous imaginations), can yet lead to traditions of the elders that cause us to break even weighty commands of God—e.g., they can lead to witchcraft ideas and allegations that have us murdering the elderly poor and horribly abusing children.

This, by the way (and to bring two threads of the paper's argument together), is where I believe it in large part "obvious from the text that humans are not supreme rulers, autonomously free to do whatever they wish" (Pearcey 2005b:47)—here where the trees of life and knowledge are together as in Lewis's "primitive" version of the myth of the Fall, but joined as well by the river that flowed from Eden, watering the garden, and separating from there into four headwaters. Here at the center of the garden we see symbolized the limit on humanity's creative cultural license—with God himself the limit, in all his glory, strength, holiness, and other attributes (including even his triune nature, as suggested by the three garden symbols of the text in the context of Scripture as a whole?). Subdue and rule over the earth, creating your cultures—yes, but only in the presence of God, under God, fearing and glorifying God as is his due.

## 5. Four examples

Adequately developed examples are in order and I offer four. The first, the Mangbetu witch, I know in large part from over six years of linguistic and sociocultural researches in the Meegye-Mangbetu area of northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo (Congo/Zaire).<sup>28</sup> The second, the Zande rubbing-board oracle, is less known than the same people's poison oracle but treated nonetheless by Evans-Pritchard (1976). The third, Suku elders, I became acquainted with through my dissertation researches on Meegye-Mangbetu death compensations (see McKee 1995). The fourth, naturalistic-materialistic Western science's version of evolution, I know to the extent I do from growing up in America, being educated at Harvard College (A.B. 1975, Social Relations) and the University of Rochester (M.A. 1985, Ph.D. 1995, Anthropology), limited though thoughtful reading (including, most recently, Dawkins 2008), and discussion with a range of friends and academic colleagues. While I do not develop each example to nearly the same extent, I attempt to develop each sufficiently to illustrate clearly enough my paper's argument.

### 5.1. The Mangbetu witch as an idol

Mangbetu witch ideas and related practices greatly resemble those of the neighboring Azande (Congo/Zaire, Sudan, Central African Republic), from whom, evidently, the Mangbetu

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Katie Hoogerheide, that they may in fact be together in the tree of life in the new Jerusalem of Revelation 21-22. By this interpretation, humanity's sin that started with eating of the forbidden fruit of the one tree has been judged once for all in that symbolized by the-two-trees-together ξυλον '(crucifixion) tree' of Revelation 22.2 that yields its fruit every month.

<sup>28</sup> I conducted these researches as a member of SIL International, mostly in the 1980s while residing at Egbita Mission and working as part of a SIL-assisted language development and Bible translation project. The sponsoring Zairean/(Congolese) church was the *Communauté Évangélique du Christ au Cœur d'Afrique*, also known as CECCA/16.

very largely borrowed them. Mangbetu say<sup>29</sup> the power of witchcraft resides in *nótú*, the Zande equivalent of which Evans-Pritchard glossed ‘witchcraft substance’; a person who has this ‘witchcraft substance’ Mangbetu call a *nótúómbié*,<sup>30</sup> the fairest English gloss of which is then ‘witch’. Mangbetu describe *nótú* as a small, gourd-shaped, luminescent appendage on the small intestine, heritable in the same-sex line and discoverable on autopsy. They say that *nótú* commands its bearer to bewitch its victim, who by such bewitching is afflicted with a wasting illness that, unaddressed, eventually ends in death. They say that *ótuí* ‘witches’<sup>31</sup> get up at night, strip naked, and go to where their victim lies asleep to bewitch him or her from close by. They say that, as witches walk naked at night, sometimes in groups, one can see them as lights moving eerily through the darkness, with the luminescence of each *nótú* shining out through its bearer’s mouth and anus. They say that people use oracles to indict the witch or witches responsible for a given wasting illness or resulting death; that people could, in former times, try to persuade witches to desist from bewitching their victims; and that, if the illness continued or if death resulted nonetheless, people might beat or even kill a witch. Mangbetu speak of *nótú* as something bad or evil. When a person’s illness resists treatment over time or eventually leads to death, there are, depending on a number of factors, various effects that harm relationships and divide families and communities—e.g., the accusation that a wife has killed her husband by witchcraft; divination as to which one or more persons from the community bewitched the victim.

Because the biblical worldview provides no warrant for the ontological reality of *nótú* as Mangbetu describe it, Mangbetu *ótuí* can only ever have been scarecrow witches. More specifically, since God clearly didn’t create *nótú* in the beginning (Gen 1.31), and since neither Satan nor any other created being has had the power to create it (Ps 146.6, Is 44.24, Jn 1.3, Ac 4.24, Col 1.16, Rev 4.11—among others), and since there’s no biblical warrant to suppose or conclude that it’s appeared post-Fall as the malevolent, mystical-organic substance that Mangbetu maintain it to be (though some might insist on arguing this point), the reasonable remaining choice is that it’s a construct—and that makes Mangbetu witches the same. *Nótú* is a construct, by the present paper’s analysis, for the fact that it’s a creation of the human imagination that’s had people ascribing to it powers of sickness and death that belong to God alone. Having divinized it in this fashion, people have then feared its imagined powers and so broken various commands of Scripture—e.g., by fearing people and not God in relation to sickness and death, by seeking guidance by divination as to causation, and by accusing, abusing, scapegoating, and breaking relationship with others over witchcraft allegations. Meanwhile, *nótú* has only ever been a phenomenological reality, never an ontological one; it’s never in fact been discovered on autopsy, however many times it’s been in people’s minds; it’s never of its imaginary self sickened or killed anyone, since such imagined creations can only ever contribute by suggestion to people’s sickness or death. Presumably, and painted more or less with broad strokes, it’s something that a given sub-Saharan

<sup>29</sup> While using the ethnographic present, for the most part, for each of my four examples, I recognize, on the one hand, that the ideas and practices concerned have changed more or less through the years; I also believe, on the other hand, that the same idol-making process remains at work in the present with regard to the same or similar phenomena—e.g., with regard to Mangbetu witch or similar ideas and practices.

The Mangbetu witch data presented here are ones I gathered and heard confirmed throughout the 1980s, mostly in the area around Egbita Village, Mongomasi and Ndei collectivities, Rungu Zone, Haut-Uele.

<sup>30</sup> According to a rule of the Mangbetu orthography currently in use in ongoing Bible translation in the language, an acute accent on a vowel indicates high phonemic tone, whereas no accent indicates phonemic low.

<sup>31</sup> The plural *ótuí* is of an irregular subtype whose singulars end in the complex form *-ómbié*, the larger, initial part of which is the singular noun stem *ombí* ‘person’.

African people, at a point of acute felt need for cognitive understanding of misfortune, sickness, and death, made up and to which they attributed the mystical powers concerned.<sup>32</sup> They were surely encouraged to be convinced of its ontological reality by whatever all demons are in fact capable of doing, with Satan, according to Jesus in John 8.44, “a murderer from the beginning” and “a liar and the father of lies.” Thus they came to fear it, even though they themselves had created it—even though it’s something without divine power in or behind or above it, since its fundamental reality is that of a fiction of humanity. It’s another resplendent product of humanity’s own creativity, which some will defend belligerently for the immensity of the sociocultural investment concerned, repudiating fiercely anything like the present paper’s take on it, insisting in effect that it will not do for the “African reality” of *nótú* to be mocked, unmasked, or toppled. It exalts a product of a people’s imagination and credits this imaginary product with a potency that belongs only to God.<sup>33</sup> In sum, it’s only ever existed as a mistaken, stronghold tradition of the elders that Satan has surely delighted in helping maintain as experienced, undoubted, humanity-destroying reality among Mangbetu. And thus, while Mangbetu may imagine that their wives, brothers-in-laws, neighbors, or even they themselves are witches, no Mangbetu ever has been, is, or ever will be a witch according to their *nótú*-based idea of witchcraft.

## 5.2. The Zande rubbing-board as an idol

The second example is that of an oracle—the Zande rubbing-board as described by Evans-Pritchard (1976). Called *iwa* in PaZande, the rubbing-board was, at the time Evans-Pritchard studied it and by his account, “[t]he most used of all Zande oracles.” Its common use was because, unlike the Zande poison oracle, it demanded no special preparation, “a man cannot wait when he fears that he may be a victim of witchcraft or trickery,” and a man who possessed one and was qualified to use it could “take it out at a moment’s notice and inquire from it what he is to do.” Since Azande considered it less reliable than their other oracles, they asked it “only minor or preliminary questions,” keeping the poison oracle “always the final authority.” While Evans-Pritchard devotes several more pages to its description, the bits most relevant to the present paper are the following:

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<sup>32</sup> Historically, I know that the Mangbetu appear clearly enough to have borrowed very much of their system of ideas and practices relating to witchcraft, oracles, and magic from the Azande; I don’t know where the Azande got theirs, whether from within their congeries of peoples or from without. Two vitally important points are (1) that such ideas, practices, and systems of such are not given to humanity by either God or demons; and (2) these ideas, practices, and systems of such have histories that can be more or less determined. Concerning the first, it’s people who construct these ideas, practices, and systems of such, and they construct them in the same basic manner as Jeremiah 10 describes the construction of every scarecrow idol. Concerning the second, the undeniable fact that these ideas, practices, and systems of such change through time and even pass away should be a dead giveaway as to what’s going on in this area. Real gods don’t die; the gods behind scarecrow idols do. As Wright has said concerning the mortality of gods,

If gods are mainly human constructs, then they are not only destructive but also *destructible* – as destructible as anything else we make on earth. *The gods too are subject to decay and death.* They are no more durable than the men or empires that make them. The scorn of the Assyrian on the defunct gods of the nations he had conquered rebounds on himself in the light of history. For where now are the gods of Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece or Rome? History is the graveyard of the gods (2006:162-63).

<sup>33</sup> Parts of the wording of several consecutive sentences here are very intentionally from Wright (2006:153, 154, 160, 164-65).

A rubbing-board is “carved out of the wood of various trees” in its two pieces. When fashioning a rubbing-board, “a man is subject to taboos” on sexual relations and certain foods. “[A man] cuts it with an adze, fashioning the bottom part before the upper part,” after which he “blackens it by rubbing the surface with a red-hot spear.” It is “endowed with mystical potency” by two further steps: (1) its upper and bottom parts are anointed, each in a slightly different manner and with a slightly different medicine, and with the medicine for the upper part addressed repeatedly by its owner while still in preparation in the pot; (2) it is buried for two days in a particular manner in the center of a path, since “the medicines have to be given time to sink in and there is still “coldness” about it which must be removed.” Its owner tests it by a procedure that includes his addressing it, with the result of a successful test being that “[the rubbing-board] sticks in declaration of its potency and powers of discrimination” (1976:167-70).

Biblically, by the present paper’s analysis, the Zande rubbing-board is not an oracle of lesser reliability than the poison oracle, it is a kind of idol with nothing but scarecrow potency or powers of discrimination. Its fashioning is not significantly different from that of the worthless idols of Jeremiah 10.1-16 or Isaiah 44.9-20, and several points of Habakkuk 2.19-20 I find particularly apt with regard to its construction (*italics added*): “Woe to him who says to wood, ‘*Come to life!*’ [o]r to *lifeless* stone, ‘*Wake up!*’ *Can it give guidance?* It is covered with gold and silver; *there is no breath in it*. But the *LORD* is in his holy temple; let *all the earth* be silent before *him*.” Wood is the lifeless rubbing-board’s material; “*Come to life! Wake up!*” is what, essentially, its maker says to it in attempting to endow it with mystical potency as he does; “*NO!*” is the obvious response to the prophet’s rhetorical question concerning its ability to give guidance; and this emphatic negative response can indeed be generalized for oracles the world over—i.e., it’s a “*NO!*” that is cross-cultural, universal, for “all the earth” that is to be silent before “the *LORD* in his holy temple”—i.e., before the one living God who alone has the power to give life and guidance of the kinds concerned.<sup>34</sup> Biblically, neither Satan nor other demons have the power to mystically enliven an oracle, nor can they consistently work through or behind it to do other than deceive and foster murder, injustice, disunity, and other such harm. The Azande, by their rubbing-board, falsely ascribe knowledge to dumb, lifeless material parts of God’s creation. In doing so, they steal glory from God and create an idol on which they foolishly depend for guidance.

### 5.3. Suku elders as idols

The Suku are a matrilineal people of southwestern Democratic Republic of Congo. Suku *bambuta* ‘elders’, as Kopytoff (2010) is at pains to point out, include ancestors both living and dead. These elders, similarly to their Mangbetu counterparts (as I came to understand during my dissertation researches), are said or assumed normally to protect the members of their descent groups from both non-mystical and mystical harm. For Suku, according to Kopytoff (1961),

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<sup>34</sup> This understanding of the Zande rubbing-board is, I believe, consistent with the Bible’s general condemnation of divination (see, e.g., Lev 19.26, Deut 18.10, 1 Sam 15.23). The Urim and Thummim of ancient Israel, given to Israel by God, are an understandable exception to the rule; the casting of lots that selected Jonah is God choosing to guide on a particular occasion through a normally worthless oracle; etc., with confidence, given the prologue’s foundation for parsing animistic worldviews.

... the function of the powers of the elders is to “protect” their lineage. This protection is expected by a member of the lineage to be exerted in every aspect of existence, “mystical” as well as “real,” in economic activities, in social and political relations, in health and in disease. The total power of the lineage, in the persons of its elders, is expected to “close the road” to misfortune, either by preventing it or by providing an effective force to counteract it (1961:118-19).

Although the particular Suku idea of multiple causation has *Nzambi* ‘God’ as the ultimate cause of all misfortune, if a Musuku becomes ill, dies, or suffers otherwise, it’s necessarily assumed that the elders as a group, whether from neglect or deliberately, have culpably withdrawn their protection, have thus failed to keep closed the road to misfortune, and so have enabled more immediate, direct causes—e.g., *kiloki* ‘witchcraft’, *mikisi* ‘(sorcery) medicines’—to successfully attack their victim (Kopytoff 1961:119-21).

By the present paper’s analysis—much as Mangbetu witches are idols by their being mistakenly ascribed harmful powers that end in death, Suku elders are idols by their being ascribed helpful, protective ones that prosper life. Biblically, God never endowed any people’s elders, whether living or dead, whether as individuals or as a descent-system-based group, with any mystical power to protect against whichever kind of harm. Matrilineal and other descent rules, lineages and other kinds of social groups, living and dead elders with particular responsibilities and powers—biblically, they’re all cultural constructs and each is liable to be or become something that does *not* respect or glorify God for who he is. Elders with powers to “close the road” to misfortune are a construct that ascribes to them powers that belong to God alone, and there’s no biblical indication that any such mystical intermediate agent in any culture’s chain of multiple causation is other than a mistaken, illegitimate construct. Tellingly to me, there is no psalm in which the psalmist cries out for help to Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, or any of Israel’s other illustrious ancestors; the psalmist cries out to God alone, the Maker of heaven and earth—“Answer me when I call to you, O my righteous God. Give me relief from my distress; be merciful to me and hear my prayer”—with confidence that God alone, directly, will both hear—“Know that the LORD has set apart the godly for himself; the LORD will hear when I call to him”—and help—“I lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety” (Ps 4.1, 3, 8). This is part and parcel of the biblical worldview we see clearly enough already from Genesis 1-2, and it’s that to which we need to refer back to parse all such constructs as Suku elders.

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Before leaving these first three illustrations—each one an African illustration—I believe it vital to beware two possible red herrings in evaluating the present paper’s argument. First is the charge of cultural evolutionism, which would have me saying or implying that Africa, including the African church, is behind the West and the Western church in its cultural evolution and simply needs to catch up. This is not what I’m either saying or implying. As an anthropologist, I know well that the theory of cultural evolutionism of the second half of the nineteenth century—that of Morgan, Tylor, and others—is long dead and deservedly so. I also know well, as Wright (2006) notes well, that the West has its own idols, with which Western Christians, myself included, must be concerned. Wright’s introduction to a “small sampling” of studies of Western idols I deem worth quoting in full:

Much helpful work has been done in identifying and analyzing the gods that may be said to dominate modern cultures—especially in Western societies. Some of these studies make extensive use of combined biblical and sociological tools, others less so. Such analyses have powerful missiological relevance since they apply this distinctive biblical category (idolatry) to contemporary cultural phenomena, enabling us to see below the surface and recognize idolatrous or demonic forces at work. Some of them also are specifically addressed to the missiological question of how we are to expose and confront these cultural idols and address the liberating message of the biblical gospel to those who are captivated by them (2006:165).

Wright then mentions eight studies that analyze Western cultural idols or idolatrous possibilities ranging from such as technique, sex, work, and the family to individualism, ecology, race, and the media to material prosperity, consumerism, and guaranteed security to science, reason, unreason, New Age-ism, relativism, and hedonism (Wright 2006:165-66). It should be clear, please, that I'm not looking down at Africa through the lenses of a dead theory.

The second red herring is, that debunking witches as idols is but another example of Western rationalistic failure to understand “African realities.” Nonsense, as politely as I may say so. However complex and difficult to understand African experience may often be, African ontological realities neither can nor do differ essentially from ontological realities the world over; what can and do differ are phenomenological, cultural realities—those incredibly variable forms of our cultures’ imaginative constructs. This is the reason “witch,” “witchcraft,” and other such terms defy universal definition as they do—they don’t in fact correspond to any one or whichever finite number of ontological realities, but only to a theoretically limitless number of phenomenological, cultural realities. Where both red herrings are concerned, I believe those who continue to deploy them in missiological argument do a huge disservice thereby to the church worldwide. The problem lies elsewhere clearly enough—in the stronghold power of certain traditions of the elders that *require* parsing as illegitimate and scarecrow by the biblical worldview that starts from the one living God. Jesus, for what I believe it’s very much worth in this regard, *never* had a problem casting out a demon; what he did sometimes make little or no headway against was unyielding traditions of the elders.

#### 5.4. Naturalistic-materialistic Western scientific evolution as an idol

Naturalistic-materialistic Western science, from the mid-nineteenth century to the present, has developed the idea that all life, human life included, had its origin in a blind, purposeless, naturalistic-materialistic evolutionary process.<sup>35</sup> Biblically, this involves humanity taking fruit from the tree of life—specifically, the origin of physical life, for which the one living God

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<sup>35</sup> How exactly life developed after its origin and even the nature of the process by which it originated—whether or not with God’s intervention at one or more points—are not matters addressed by the present paper. Where the paper’s subject matter and the symbolism of the tree of life at the center of the garden are concerned, what’s important to recognize is that Christians with as diverse views of origins as Francis Collins (2006) and Henry Morris (1984) have agreed with each other and disagreed with Richard Dawkins concerning a self-existent Creator and the contingency of created life.

alone was responsible—and attributing it to an inanimate process.<sup>36</sup> The result is a process idol, various forms of the worship of which have characterized national philosophical-religious climates that have contributed to the deaths of *tens of millions* of people in Nazi Germany, Stalinist Russia, and other such modern states. (Such a figure, by the way, surely dwarfs the maximum conceivable number killed throughout the history of the world as a function of witch ideas and practices—in which regard, in any case, Richard Dawkins should read lots of sociologist of religion Rodney Stark.) This staggeringly huge number of deaths is a function of the process idol entailing two related conclusions about value and values, recognized and expressed clearly by the atheist mathematician-philosopher Russell (1955). The first is, “Our feelings and beliefs on the subject of good and evil are, like everything else about us, natural facts, developed in the struggle for existence and not having any divine or supernatural origin” (1955:92). The second is,

[E]verything, real or imagined, can be appraised by us, and there is no outside standard to show that our valuation is wrong. We are ourselves the ultimate and irrefutable arbiters of value .... It is we who create value and our desires which confer value. In this realm we are kings .... It is for us to determine the good life, not for nature—not even for nature personified as God (Russell 1955:55-56).

With humanity thus as sovereign kings in the realm of value, it’s people’s desires that confer value on *everything*, even on their own and other people’s lives, as part of a natural struggle for existence. It’s also people who creatively imagine, and people’s desires that confer subjective value on, rights of whichever kind—e.g., human, women’s, children’s, and animal. *No* result of such a view of value should come as a surprise, nor can *any* be condemned as objectively, indisputably evil; however, some who worship the idol understandably reject its value-related conclusions, insisting they can have their process cake—which cuts God from the picture—and eat it too—by which they retain an imagined, enlightened, humanistic morality apart from God.<sup>37</sup>

In addition to its mass-murderous influence, the process idol has contributed as well—though perhaps by culture-war politics and demonic encouragement<sup>38</sup> more than natural scientific argument—to some people rejecting the Christian faith and others defecting from or losing

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<sup>36</sup> Atheist biologist Richard Dawkins, in his *New York Times* bestseller *The God delusion* (2008), states as follows his own alternative to what he calls “the God hypothesis”: “[A]ny creative intelligence, of sufficient complexity to design anything, comes into existence only as the end product of an extended process of gradual evolution” (2008:52, italics in the original).

<sup>37</sup> Dawkins (2008) praises Russell as a philosopher—as “great” and having “won the Nobel Prize,” as compared to theistic convert Antony Flew—apparently unaware of (or unwilling to note?) the fact that Russell would likely have shredded Dawkins’ view of a naturalistic-materialistic moral *Zeitgeist* and “the manifest phenomenon of *Zeitgeist* progression” that allow “brights” like Dawkins himself to enlighten the rest of us. But then Dawkins also shows himself either ignorant or forgetful of the fact that C. S. Lewis, author of *Miracles: a preliminary study* (1978) and decidedly not embarrassed by miracles such as creation (not to be confused with creationism any more than Lewis didn’t confuse evolution with evolutionism), preceded him as an educated person at Oxford in the twentieth century (2008:106, 308; 187).

<sup>38</sup> I know of no biblical support for the idea that there would be demonic encouragement of *non-Western* idols but not Western ones. Lewis (1982), who recognized that belief in devils (or demons) “conflicts with nothing that any of the sciences has shown to be true,” imagines Screwtape, a senior devil, at the side of an atheist reading in the British Museum, encouraging him away from a line of thought that appeared likely to bring him toward faith in Christ (1982:vii, 9-10).

confidence in it. In its Richard Dawkins instantiation (among others), it also appears to insist there's beauty and wonder in the universe, not to mention liberation from the pernicious effects of the God delusion, that all should recognize for what they are—even though, at the same time, the worldview concerned has no objective value. That those who opt for and then cling to the process idol don't pretend to *begin* to understand how life did in fact originate is one indication to me of the idol's stronghold-level resistance to debunking.

Some might think it preposterous that naturalistic-materialistic evolution be considered an idol. What I'm *not* saying by this is that the process idol is the whole religion of the worshipers concerned; what I *am* saying is that naturalistic-materialistic evolution is an idol, biblically, in the same basic way as is an Old Testament wood or stone idol or a Mangbetu witch. The *whole* religion of those who worship the process idol I would define in the same general way as I would for all—the exercise of their kingship in the realm of value (see also below). The mystical-supernatural is not in any case what defines religion—unless you're resorting to raw politics to try to exclude your “religious” opponent from public policy debate. While the supernatural appears generally part of religion (no wonder, biblically, given God as the Ultimate Fact), what religion is about is value and values—what we recognize and discount, construct and deconstruct, value and devalue—and this has all normal people religious, atheistic and agnostic scientists obviously included. Every normal person exercises a kingship—or rulership or sovereignty, if you will—in the realm of value.

As a final note in this regard—there's no argument here with evolution as a scientific theory. For me, prologue myth contains humanity's charter to develop scientific knowledge; it also has the two trees at the center of the garden and the river that flowed from Eden as a sound base, symbolically, for humanity's theoretical and practical reason, and that function at the same time as a limit on humanity's creative license. Thus, prologue myth offers a “golden mean” resolution to the creation-evolution debate that includes both (1) God-respecting science as valid, on the one hand,<sup>39</sup> and as free to investigate origins questions, on the other, and also (2) morality, professional ethics, and universal human rights as more, at base, than survival-related products of the human imagination.

In sum, naturalistic-materialistic Western science attributes the origin of life to a blind, purposeless, naturalistic-materialistic process; in doing so, it attempts to take from the tree of life and attribute various goods that belong to God to a scarecrow process idol. Although this idol in itself, like a Mangbetu witch, can't do us either harm or good, its worship—people giving it credence and letting their lives, with demonic encouragement, be more or less dominated by it—can have all kinds of pernicious effects.

## 6. Conclusion

“For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the *LORD* made the heavens. Splendor and majesty are before *him*; strength and glory are in *his* sanctuary” (Ps 96.5-6, italics added).

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<sup>39</sup> This concerns Lewis's argument from reason, as treated and strengthened by Reppert (2003), though Lewis's argument in *The abolition of man* (1965) was not a Christian theistic argument. The gist of the argument is, “that if we explain reason naturalistically we shall end up explaining it away, that is, explaining it in such a way that it cannot serve as a foundation for the natural sciences that are themselves the foundation for naturalism” (2003:128).

The last verse of 1 John warns us to keep ourselves from idols. I believe this parallels verses in some other epistles that ascribe to God one or more of glory, majesty, power, authority—attributes that belong to God alone. Psalms 29 and 96 command us to ascribe glory and strength to the LORD, and the glory due his name; they then tell us as well to “[w]orship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness” (Ps 29.1-2, Ps 96.7-9)—all of this given who God is recognized to be and what attributes are ascribed to God in Psalm 96.5-6.

Concerning the cultural mandate, Pearcey (2005b) says, “It is obvious from the [Genesis prologue] text that humans are not supreme rulers, autonomously free to do whatever they wish. Their dominion is a delegated authority: They are representatives of the Supreme Ruler ...” (2005:47). Wright (2006) hits the first tree on the head with his recognition that it’s in humanity’s eating of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil—in their choosing to act as though they were gods, deciding good and evil for themselves—where lies the root of all other forms of idolatry (2006:64). Lewis (1962) suspects a deeper, subtler truth in a version of the Fall myth that “brings together the trees of life and knowledge” (1962:71-72). What I’m suggesting is that there’s much of both practical and philosophical-theological import to be seen by interpreting the two trees at the center of the garden and the river that flowed from Eden as symbolic of a divine limit on humanity’s worshipful exercise of the cultural mandate. To me, in light of all I understand of Scripture, the following is what’s become obvious in the text relative to the cultural mandate:

Culture, considered from within a Christian anthropology grounded in the Genesis prologue, is not only learned, adaptive, shared, and integrated; it’s also, by God’s express commands to us through our common first ancestors, largely ours to construct—but *only* largely. This is good news. Given that it’s *largely* ours, we all owe a basic respect to the cultures of others; were it *entirely* ours, there’d be no logic stopping us from extreme cultural relativism, even as regards Carthaginian child sacrifice or burning alleged witches in Kenya. Although God, by the cultural (or dominion) mandate, has indeed made us ruler over the works of his hands (Ps 8.6), this is not as Russell’s sovereign kings in the realm of value, free to construct even good and evil for ourselves; it’s only as *vassal* kings from whom God rightly and mercifully requires loving, obedient worship. He requires this worship given who he is—the one holy, living Creator God. This is what (or who, rather) is symbolized by the two trees at the center of the garden and the river that flowed from Eden. The mandate does indeed bid us construct our cultures, but always respecting who God is, with significant focus on his “life” and holiness. Of all, then, that our ancestors have constructed legitimately, respecting the one living God symbolized by the two center-of-the-garden trees and the garden’s river, we their descendants can be duly proud; of all that our ancestors have constructed illegitimately, disrespecting God, we their descendants cannot be justly proud, but rather need to repent, deconstruct, and reconstruct, this time respecting God. Respect for the authority of our ancestors and elders can be good, but not where they’ve shamed themselves by their idols (Jer 2.5, 11, 26-28; 10.14). Where their cultural creations have been idols of any kind, repentance and seeking God’s forgiveness—not to mention reconstruction for his glory—are the biblical order of the day (Jer 3.21-25).

To sum up concisely: It’s God who calls the light “day” and the darkness “night”; it’s we, the descendants of our common first ancestors, who name the animals. Woe to him who ascribes to any created thing any attribute that belongs to the Creator alone; to avoid such idolatry, including the fear of scarecrow witches we ourselves create, “Ascribe to the *LORD* [alone] the glory due his name.” Praise and thank God for the mandate, and that it has its garden limit.

Appendix

Figure 1: The Genesis 1 binary oppositions through the end of the Christian New Testament (adapted from McKee 1998)

|   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| <p>1</p> <p>God calls the light “day” and the darkness “night”</p> <p>→</p>   | <p><i>God’s Gen 1 acts of “calling” establish key symbolic oppositions</i></p> <p>2</p> <p>God calls the expanse “sky” (as opposed to the earth below)</p> <p>→</p>   | <p>3</p> <p>God calls the dry land “earth” and the gathered waters “seas”</p> <p>↓</p>  |
| <p><i>the Crucifixion</i></p> <p>regarding which humanity has rejected the <i>light</i> of the world, who atones for humanity’s sin by his death, during the course of which <i>darkness</i> covers the land mid-day</p> <p>←</p> | <p><i>In response to humanity’s sin, God brings the universal judgments of ...</i></p> <p><i>Babel</i></p> <p>in which humanity has presumed to make a name for themselves by building a tower with its top in the <i>sky</i>, at which point God comes <i>down</i> and confounds their speech</p> <p>←</p> | <p><i>the Flood</i></p> <p>in which humanity has filled the earth with lawlessness and the <i>waters</i> are brought back over the <i>earth</i> in judgment</p> <p>←</p> <p>↓</p> |
| <p>There is no more <i>night</i>. – Rev 22.5</p>  | <p><i>God establishes the new Jerusalem and resolves the oppositions</i></p> <p>The dwelling of God is with humanity. – Rev 21.3</p> <p>←</p>   | <p>There is no longer any <i>sea</i>. – Rev 21.1</p> <p>←</p>   |

Figure 2: Scripture's divinizing, idol-making process

| <i>created thing or person</i> | <i>God-intended or legitimate purpose(s), use(s), etc.</i>   | <i>divinization, more or less, via the ascription of attributes that belong to God alone</i>                           | <i>example scarecrow constructs that result</i>                                     | <i>relevant example scripture passage(s)</i>   |
|--------------------------------|--|--|---|--|
| tree/wood                      | "It is man's fuel for burning." – Isa 44.15  | life; due glory, honor, power/strength, wisdom, praise; power over life and death, production and reproduction,        | idol, divination technique  | "Woe to him who says to wood, 'Come to life!'" – Hab 2.18-20; "Do not fear them; they can do no harm nor can they do any good." – Jer 10.5   |
| sun, moon, and stars           | "God set [the sun, moon, and stars] in the expanse of the sky to give light on the earth, to govern the day and the night, and to separate light from darkness." – Gen 1.17-18 | sickness and health, blessing and cursing, success, prosperity, etc.; hidden knowledge of the past, present, or future | gods, mystical influences   | "The heavens declare the glory of God." – Ps 19.1-4; "The sun will not harm you by day nor the moon by night." – Ps 121.5-6  |
| human person                   | "You made him ruler over the works of your hands." – Ps 8.6; "I am fearfully and wonderfully made." – Ps 139.14  |  | witch, medium, fortune-teller, false prophet, diviner, magician, sorcerer, ancestor | "[I]n God I trust; I will not be afraid. What can (mortal) man do to me?" – Ps 56.4, 11; "The LORD is my light and my salvation – whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life – of whom shall I be afraid?" – Ps 27.1 |

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