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# **A BIBLICAL RESPONSE TO DIVINATION IN THE CHURCHES AMONG THE AKEY PEOPLE ON THE ISLAND OF SANTO IN VANUATU**

**Lionel Tom**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Historically, the Akey people in the island of Santo in Vanuatu were like the Israelites, who were delivered from Egypt to go and worship God in the Promised Land. In 1960, the Akey people were the last people who made an exodus from their practice of traditional religion, and their remote inland location on Santo, to the coast, with the intention of adopting a new way of life, based on the gospel, brought by missionaries. From that time, until the independence of the country in 1980, the people's lives changed tremendously in terms of spirituality.

After the missionaries departed in 1980, the church life of the Akey people slowly declined. Traditional practices, which the people had abandoned, began to creep into the churches, particularly the practice of divination. It is discouraging to see people, who have been baptised, who partake in the Lord's Supper, and who regularly attend the church services and prayer meetings, still consult diviners for guidance.

Based on the severity of the issue, three questions are raised for inquiry. Why are people so attracted to a diviner? What does the Bible say about divination? What are the recommendations to those who are bound by a system of divination? These are the questions to guide this study in order to achieve its goal. The goal is to give "A Biblical Response to Divination in the Churches Among the Akey People on the Island of Santo in Vanuatu".

In order to answer the three inquiry questions, we will look at the definition of divination, divination practices in the Akey people, reasons people are drawn to diviners, divination's consequences in the church, a biblical reflection on divination, and recommendations.

## WHAT IS DIVINATION

This paper deals mainly with the issue of divination. Therefore, it is important to know its definition, in order to have a clear understanding, as we begin to explore this subject. Divination is an endeavour to “obtain information about things future”,<sup>1</sup> and “seek hidden knowledge from gods, spirits, ancestors, and other beings, with the belief to know the unknown”.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, it is an “art of determining the purposes, will, or attitudes of the gods”, revealed through “signs, which, if interpreted properly, divulge something of divine intentions”.<sup>3</sup> Upon this interpretation, people can make plans for their lives, either to avoid dangers, or gain success in relation to a present or future situation. Diviners are religious specialists, who serve as intermediaries, and who are spiritually powerful, and specially trained, to deal with the gods, through rituals performed accordingly, to catch the gods' attentions.<sup>4</sup>

## DIVINATION PRACTICES IN THE AKEY PEOPLE

People around the world have different worldviews and religious beliefs, which become the basis on which they interpret life, and practice certain things in life.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, to deal with issues affecting a particular group,

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<sup>1</sup> H. J. Rose. “Divination (Introductory and Primitive)”, in *The Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, vol 4, James Hastings, ed., Edinburgh UK: T. & T. Clark, 1908, p. 775.

<sup>2</sup> Paul G. Hiebert, *Understanding Folk Religion: a Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices*, Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 1999, p. 176.

<sup>3</sup> O. Burke, “Divination in the ancient Near East”, in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: An Illustrated Encyclopaedia*, Keith R. Crim, ed., Nashville TN: Abingdon Press, 1976, p. 241.

<sup>4</sup> Symeon Schwhyiam Yovang, “Traditional Sickness Healing among the Kalam”, in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 8-1 (1992), p. 55.

<sup>5</sup> Harold W. Turner, *Living Tribal Religions*, London UK: Ward Lock Educational, 1971, p. 5. Turner stated that, there are, however, other living religions, which we tend to forget, because they have no special names, are practised by smaller groups of people, in many different parts of the world, and usually where there has been no writing until recent

one needs to understand their cultural background. In this context, divination is an issue in the churches among the Akey people. Therefore, a survey of cultural beliefs, including purposes and methods for seeking guidance, will be helpful to address the issue.

## **CULTURAL BELIEFS**

Since the Akey people are considered Melanesians, they have commonality in their belief system with other Melanesians. Their belief is rooted in the activity of nature spirits, and of ancestors<sup>6</sup>. Marilyn Rowsome affirmed that “if you want to understand the Melanesian mind, you must think spirits everywhere, and in everything”.<sup>7</sup> Spirits are involved in the total life of the Melanesian community.

Based on their worldview, the Akey people believe that, “wherever the spirits are, there is ‘movement’, ‘action’, ‘force’, and ‘power’ ”.<sup>8</sup> They view them as the source of protection, blessing, and punishment. Nothing happens accidentally, there is always a spiritual explanation. For example, a person’s sickness, a child’s death, or a mental illness, are all interpreted as the result of offending an ancestral spirit, or of a broken relationship. It could also be the result of an unknown person trespassing into the dwellings of a spirit, who, out of anger, makes the person sick.

Based on that belief, people who are sick, go the diviner to determine the causes of their sicknesses or other misfortunes. Once the causes are identified, proper remedial steps are taken to cure, or heal, or restore balance to the situation. According to the Akey people, diviners have the power also to mediate between them and the spirit world.

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times, so that we know little of their history and almost nothing of how they came to be founded. These are the religions of men, who are still living in what we call tribal societies.

<sup>6</sup> Ellison Suri, “Religious Experience in Traditional Melanesian Cultures”, in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 2-1 (1986), p. 32.

<sup>7</sup> Marilyn Rowsome, “Spiritual Powers in Paul’s Writings”, in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 9-2 (1993), p. 37.

<sup>8</sup> Esau Tuza, “Spirits and Powers in Melanesia”, Melanesian Institute Orientation course, Goroka PNG: Melanesian Institute, 1979, p. 1.

## **PURPOSES FOR GUIDANCE**

In Akey cosmology, the existence of both benevolent and malevolent spirits is experienced. The benevolent spirits are usually the spirits of the ancestors. They are the ones who seek to protect and prosper their progeny. They are also regulatory spirits, who will punish bad behaviour, and reward good behaviour.

Malevolent spirits are the spirits of the recent dead, and the spirits of those whose lives were taken violently through accident, or through other undignified circumstances. Malevolent spirits are dangerous to human beings. They are the ones responsible for sickness, death, barrenness among women, and other major misfortunes.

So, when the Akey people go to a diviner, the diviner does not go to just any spirit, he goes seeking benevolent spirits. Once the diviner has consulted the spirits, he then makes known to those who seek guidance and/or answers to their problems what the spirits have shown to him. People then act depending on the information from the diviner.

There are many reasons the Akey people seek guidance, but the common ones are to diagnose their diseases, either physically, mentally, or spiritually,<sup>9</sup> “to diagnose cases of misfortune and death”,<sup>10</sup> “to determine courses of action”,<sup>11</sup> “to avoid danger”,<sup>12</sup> “to determine guilt or innocence”,<sup>13</sup> “to select someone for office”,<sup>14</sup> “to find lost persons or objects”,<sup>15</sup> and “to gain supernatural knowledge”.<sup>16</sup>

## **METHODS USED TO OBTAIN GUIDANCE**

Hiebert classified the methods used to obtain guidance into two groups. These are the organic method, and the mechanical method; and, within these

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<sup>9</sup> Turner, *Living Tribal Religions*, p. 33.

<sup>10</sup> Hiebert, *Understanding Folk Religion*, 188.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 189.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

two methods, diverse practices are applied. The methods are similar to the ones most Akey diviners use. We will now discuss, in detail, the popular practices and why they are used.

In the organic method, the first practice is, “oaths and conditional curses”,<sup>17</sup> which are used to determine guilt or innocence. The second practice is “necromancy”.<sup>18</sup> People consult the dead for many reasons, such as, for protection, for revenge, and for help in gardening and fishing. Thirdly, is “presentiments”,<sup>19</sup> which diagnose the sick, and avoid danger. Lastly, many people use “dreams, visions, and trances”.<sup>20</sup> These practices have multiple uses, such as, to diagnose diseases, misfortune, and death, to determine a course of action, to avoid danger, to find a lost person or object, and to gain supernatural knowledge.

In the mechanical method, many people use “omens”.<sup>21</sup> Omens can be in the form of unusual events. Firstly, through events in nature, such as a bamboo explosion, or a strong, sudden blast of cool wind, a coming danger is announced, such as the soon arrival of a witch. Next, insight into the future is observed through animal behaviour, such as, a kingfisher whistling and flying over, and turning left or right. A left direction stands for misfortune, and right for fortune. This is used mainly in hunting and fishing. Lastly, through astrology, reading signs in the sky, such as falling stars, which show that someone is dead in the direction where it is falling. “Divination”,<sup>22</sup> is the next mechanical method. But it is only used by specialists. There are different types of divination, with complicated practices applied, to get guidance. These are aeromancy,<sup>23</sup> alectryomancy,<sup>24</sup> astragalomancy,<sup>25</sup> and

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 178.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 185.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 183.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184. Aeromancy is divination by observing the ripples in water.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* Alectryomancy is divination by observing a rooster moving in a circle of letters.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* Astragalomancy is divination by casting bones to see how they fall.

botanomancy.<sup>26</sup> They are used for the same purposes, as mentioned above, in the section on “purposes of guidance”.

## **SUMMARY**

The Akey people practice divination, based on their traditional religious beliefs in the spirits, and their interconnection to the natural surroundings. They view them as the means of protection, blessing, and punishment. There are common reasons that the Akey people consult a diviner, based on their belief that the diviner is spirituality powerful to communicate. They are able to get information from the spirits, who know everything concerning the present and the future, due to their interconnection. An Akey diviner uses many practices to obtain guidance. These practices are classified into two groups, the organic and mechanical methods.

## **THE REASONS PEOPLE ARE DRAWN TO DIVINERS**

Having looked at divination practices in the context of the belief system of the Akey people, we now move to explore the reasons why people are so attracted to a diviner. Diviners occupied an important cultural position and function in the social and religious lives of Akey communities prior to the advent of Christianity and western laws.

## **NATURALLY ROOTED IN CULTURAL BELIEF**

We have already mentioned, “if you want to understand the Melanesian mind, you must think spirits everywhere, and in everything”.<sup>27</sup> The Akey people greatly revere the spirits. They view them as a source of protection, blessing, and punishment. Thus, the spirits influence the way they think about life, and the way they interpret happenings in life. For the Akey people, belief in spirits is not an abstract idea, but it is a belief that is rooted in the very fabric of their life, their surroundings and nature, and the ways they cope with life.<sup>28</sup> This is a driving force to seek help and guidance, not from anywhere else, other than diviner.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid. Botanomancy is divination by watching how leaves burn or blow.

<sup>27</sup> Rowsome, “Spiritual Powers in Paul’s Writings”, p. 37.

<sup>28</sup> Tuza, “Spirits and Powers in Melanesia”, p. 1.

## **IMMEDIATE RESULTS**

One of the contributing factors to the attraction of a diviner is getting a quick response. The Akey people rarely consult pastors or God for their daily needs, because most of the time they seem to be silent in their response and people feel helpless. As a result, people are turning to seek anything that has power to fix their problems as soon as possible. Diviners are always sought, with a trust that, by using any of their quick methods, they can give the people an immediate and satisfactory response.

## **GUIDANCE PROVED**

Previous guidance provided is another factor that draws people to the diviners. For example, many have experienced healing in their lives through a diviners' help, predictions have come to pass, and so on. Proofs such as these, maintain the people's trust in the diviners, even though some of the things do not happen exactly as the diviners have promised. But these do not stop the people from continuing to consult them. This is similar to dealings with doctors. Many people trust their treatments for healing, but, in reality, some experience healing, some do not. This does not stop people from continuing to consult doctors when they are sick.

## **SUMMARY**

There are three reasons why the Akey people are so attracted to diviners. The first is because their belief system in spirits is rooted in the very fabric of their life. The second is that they believe that, with the quick methods of the diviners, they can get quick responses concerning their needs, which is not the same as the outcome from the pastors. Finally, many Akey people are attracted to diviners, because they have proven to be true in some of their guidance.

## **DIVINATION'S CONSEQUENCES IN THE CHURCH**

Having looked at the reasons why people are drawn to diviners, it should challenge us to feel the tension of that major shift from trusting the power and wisdom of God to believing in the work of the diviner, and prepare us to address the issue. There are consequences that need to be pointed out, such

as giving priority to diviners, misunderstanding of scripture, weakening of faith, and declining church attendance.

### **GIVING PRIORITY TO DIVINERS**

Based on their cultural background, the Akey people give priority to diviners. For anything concerning life, they will often go first to a diviner for help. For example, if a person is sick, that person goes to the diviner first to diagnose the cause of the sickness. If an object is lost, the person seeks a diviner to locate the exact place to find it. If a person wants to make a journey to another place, that person will consult the diviner to see if his journey will be safe or not. These things are impossible for a pastor to respond to. He cannot determine the cause of a sickness. He cannot tell the exact location of the lost object, and he cannot know whether the voyage will be safe or not. The Akey people view the pastors as helpless, compared to the diviners. For those reasons, they classify diviners as their first source of help in their lives.

### **MISUNDERSTANDING OF SCRIPTURES**

Many Akey members of the church are influenced by divination. Because of that, they sometime make claims, which sound scriptural, to defend their ignorance, and to entice others to follow them. As a result, many are confused, and fall in their traps. Firstly, they argue that divination is a gift from God, for the diviner uses the same methods to obtain guidance that the priests and the prophets used in the Old Testament. The truth is the methods used by priests and prophets were God's given methods for His glory, while a diviner's focus is on himself. Secondly, they claim to find no evil in divination, because it contributes to the welfare of the individual and the community. They forget that the devil can produce results for the people, to trick them. He builds his base through welfare, and so on.<sup>29</sup> Thirdly, others emphasise that it is all-right to "blend elements from traditional religion with Christianity . . . to pray to God, the source of power, before employing their magic".<sup>30</sup> This claim is totally opposite to scripture, which warns against

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<sup>29</sup> John Weldon, Clifford Wilson, *Occult Shock and Psychic Forces*, San Diego CA: Master Books, 1980, p. 427.

<sup>30</sup> Ledimo Edonie, "Syncretism in the Milne Bay Province of Papua New Guinea", in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 16-2 (2000), p. 5.

serving two masters (Matt 6:4). Finally, others state that the scriptures do not condemn Godly mediums, but only wicked mediums. This is not true, because the Bible does not make any distinctions between Godly and wicked mediums. Being a medium is already against God's word (Deut 18:9-12).<sup>31</sup>

### **WEAKENS FAITH**

In spite of the fact that being a medium is against God's word, the Akey people give priority to diviners for help and guidance, it shows what kind of people they are. Their love and trust are shown through their priorities. And that means they love and trust the spirits and the diviners more than God, the giver of life, and His servants. Their contact and experience of spirits, through the diviner, robs their confidence, and weakens their faith in the Lord. This is a challenging situation in the life of Akey Christians, in terms of their relationship and faith to God.

### **CHURCH DECLINE**

When priority is given to the diviner, this not only affects their faith, but their relationships as well. Participating in the church, which is the body of Christ, shows mutual relationship with Him, who is the head of the body. Having said that, the Akey people see that the church has no value. They say there is nothing good a person can get by going to church. It is a waste of time, and worthless, compared to the diviner, who is spiritually powerful in their minds, who can guide their individual lives, and even their society. Therefore, this influence has led to the withdrawal of many good churchgoers, and thus has eventually contributed to the church's decline.

### **SUMMARY**

Divination's consequences vary in different contexts. These situations are some of those, which have been identified in the Akey people. Firstly, they give priority to a diviner. For anything concerning their lives, they will always consult him first. They will not go to pastors, because they view them as helpless, compared to diviners. Secondly, those who are so influenced by divination, many times raise arguments, which seem scriptural, to defend their ignorance. They also confuse others, and lead

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<sup>31</sup> Weldon, and Wilson, *Occult Shock and Psychic Forces*, p. 426.

them astray from the truth. Thirdly, people's faith in God is weakened, because of the shift of trust from God to the diviner. Lastly, due to the diviner's priority in their lives, and the misunderstanding of scripture, which weakens their faith, it leads to withdrawal of many from the church. This contributes to church decline.

## **BIBLICAL REFLECTION ON DIVINATION**

The information presented concerning divination practices among the Akey people, and the reasons why they are so attracted to a diviner, and its consequences in the church, give us an overall understanding on the issue. We now move on to explore biblical views on the issue of divination. We are going to look at the practice of divination in the Bible, the warning against divination, examples of disobedience, and biblical instruction on divination.

### **THE PRACTICE OF DIVINATION IN THE BIBLE**

Divination, with its various forms, existed before the literary record, and survived throughout history. During the time of the Jewish people, the knowledge of divination existed, but they were not allowed to practise it, because of the warning (Deut 29:29).<sup>32</sup>

Sadly, the practice of divination began to creep into the Jewish community. This happened because of "a primitive state of mind and cult, in which the heathen and the Jewish elements are strangely blended; one can follow up, as it were, the transition from one to the other, but the people do not yet clearly distinguish between them".<sup>33</sup> According to what the Bible says, some prophets consulted Baal, Dagon, and other gods, and other prophets consulted the God of Israel.

There are diverse practices of divination which we can find in the Bible. These include "leconomancy" (Gen 44:5),<sup>34</sup> "belomancy" (Hosea 4:12),<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> M. Gaster, "Divination (Jewish)", in *The Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, vol 4, James Hastings, ed., Edinburgh UK: T. & T. Clark, 1908, p. 806.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Burke, "Divination in the ancient Near East", p. 242. Leconomancy is divination by means of liquid in a cup.

“oneiromancy” (1 Sam 28:6; Gen 37:5-11; 41:1-36),<sup>36</sup> “observing the action of animals” (1 Sam 6:7-12),<sup>37</sup> “budding plants” (Num 17:1-11),<sup>38</sup> “hepatoscopy” (Ezek 21:21-22),<sup>39</sup> “omens” (1 Sam 14:8-10),<sup>40</sup> “necromancy” (1 Sam 28),<sup>41</sup> “astrology” (Is 47:13; Dan 2:27-4:7),<sup>42</sup> “divination by ordeal,”<sup>43</sup> and “cleromancy.”<sup>44</sup>

### **WARNING AGAINST DIVINATION (DEUT 18:9-13)**

Even though there is mention of diverse practices of divination in the Bible, there is also a strong warning against them. Deut 18:9-13 is one of the passages to explore that really speaks against such practices.

Deuteronomy consists mostly of Moses’ sermons preached to the Israelites before his death, and before Joshua came to leadership, and conquered the land. The sermon is given purposefully to motivate the Israelites to be faithful and obedient to the covenant law that was given to them Mount Sinai.<sup>45</sup>

Having said that, Moses preached a strong sermon against seeking help and guidance apart from the Lord (Deut 18:9-13). This warning was given because most of the Israelites looked for answers in other places, such as from diviners.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid. Belomancy is divination by means of arrow.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. Oneiromancy is interpreting dreams.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. Hepatoscopy is looking in the liver.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Gaster, “Divination (Jewish)”, p. 809. Astrology is observation of stars and planets.

<sup>43</sup> Donald P. O’Mathuna, “Divination, Magic”, in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch*, Alexander T. Desmond, and David W. Baker, eds, Downer Grove IL: IVP, 2003, p. 195. Divination by ordeal is where people, suspected of crimes, would undergo some process that would normally injure them.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. Cleromancy is divination by casting lots.

<sup>45</sup> *The ESV Study Bible*, Westchester IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008, p. 326.

Firstly, Moses warned them that such practices are detestable to the Lord (vv. 10-12). This is the reason why the Lord judged Canaan. Therefore, they must not be involved in what the Lord forbids.

Secondly, he warned that those practices are harmful, and involve human sacrifice. That is the case with sorcery and witchcraft, which involve satanic activity. He also warned them not to make contact with the dead, which the spiritist and medium were doing, because they can affect the lives of innocent people. If anyone was found guilty of involvement in such practices, they must be cut off from God's community (v. 10). "Divination and magic are dangerous, because they bring people into contact with evil spiritual beings and forces".<sup>46</sup> The Bible affirms that people can be controlled by their powers.

Thirdly, according to the context, the "warning about divination, discovering the divine mind, is set between passages concerning the appropriate and acceptable way for the Israelites to discern God's will, through the ministry of priests and prophets".<sup>47</sup> The priest represents the people before the Lord. The people consult him to find out the purpose and will of God for their lives (Mal 2:6-7). "The prophet came out from the audience chamber of the Lord into the presence of the waiting congregation."<sup>48</sup> He is the person responsible to speak "in the name of the Lord" (Deut 18:22). Therefore, the people have to listen to him, to know his thoughts concerning any issue.

Moses concluded by drawing the Israelites' attention to the Canaanites' situation that God is going to drive them out from their land, because of such evil practices that make them detestable before God (v. 12). Therefore, for the Israelites, they must be blameless, and not mingle with the practices of the surrounding nations, to avoid God's judgment (v. 13).

This warning also applies to us, as Christians, not to consult diviners for guidance, because it brings God's judgment upon our lives. We need to

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<sup>46</sup> O'Mathuna, "Divination, Magic", p. 196.

<sup>47</sup> Raymond Brown, *The Message of Deuteronomy: Not by Bread Alone*, The Bible Speaks Today, Leicester UK: IVP, 1993, p. 185.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

study and listen to God's Word to guide us to find His will and purpose for our lives on any issue.

### **EXAMPLE OF DISOBEDIENCE (1 SAM 28:3-25)**

The warnings against using mediums, spiritists, or diviners were clearly stated in the Pentateuch (Lev 19:31; Deut 18:9-13). Probably, many Israelites would have known them, including their kings. For this reason, we see in this passage, "Saul had expelled the mediums and spiritists from the land" (1 Sam 28:3). The law also instructed the Israelites to consult either priest or prophet for guidance on any issue. But the passage informs us that the prophet Samuel, the only trusted prophet at that time, was dead (v. 3). An issue arose, with which Saul and the Israelites had to deal, that is, the Philistines were setting their camp to battle against the Israelites (v. 4). The challenging question, for which Saul needed an answer, was: Who should he consult for guidance? God did not respond to him, through the ministry of the priest (Urim) and prophet (v. 6). In order to trust God to fight on their behalf, based on His covenant promises (Ex 14:13-14; Num 14:9; Josh 10:8), Saul failed. "In his desperation, Saul turns to a pagan practice that he himself had previously outlawed (v.3), in accordance with the Mosaic law."<sup>49</sup> Saul then said to his attendants, "Find me a woman, who is a medium, so I may go and inquire of her"(v. 7).

Sadly, after the consultation, the response Saul received was not satisfactory. Samuel openly confirmed to him that the Lord had departed from him, and had torn the kingdom out of his hands, and had given it to David. The Lord will also deliver them into the hand of the Philistines, including he, himself, his sons, and the Israelites (vv. 16-19). "Saul's excursion into forbidden occult territory brought him no joy, no reassurance, and, indeed, no benefit at all, but only further despair."<sup>50</sup> Saul had to face the consequence of his disobedience and sin, as promised in the Law of Moses. "Saul died, because he was unfaithful to the LORD; he did not keep the word of the LORD, and even consulted a medium for guidance, and did not inquire of the LORD. So the LORD put him to death, and turned the

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<sup>49</sup> *The NIV Study Bible*, Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1989, p. 453.

<sup>50</sup> Mary J. Evans, *The Message of Samuel*, The Bible Speaks Today, Leicester UK: IVP, 2004, p. 155.

kingdom over to David, son of Jesse” (1 Chron 10:13-14). Saul’s life showed a clear example of how God deals with those who disobey His Word, and seek guidance from a medium or diviner.

## **SUMMARY**

In this section on a biblical reflection on divination, we are firstly informed that, even though diverse practices of divination are mentioned in the Bible, God prohibited them from among His people. God wants the Israelites to be blameless, not to mingle with other nations’ religions (Deut 18:9), because they are harmful. If Israel did so, God would judge them, as He did those surrounding nations (Deut 18:12-13). Any person, who was found to be involved in such practices must be cut off from the community (Lev 20:6). Secondly, God did want His people to know His will and purpose for their lives. Therefore, He chose to reveal it through the ministries of priests and prophets. People needed to listen to the words of the priests and prophets, for they were God’s messengers, but they should not consult diviners. Lastly, Saul’s example showed how serious God deals with those who consult mediums for guidance.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

By looking at the divination practices among the Akey people, and the reasons why they are so attracted to a diviner, plus its consequences in the church, and the biblical reflection on divination, we have an overall background on the subject. That information enables us to identify weaknesses, and be able to suggest some recommendations to improve the situation. In the recommendations, we will be looking at the biblical response to divination, and a biblical approach to guidance.

## **BIBLICAL RESPONSE TO DIVINATION**

Robb states that “Spirit mediums are satan’s ‘hatchet men’, human instruments, by which he extends his dominion, and tightens his control in a society”.<sup>51</sup> With that challenging statement in mind, Christians need to give

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<sup>51</sup> John Robb, “Satan’s Tactics in Building and Maintaining His Kingdom of Darkness”, in *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 10-4 (October 1993), p. 178; [http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs\\_IJFM/10\\_4\\_PDFs/05\\_Robb.pdf](http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/10_4_PDFs/05_Robb.pdf) (accessed March 9, 2013).

a biblical response to minimise the issue at hand. This section gives responses to some of the wrong ideologies assumed to be contributing factors in relying on divination.

Firstly, divination is forbidden, because it is based on human effort. People are seeking to control their lives, and, as a result, different form of beliefs and practices are emerging. For example, if a person wants to protect his life from sickness, he has to make sacrifices to ancestors or spirits, or seek a diviner. But, for us Christians, we need to submit ourselves to God, and have faith in His plan concerning our lives (Is 8:19-22; Jer 27:9-10; Rev 21:8).<sup>52</sup>

Secondly, people seek diviners, mostly for healing and prosperity. But they forget that, after the fall, sickness, suffering, death, poverty, starvation, and so on, became part of the world. They are the consequences of sin. On one hand, we are subject to sicknesses, to suffering, to death, and so on. No one can be free, and escape from them. But, on the other hand, Jesus came “to preach good news to the poor . . . to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed” (Luke 4:18). So, we are living between two worlds. We may still continue to face challenges today, due to the fallen world, but we need to live with kingdom expectations. Because, when Christ returns, we will experience the fullness of life that He promised (Rev 12:10).<sup>53</sup> Having said that, it does not mean that God cannot heal. God does heal, either in the present by a miracle, or in the future, after death, when believers receive new bodies. In addition, it is also important to note that sometimes God does allow Christians to be sick, or suffer, to draw them to Himself, and to teach them patience and maturity (Job 42:5-6; James 1:2-4).<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Paul G. Hiebert, Daniel R. Shaw, Tite Tienou, “Responding to Split-Level Christianity and Folk Religion”, in *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 16-4 (Winter 1999/2000), p. 174;

[http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs\\_IJFM/16\\_4\\_PDFs/02\\_Hiebert\\_Shaw\\_Tienou.pdf](http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/16_4_PDFs/02_Hiebert_Shaw_Tienou.pdf) (accessed March 9, 2013).

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

Lastly, people are tempted to seek anything that has power to fix their problems. Therefore, they seek diviners, with the belief that they have power for prosperity, health, success, and control over life. In terms of power, Christians should understand that our God is Almighty (El Shaddai) (Gen 17:1). He is the creator, and not a creature, such as diviners and spirits. He defeated satan (John 16:33). He is “continually involved in His creation, by His providence, presence, and power”,<sup>55</sup> and nothing happens without His control. Therefore, we need to rely on Him in all circumstances in lives.

### **BIBLICAL APPROACH TO GUIDANCE**

People want to know their future, and the will of the spirits or gods, concerning their lives, so that they can make right decisions. Therefore, they seek guidance from diviners. Similarly, as Christians, God also wants us to know our future, and His will concerning our lives, to make right decisions. But the questions are, how does He reveal His will, and how can we know it, since there are no priests and prophets?

God does reveal His will, and the scriptures are the means whereby He reveals it. God also provided the church, where people can seek, encourage, and give advice to one another, and make decisions according to God’s will. These are done through listening to God’s word, in prayer and discernment. In doing so, people need to be sensitive to God’s open and closed doors in circumstances, for these can change plans. As special creatures of God, with minds and hearts, we can discern His will through a still, small, convincing voice, and act upon it with faith that God will lead us.<sup>56</sup>

Furthermore, the use of other spiritual gifts, such as prophecies, words of knowledge, visions, dreams, speaking in tongues, and demonstrations of power, are other means to obtain God’s guidance. Even though there is much discussion about them today, it is hard to deny the fact that God can still use them in different circumstances to guide His people. Having mentioned that, it is important to note that these are the ways that satan also

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174.

<sup>56</sup> Hiebert, *Understanding Folk Religion*, p. 193.

imitates for his personal gain. Therefore, it is important to always check their origins. God's guidance comes only through a relationship with Him, and through spiritual growth. That is when we gave Him a priority place in our lives, and discern His will through prayer and study of His Word.<sup>57</sup>

### **SUMMARY**

This essay has had five sections, and each section has dealt with different topics. The first section surveyed the divination practices among the Akey people. It included their cultural beliefs, which are rooted in spirits, and their intermediaries, the diviners. The purpose of guidance focuses on health and prosperity. There are many practices within organic and mechanical methods used to obtain guidance.

The second section dealt with the reasons people are attracted to diviners. It is because they are naturally rooted in cultural beliefs, and in getting quick responses from diviners. Some of the guidance in their lives was proven to be true.

The third section looked at divination's consequences in the church. Based on the influence of divination, it has caused people to give diviners priority in their lives. They misunderstand the scriptures, which then weakens their faith, and ends with withdrawal of many good churchgoers from the church.

The fourth section gave a biblical reflection on divination. Although there are diverse practices of divination mentioned in the Bible, there is also a strong warning given against such practices (Deut 18:9-13). Despite such warnings, 1 Sam 28:3-25 shows the example the disobedience of Saul, in his consulting of a medium, and how God dealt with him.

The last section contained recommendations. In the biblical response to divination, the divination was viewed as a human effort to control life rather than to submit to the Lord's control. People long for present health and prosperity, rather than to hope for that of the kingdom. The challenges may come, but people need to submit themselves under the care of God, for He is Almighty, and nothing happens without His control. A biblical approach to

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 194.

guidance is provided, which only comes through a relationship with God, and through spiritual growth. That is when priority in our lives is given to our Lord, and the discernment of His will through prayer and study of His Word.

## **CONCLUSION**

We conclude by summarising the three motivating questions that have been raised to guide the research into the goal, which is “A Biblical Response to Divination in the Churches Among the Akey People in Santo Island in Vanuatu”.

Firstly, why are people so attracted to a diviner? Based on the survey of the Akey people’s cultural background, people are attracted to a diviner, because they are naturally rooted in their cultural belief, specifically belief in the spirits. This belief is rooted in the very fabric of their lives, their surroundings and nature, and the ways they cope with life. The next attractive factor is getting quick responses, and the fact that those responses have sometimes proved to be true, has had major influences in their lives.

Secondly, what does the Bible say about divination? The Bible strongly warns us not to consult diviners for guidance, because it is detestable to the Lord, harmful to our lives, and brings God’s judgment upon our lives. The story of Saul well illustrates the way God deals with those who consult diviners (1 Chron 10:13-14).

Finally, what recommendations are for those who are bound to the system of divination? When situations occur in our lives, it is important to know that they are part of the fallen world, and nothing happens without God’s control. So, as Christians, we need to submit ourselves to God, and have faith in His plan concerning our lives. We need to seek guidance in the community of faith, and also through listening to God’s word, in prayer and discernment. For God’s guidance comes only through relationship with Him, and in spiritual growth.

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