

Throwing the Bones

January 2006

While visiting in the town of Eshowe in South Africa, brother Paul K. Williams and I visited the local Zulu museum. On display was a collection of small bones, coins and stones. Brother Williams explained that these were common implements used by witch doctors. If one wanted to know the will of the gods, the witch doctor (usually female, and usually afflicted with mental illness) would ingest a drug that would alter her state of consciousness and make her vomit. Then she would “throw the bones.” The pattern of the scattered items supposedly revealed divine guidance in the matter.

This is no different in principle from “reading” the livers of sacrificed animals (an ancient Roman practice), tarot cards, the palm of the hand, horoscopes or tea leaves in order to glean some supposed insight. And while we may scoff at such nonsense, we must remember that people today still take such hocus-pocus seriously (remember how Nancy Reagan set the President’s schedule?).

More tragically, if the witch doctor tells you that the cure for AIDS is to rape a virgin, *and you believe that the witch doctor speaks for the gods*, then the clear facts of medical science will fall on deaf ears. Or if the witch doctor tells you that smearing the fat of a child offered as a burnt sacrifice throughout the interior of your taxi will protect you from a fatal accident, *and you believe that the witch doctor speaks for the gods*, then children will mysteriously disappear from the streets (these are both taking place in South Africa).

Such ignorance enslaves men to superstition and self-will. Bones, tarot cards, crystal balls and such like are mental prisons that torture the innocent, subject the simple to the whims of fate and clog the mind with meaningless mumbo-jumbo.

What wonderful depth to the promise of Jesus: *“If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free”* (Jn 8:31-32). The truth makes us free from the dominion of sin by revealing the acts of an atoning Savior. But it also sets us free from the perverse precepts of men, the restless quest for wisdom that keeps meandering into intellectual cul-de-sacs only to backtrack time and time again when proven wrong.

What a joy to know the true God who has freely shared with us everything worth knowing. Such knowledge is not invested in the doctors of witchery or theology; it is not the special revelation of evil men who persuade the naïve to relinquish their thinking to them. Rather, it is truth that lays on our coffee tables and rests on our bookshelves patiently waiting to be discovered by the diligent seeker: *“Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth”* (2 Tim 2:15).

Too, what a joy to serve a powerful God who oversees our lives and guides us along the path while still honoring our free will. God allows us to be tempted but governs its intensity (1 Cor 10:13). God allow us to experience trials so that they might produce patience (Jas 1:2-4). God may allow afflictions to continue that we might be humble and recognize our dependency upon Him (2 Cor 12:7-10). What a relief to know that our lives are not determined by mindless forces that wreak havoc and inflict injury for no ultimate purpose – or worse, that we are the hapless victims of demonic forces bent upon our suffering and destruction.

God’s truth is liberating, benevolent, comforting. It is not without its duties, however. But they are duties lovingly lavished upon the God who saved us and set us free.