
A Biblical perspective on the meaning of the word pharmakeia-sorcery and its implications today

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Abstract

The Greek word pharmakeia and its related meanings in the Christian Bible, more specifically in Revelation 18:23, formed the basis for the belief that it is directly related to the measures of and medical interventions used to address the Covid-19 pandemic in which big pharma played a major role. This study will investigate the word pharmakeia in the passages of the Bible with the view to understand the context in which it is used as well as its meaning to determine its relevance today. Although the word pharmacy and pharmaceutical products are derived from the word pharmakeia they cannot explicitly be linked in the text of the Bible to refer to big pharma. This, however, does not mean that the word and its variants do not carry implicit applications that can be to the detriment of Christian believers today. The word pharmakeia in the Bible is related to occult and pagan worship practices. Although these practices do not refer to pharmaceuticals only, they included practices that involved conscience-altering drugs and narcotics containing poisonous elements. These practices were always related to the magic realm which made participants susceptible to the influence of the demonic world. Similarly, one can conclude that policymakers and influential role players during the pandemic through magical maneuvers of mass media propaganda proverbially “cast a spell” on the world’s population causing humans to act uniformly across the world as if they had been captured.

Opsomming

Die Griekse woord farmakeia in die Bybel word meesal vertaal as waarsêery, medisyne of dwelmmiddel en die spesifieke verwysing in Openbaring 18:23 het tot gevolg gehad dat die woord en sy betekenis direk verbind is aan die farmaseuties maatskappye wat 'n rol gespeel het in die maatreëls van en oplossing vir die Covid-19 pandemie. Die studie het die woord ondersoek asook die konteks waarin dit gebruik word en gebruike daarvan ten einde die relevansie daarvan vas te stel. Alhoewel die woord farmasie en farmaseutiese maatskappy hulle oorsprong van die woord kry kan die woord farmakeia in die Bybel nie direk met moderne farmaseutiese reuse verbind word nie. Dit beteken egter nie dat daar nie hedendaagse implisiete toespansings is van die nadelige praktyke wat geassosieer word met die woord en sy variante. Alhoewel die woord farmakeia verwys na die okkulte en heidense aanbiddingspraktyke in die Bybel en nie uitsluitlik net na farmaseutiese produkte nie, sluit dit wel dwelmmiddels en giftige narkotiese middele in. Verder was die praktyke altyd verbind met towery wat die deelnemer meer ontvanklik maak vir beïnvloeding vanuit die demoniese wêreld. Soortgelyk het die beleidmakers en invloedrykes gedurende die pandemie deur hulle kragtige media-propaganda “toorkuns” die wêreld bevolking spreekwoordelik betower en veroorsaak dat mense dwarsoor die wêreld universeel opgetree het.

1. Introduction

The word *pharmakēia* has received huge amounts of searches online since the beginning and throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. The purpose of these searches seemed to determine if there can be any correlation between the push on medical intervention by big pharma during the pandemic and sorcery or the Greek word *pharmakeia* with its meanings in the Bible. On the website of Religion News Service, there was a 193% increase in searches for the term ‘sorcery’ in 2021 (Miller McFarlan, 2021). Some found a connection and propagated that the push by big pharma with regards to the measures of and solution to the pandemic is related to what the Bible says in Revelation 18:23 that the whole world is deceived by the sorcery (*pharmakeia*) of great men. One prominent medical professional, Sherri Tenpenny, used the term *pharmakeia* in an interview concluding that the Pastors, Priests, and Rabbis that closed their sanctuaries during the Covid-19 pandemic and

opened them later as vaccination centers played into the hands of these sorcerers that pushed the vaccinations (Miller McFarland, 2021). This increase in the search for answers is understandable in the light that there was an almost deafening silence from the cadres of the Christian leaders, at least on mainstream media, and marked this time as, for a substantial number of Christians, a time of uncertainty which meant they were begging for clarity. Others believe that the term *pharmakēia* from which the words pharmaceutical and pharmacy are derived has no connotation with any evil intentions or with the occult since in modern terms it has a different purpose, namely, to give relief from illness.

Of particular interest to this study is to understand the word *pharmakēia* in its different forms in the Bible and the practices to which it is related in ancient times that were the context of the Bible passages as well as its relevance for today.

2. *Pharmakeia* in the Bible

The Greek word *φάρμακεια* – *pharmakēia* frequently translated as “*witchcraft*” or “*sorcery*” and other variants thereof such as *pharmakon* and *pharmakos* appear several times in the Old Testament and five times in the New Testament. To understand the meaning and relevance of the term, three important aspects are needed, namely, how it is translated, what practices are involved, and the significance of it in our day.

The word *pharmakeia* in Scripture carries a negative view in that when translated as a drug that is linked to sorcerers, it relates to practices of and participants in the occult. Wuest (1984:157) points out that “*Pharmakeia* speaks in general of the use of drugs, whether helpfully by a physician or harmfully by someone whose purpose it is to inflict injury. In the Septuagint (LXX), the word is uniformly used in a bad sense”. The use of the word *pharmakeia* in the Septuagint (LXX) refers to the pagan nations during the Old Testament times that employed such strategies. It is because of the multitude of her sorceries that her destruction has come (Isa. 47:9). Reference is made to Pharaoh of Egypt that used sorcerers or magicians to contest with Moses (Exodus 7:11, 22; 8:7, 18), and of the Babylonians a multitude of sorceries and enchantments (Isaiah 47:9, 12) (Maxey, 2012). In the Aramaic section in Daniel 2:27 and 5:7 and 5:8, it refers to an occultist.

The word *pharmakeia* or *pharmakos* are used in five passages in the New Testament. In the context of these passages, the word *Pharmakeia* is used

to refer to the use of drugs either for medicine, poison or magic, magic art or sorcery (Gal 5:20, Rev 9:21, 18:23). Pharmakos found in Rev 21:8 and 22:15 refers to one who is skilled in arcane uses of herbs and drugs probably for the reasons of poisoning or one who does extraordinary things through occult means, a sorcerer, magician (Danker, 2000:1049-1050; Strong, 1986; Reinecker, 1976). Pharmakon can mean a harmful drug or a drug as a controlling medium, magic potion or charm, a healing remedy, or medicine.

In general terms, *pharmakeia* refers to actions that can include mind-altering drugs as part of some ritualistic or pagan religion always related to the magic realm. Sorcerers or priest-physicians used to induce altered states of consciousness, visions, and healings to make contact with the demonic realm. Sorcerers also used drugs themselves to enable them to see visions or make contact with the spiritual world but also served that to those who required the same ecstasy. Sorcery *per se* describes an occult practice in which the adherents claim to have supernatural powers and knowledge, including the ability to foretell the future and summon evil spirits through charms and magical spells (Precept Austin, 2022). Sorcerers were traditionally feared because of their knowledge of the occult and poisons that could lead to death (Melton, 2022).

Sorcery for some did not refer to actions that evoke supernatural power and spells but rather to different forms of drug abuse or addiction as was evident in practices of pagan worship. Therefore, the distinction between illicit and prescription drugs must be made. Others hold the view that sorcery in the context of the Bible refers to a wide spectrum that includes herbal medicines, psychoactive plants, and even poisons to cast spells (Anon, 2022). Kistemaker (2001:203) points out that the word *pharmakeia* in the book of Revelation refers to a magical tradition of herbs [which even could include psychoactive plants] gathered and prepared for a spell. It is also used to encourage the presence of [evil] spirits. Zodiates (1994:1437, 1438) argues along the same line and adds that it refers to illicit pharmaceuticals used to induce a trance [or altered state of consciousness] as well as magical incantation and the invoking of spirits. Pharmakon translated as a drug in the book of Revelation according to Rafalsky (2019:8) may refer to legitimate medicine and its cognate words to magic, including the deception resulting from this magic. He further points out that in the Old Testament times, it is associated with demons that could infiltrate the community, therefore sorcery was a capital crime in ancient Israel (Ex 22:18).

Different scholars and commentaries all point to sorcery, meaning the practices that often involved drugs to attain an altered state of consciousness

to make contact with the demonic realm, to cast spells or divination that was part of occult practices. The word drug could either refer to medicine or psychoactive drugs of which *Papaver Somniferum*, opium, and cannabis were the most common in the ancient world, with opium probably used the most (Merlin, 2003).

2.1 Medicines and a prominent healing cult in the ancient world

In ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, the cause for the disease was believed to be the consequence of sin, an attack by an angry ghost or devil, or some god that was offended. At first in the ancient world, death and serious diseases were not regarded as human phenomena. Illness was categorized into two broad categories, common sickness, and serious or disabling illness. Common sicknesses such as constipation and colds were part of human existence and were treated with herbal remedies. But serious or disabling illnesses were supernatural and caused either by a spell that was cast upon the person, a demon, or a god that was offended and succeeded in extracting the soul of the person. Such a person was healed by luring the errant soul back into its rightful place in the body or extracting the evil spirit by counterspells, incantations, potions, suction, or other means (Richardson, Guthrie, Rhodes, Thomson, Archibald & Underwood, 2022: par 3).

According to Egyptian belief, the human body was full of passages that acted like irrigation canals that sometimes became blocked by evil forces and caused illness. Laxatives were used that induced vomiting and open canals (Lambert, 2021), or magic and religion to undo the work of evil forces and angry gods. In ancient Greece, the magic realm of superstition, incantations, dreams, astrology, and sorcery played a major part in herbal medicine (Christodoulou, 2021, Cartwright, 2018). Also, a collection of non-medical methods and superstitious beliefs related to geography, social class, gender, local traditions, and negative and positive aspects of diet were used. Physical healing and spiritual healing in the ancient world were inseparable. Spiritual healing was needed to free a person from discomfort or harm from angry or offended gods. This was generally obtained through magic prayers so that energetic influence was obtained from outside the natural human realm to protect their health. Herb and plant root remedies played a vital role in physical healing. Two types of merchants were involved with herbs and root medicine, namely the root cutters or *rhizotomoi* and the drug sellers or *pharmakopolai* who believed that nature is directed by an unpredictable and powerful force. It was in the agora – marketplace, where these root cutters and drug sellers functioned as highly knowledgeable people in herbs. Herb plants according to them possessed inherent magic and conveyed divine

messages to avoid disaster. Hippocrates and Theophrastus, both doctors in ancient Greece, believed in the medicinal benefits of herbs. One such plant was “Peony (*Paeonia officinalis*) [that] was widely used for medicine and magic. As a medicine, a decoction of the root was used for inducing or regulating menstrual flow, easing inflamed kidneys and jaundice, soothing diarrhea, and helping remove the afterbirth after delivery” (Christodoulou, 2021: par 6). Peony was believed to have magical powers and was worn by a person to keep them protected from the spells of witches, and assaults from devils, and the location where the plant grew in the mountains was free of devils (Dioscorides, Osbaldeston, & Wood, 2000:530). The Romans used a wide range of herbal remedies including fennel to calm the nerves, elecampane for digestive problems, garlic for the heart, fenugreek for lungs and pneumonia, silphium for fever, cough, indigestion, a sore throat, aches and pains, and warts, and willow was used as an antiseptic. In the time that Nero ruled in Rome, a physician and pharmacologist by the name of Pedanius Dioscorides, practiced medicine in Rome. From his pen came the five-volume pharmacopeia known as “De Materia Medica” which lists more than 600 herbal cures that have been used by doctors for 1500 years (Brazier, 2018(b)). During this time the famous physician Hippocrates compiled medical treatises. From this and other inscriptions, it is evident in ancient healthcare that *“physicians knew that lancing, draining and cleaning infected wounds promoted healing and that they knew of certain herbs that had healing and disinfecting properties. Wild ginger was known to be helpful for nausea, and a particular clay found on the Greek island of Lemnos was believed to be helpful for ailments such as dysentery. This clay, called terra sigillata for the stamped discs that were formed from it and sold as medicine, contains the counterpart to elements such as kaolin and bentonite, which are used in modern medicines to treat diarrhea”* (Yeomans, 2022: par 3).

Medicine in the form of a pill as we know it is first mentioned in the Egyptian medical papyri, a 110-page-long papyrus scroll from the second millennium B.C. dating back to the ninth year of the reign of Pharaoh Amenophis I (1525-1504 B.C.) published by Georg Ebers 1875. The Eber’s document as it is called contains more than seven hundred remedies and magic formulas and many incantations had the purpose of keeping away demons that cause illness. Before that time Mesopotamian, Sumerian, Babylonian and Assyrian medicaments all used liquid preparations as they knew nothing about pills. *“One cuneiform tablet suggests the following for an undisclosed ailment: “Pulverize the seed of the carpenter plant, the gum resin of the markasi plant, and thyme; dissolve in beer; let the man drink.”* (Griffenhagen, 2002: par 1).

In the ancient world, illness was either treated through confession, or recitation of magic spells by the physician-priest that included rituals such as incantations, offerings, and amulets (Watterson, 2013; Mark, 2023 par 6). Curses were written on lead, tin, or papyri to expel the demon of disease as early as the fifth century B.C. in the Greek world (Regents of the University of Michigan, 2017). Brazier (2018(a)) believes that magic for those that were subjected to it had a placebo effect on the receiver that may have produced healing.

A very important healing cult known as the cult of Asclepius established in the sixth century B.C. in the ancient Greek city of Epidauros not only influenced the ancient world but even modern medical practices. The cult worshipped the ancient Greek god of healing and medicine, Asclepius. The Temple of Asklepios at Epidauros functioned successfully as a healing center and as a result of the management of its priests the cult's temples and sanctuaries spread all over the Greco-Roman world (Kelly, 2022: par 2). In the first century, Greek medicine and healing philosophy's belief that the god Asclepius was a highly skilled doctor and dispenser of healing became popular. Cartwright (2018: par 3) explains that Asclepius "was called upon by patients at his various sanctuaries such as Epidauros in Greece and Pergamon in Turkey to give the patient advice through dreams which the site practitioners could then act upon". According to archeologists, more than seven hundred sites that housed these Asclepeia or sanitariums where the sick would travel to obtain health and healing were found in the ancient Greek Empire (Mckeown, 2017). These sanitariums or healing temples consisted of a temple, and dining rooms (triclinic) on the lower level that opened up onto the portico and pool, each was equipped with stone coaches along the inner walls, it had what we know as spa baths and resembled a prototype of modern health resorts, that provided diets of healthy food (Richardson *et al.*, 2022). Another important part was the abaton or dormitory intended for "temple sleep" or "incubation" and meditation. Before entering the abaton the person that desired healing had to be purified by the holy waters that flowed from the sacred fountains of the sanctuary (Kelly, 2022). It is here where Asclepius or one of his priests would reveal the correct remedies for healing (Richardson *et al.* 2022, Kelly, 2022). Sacrifices and supplications for healing were made to the gods at altars in the temples. Another part of the healing ritual involved the sacred snakes of Asclepius at Epidauros. "The snakes were a symbol of rejuvenescence (for the snake shedding its skin was believed to renew its youth) and blessed serpents were housed in the temples of the god; the snakes were thought to heal the sick by licking them. The symbol of the staff of Asclepius (Rod of Asclepius) entwined with

a snake is still today associated with medical organizations” (Kelly, 2022: par 6).

When healing took place, a testimonial offering known as “anatomic supplications” was made – that is an image of a body part that was healed and formed with Terra Cotta clay. Many of these parts found at the excavated site of the Asclepeion testify to the belief of the ancient people that this procedure worked (Crossan and Reed, 2005:301-302, Yeomans, 2022: par 2). A documented account of the healing powers of Asclepius is that of Antikrates from Knidos on the southwest coast of Anatolia. He was struck by a spear in the head that could not be removed and as a result, he lost his vision. As last resort, he decided to undertake the long journey to one of the healing sanctuaries in Epidaurus in Greece believing he could be healed by Asclepius. Adhering to the custom he slept in the sanctuary probably in a drugged state caused by opium and dreamed that Asclepius healed him. When he woke up, he was healed and the spearhead was removed from his head (Wickksen, 2005). One of these Asclepeions was located a quarter mile from the Corinthian forum in Corinth near a spring and shaded area with the abaton where patients slept for a few days, most waiting on Asclepius for healing insights (Crossan & Reed, 2005:302).

Asklepios was joined in the healing cult of Greece from 500 B.C. to 500 A.D. by the goddess of health Hygieia. According to Beumer, (2011: par 1) *“She was connected with Asklepios in the 5th century B.C., and together they became the most famous healing couple within the Greek and Roman world”*. Panakeis also joined Asklepios and Hygieia and this is evident from the Oath of Hippocrates which states: “I swear by Apollo, the healer, Asclepius, Hygieia, and Panakeia, and I take to witness all the gods, all the goddesses, to keep according to my ability and my judgment, the following Oath and agreement.” (Narsaria, 2015) (Beumer, 2011: par 1). Asclepius was believed to be the divine patron of healing.

Medical thought developed and around 460 B.C. conceptions based on magic and religion were partly discarded but never fully and seem to have been practiced until at least the fourth century A.D. The works of Hippocrates (460-337 B.C.) introduced the stage where the disease was viewed as a natural rather than a supernatural phenomenon and physicians had to look for physical causes for disease.

Although herbal remedies played an important role in ancient healing, they seemed to always have been linked to the magical realm, in the sense that physical healing of the body through herbal or root remedies included the

religious or spiritual restoration of the relationship with offended gods and goddesses through magic and occult practices.

2.2 *Pharmakeia as medicine or poison*

The word *pharmakeia* as medicine can be defined as a substance in different forms of herbal or root remedies that could cure infirmities in the ancient world. On the other hand, *pharmakeia* also refers to a harmful drug or poison. Rossi (2022: par 2) describes it as “medicine that was not always exclusively associated with the art of healing but also a harmful substance that was used where magic was involved that could bring about pain or even death”. The word *pharmakon* in Egypt comes from the expression “magician’s remedy” which can mean “medicine in a positive sense, or a venom or poison in a negative sense”. Books containing an official list of medicinal drugs (*pharmacopoeias*) in ancient Egypt and Greece indicate the frequent use of these kinds of drugs, sedatives, pain relievers, or narcotics, containing poisonous elements. Potions with harmful components were commonly used by authorities in Ancient Civilizations to incite death, alleviate misfortunes, suppress suffering, and overcome fear (Rossi, 2022).

Abortifacient drugs used in the Greco-Roman world can be related to *pharmakeia*. Abortion in the ancient world was a common practice. Hippocrates (460-359 B.C.) opposed abortion as is evident from the Oath of Hippocrates “Neither will I administer a poison to anybody when asked to do so nor will I suggest such a course, similarly, I will not give a woman a pessary to cause abortion”. Some physicians according to Noonan (1970:5) also refrained from prescribing abortifacient drugs based on their adherence to the oath. Not everyone was against abortion and the administering of abortifacient drugs in the Greco-Roman world. Plato (427-347 B.C.) and Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) admonished people not to conceive but if it could not be prevented, they should dispose of the fetus with this condition that abortion must be practiced before sensation or life (Plato, 2013:467; Aristotle, 1932:623-624). The view that family should be limited was the order of the day amongst the ancient Greeks. This limitation was achieved either by contraception, abortion through the use of abortifacient drugs, or infanticide (Durant, 1939; Bates and Zawanski, 1964).

The Roman Empire was heavily influenced by the Hellenistic culture and at the military height of the Roman Empire and moral depravity, abortion increased and nobles used abortion to control families while physicians compiled manuals for abortions used by prostitutes and women (Durant, 1944: 313, 364). The Romans admitted that an abortifacient drug was used

for abortions (Bates & Zawandski, 1964:17). Although the Cornelian Law (80 B.C.) was passed against abortifacient drugs it was aimed at preventing harm to mothers.

Christian fathers seemed to understand the word *pharmakeia* or at least one of the meanings of the word as referring to abortifacient drugs. To refer to two patristic fathers who use the term abortifacient drugs (*pharmakois*): Clemens of Alexandria observed “But women who resort to some sort of deadly abortion drug (*pharmakois*) kill not only the embryo but, along with that all human kindness” (Wood, 1954:173-174). John Chrysostom uses *pharmakeia* to mean abortifacient drugs in his Homilies on Romans (Schaff, n.d.). The Didache implies that performing abortions, doing magic, and *pharmakeo* are closely related. According to Hawks (1979:41), “... the Didache associates the larger practice of drug use with the specific practice of abortion. *Pharmakeia* is the condemnation of the general use of potions by the direct practice of abortion. It seems that the Didache was denouncing the general practice of using drug potions specifically as they were used to cause an abortion”. The verb ‘*Pharmakeo*’ does not appear to be restricted to the use of abortifacients, however, in the ancient mind an illicit drug seemed acceptable to induce abortions.. Another church father Athenagoras also referred to drugs that induced abortion “[When he says] that women who use drugs to bring on abortion commit murder and will have to give an account to God for the abortion” (Athenagoras, *A Plea for the Christians* 35 [A.D. 177]). “There are some [pagan] women who, by drinking medical preparations, extinguish the source of the future man in their very bowels and thus commit a parricide before they bring forth. And these things assuredly come down from the teaching of your [false] gods. To us [Christians] it is not lawful either to see or hear of homicide” (Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 30 [A.D. 226]).

2.3 Drugs in religious ceremonies in the ancient world

Some scholars hypothesize that a correlation exists between consciousness-altering plants and initial human religious experience in religions such as Hinduism (Wasson,1968), Judaism (Dure, 2001), and Christianity (Allegro, 1970) were widely dismissed. Instead, an investigation of the role of psychoactive plants in the formation of spiritual concepts especially in the milieu of Judaic and Hellenistic healing cults, magic, and mystery initiations that implied sacred ethnopharmacology was conducted (Merlin, 2003:295). The different uses of psychoactive drugs in ancient times were not distinguished as medicinal, religious, or secular as in modern times. Psychoactive substances such as opium and cannabis used during rituals

would have included a medicinal purpose, seeing that physical healing was accompanied by religious ritual observance (Merlin, 2003; Sherratt, 1991,1995).

The best forms of obtaining evidence about the use of psychoactive plants in the ancient world are through archeology, artifactual and paleoethnobotanical evidence. Each of these approaches has advantages and disadvantages but a combination of both should provide the most reliable evidence (Merlin, 2003). Merlin (2003) alluded to the worldwide evidence found through these methods of evidence of psychoactive substances especially *Papaver Somniferum*, opium, and cannabis in different places such as Egypt, Greece, Spain, Turkey, and Iran (to mention a few) dating back as far as the 15th century B.C. Of special interest to this study is the discovery of a large Terra Cotta goddess statuette of approximately eighty centimeters at a cult chamber of the so-called “goddess of poppies” in Gazi, Crete dating back to 1300-1250 B.C. The figurine depicts a goddess with raised hands in a hallucinating state probably prophesying (Merrillees, 1999). Behn (1986:195) adds that she was wearing a diadem with three movable pins in the shape of a poppy capsule. Her facial expression, closed eyes, vague satisfied smile, and lifeless lips show good knowledge of the effects of the drug and suggest that the drug was used during ceremonies to reach ecstasy. At the same site, cylindrical engraved ivory vessels slightly tapered were found based on the traces of burning that are visibly similar to smoke stains caused when opium smoke was inhaled (Merlin, 1984). A further hint of probability that opium was used in this temple is the remains of coal found in the temple. The “goddess of poppies” can be regarded as the embodiment of either mystical ecstasy provoked by it or of its medicine (Behn, 1986:196). Hundreds of ceramic base ring juglets mostly similar in shape measuring 10-15 cm were found in tombs and settlements throughout much of the Middle East at sites in Syria, Palestine, and Egypt. Turned upside down the pear-shaped jug with a thin neck and round base resembled opium poppy pods. When some of these juglets were subjected to gas chromatography procedures in the 1980s and 1990s they turned up traces of opium. In Greece, the poppy plant had multiple uses such as medicine, secular, sacred, and food applications as well as in the worship of the goddess Demeter. The goddess’s connection is visible in her depiction with stemmed grains of wheat or barley and opium poppy capsules in her hands and headdresses. The opium poppy plant or capsule appears on Greek and Roman coins and even on Jewish coins dated in the 1st and 2nd century B.C. (Merlin, 1984). The Temple of the Holy-of-the-Holies at Krition was dedicated to the goddess of fertility of an Astarte type. During religious ceremonies, opium seems to be used in this temple

to provoke ecstasy and to achieve visions that cannot be obtained naturally. According to the *pharmakos* (pharmacist) *Kritikos* the priests or priestesses used the pipes and the worshippers the cylindrical vessels to inhale opium during these rituals. These vessels found at *Krition* and *Gazi* may be proof of such a practice where opium was used in the worship of the goddesses (Behn, 1986:195, 197).

In the ancient Greco-Roman world, the belief was present that higher supernatural entities are involved in maintaining the world and surrounding cosmos. The Romans adopted Greek gods and goddesses and gave them different names and a slight change of attributes (Mark, 2018). Religion was expressed in rituals in temples to gods and goddesses that were believed to ensure a peaceful and prosperous life. Mythology was indistinguishable from religion and supernatural entities were anthropomorphic and the way they acted toward humans portrayed their aversion or contentment with the values the people held (Mark, 2018). Mark (2018: par 2) describes pagan religion as “[a system that] concerns itself with the spiritual aspect of the human condition, gods and goddesses (or a single personal god or goddess), the creation of the world, a human being’s place in the world, life after death, eternity, and how to escape from suffering in this world or the next; and every nation has created its god in its image and resemblance.” The ancient world believed in many gods based on the belief that one god could not supply all human needs and that different gods with influence in different spheres of life are needed to ensure the wholeness of life. Supernatural entities rewarded people’s service to them by caring for their daily needs in life (Mark, 2018). Against this backdrop, people were seemingly involved in different ritual ceremonies to appease the gods or goddesses. The use of opium may have been a means to achieve an altered state of consciousness that embodied contact with the supernatural whereby the gods were appeased. Another drug called blue lotus was used by the ancient Egyptians to arouse their mood and made users more talkative and had a sedative quality that could make users enjoy a blissful experience. This drug was normally brewed in a tea or with alcohol that brought out the potency of the chemicals in it (Knox, 2016).

Prostitution and sexual immorality were associated with pagan ceremonies in the Greco-Roman world that most probably took place at the sites of fertility and other cults. Ferguson (1993:64) describes it as follows: “All kinds of immoralities were associated with the gods. Not only was prostitution a recognized institution, but through the influence of the fertility cults of Asia Minor, Syria, and Phoenicia it became a part of the religious rites at certain

temples. Thus, there were one thousand ‘sacred prostitutes’ at the temple of Aphrodite at Corinth”.

These practices of fornication and idolatry as part of pagan rituals were strongly condemned by the Old and New Testament as they were associated with demons.

2.4 Physicians and healing in the Bible

Ferngren (2009) did not find sufficient evidence to support the view that supernatural healing was the only healing in Bible times and that it was in opposition to natural healing. Despite the early Christian view on demon possession and miraculous healing, Ferngren (2009) argues that Christians accepted naturalistic assumptions about disease and used medical knowledge from the Greeks and Romans to care for the sick. Christians viewed illness as a natural occurrence although providential, and it was not always caused by sin (John 9:2) and deserved proper care and treatment by physicians with the distinction that they were not applying pagan practices in their treatment. Prayer, however, remained an important part of healing whether divine or through the hands of a physician. When medicine did not avail results, they waited on God in prayer for healing (Anno, 2019).

The people in the Old and New Testament times were familiar with doctors or physicians. The Hebrew word *rofe* is found several times in the Old Testament referring to someone who mends or cures. Broida (n.d: par 4) makes an interesting distinction between the word ‘physician’ to indicate a negative and positive rendering found in the Hebrew Old Testament. Firstly, he refers to one that is a physician and priest that engaged in techniques disapproved by God and seen as harmful to their relationship with Him. These practices involved invoking other gods, or magic. One such example is found in 2 Chronicles 16:12 where King Asa fell ill but did not seek God and instead went to physicians to get healed, thus choosing physicians above God. Ellicott’s Commentary for English Readers (2004) comments that “Asa, like Ahaziah, neglected to consult Jehovah through his priests, and preferred to trust in the “Healers” of his day, whose art of healing probably consisted in the use of magical appliances, such as amulets, charms, and exorcisms, as we may infer from the analogous practices of Babylon and Assyria”. Secondly, the Bible also shows a sympathetic view of doctors. Jeremiah in Jeremiah 8:22 acknowledges the value of balm and healing when he asks if there is no balm or ointment and where is the healer signifying the value of a physician’s prescription of balm. Balm here refers to the resinous gums of Gilead, important in the pharmacopoeia of Israel prescribed for the healing of

a wound. It was also exported to Egypt for the embalming of the dead. Yet in this case all of that will not help since Israel's suffering was caused by their sin. There is only one healer in this case and it is God.

Although the Hebrew Bible makes a strong connection between sin and disease and views it as the result of straying from God's commandment (Ex. 5:26), it does not teach that everybody that needs treatment is a sinner. Job is a classic example of this. As a righteous man, he suffered horrible sores and other miseries yet although he was suspected to have sinned by his friends, he was innocent. Generally, treatment of illness seemed to be done at home by family, through prophets or healers, and through miracles from God. They used prayers or other natural remedies. In the case of King Hezekiah's illness, the prophet Isaiah treated the illness by pressing figs on the sores but the king's life is saved and extended by a miracle from God (2 Kings 20:11-7, Isaiah 38:1-2) (Broida, n.d.).

Broida (n.d.) points out that healing through medical treatments in the Hebrew Bible was seen to draw the people's attention away from the healing power of God. This view developed and changed over time as a result of science and the influence of Greek philosophy as is visible in the apocryphal book of Ben Sira (180-200 B.C.) portraying physicians as a creation of God that need to be valued. This view seems not to be continued in the New Testament as is evident from Mark 5:25-26 where the woman with blood flow's consultation with physicians made her suffer even more, in contrast with the instant healing she receives from Jesus.

Healing in the Bible seems to be based on healing through physicians or healing cures or the intervention of God. Another means of obtaining healing was the belief that it could be obtained through occult practices. The word "occult" is generally defined as relating to, or dealing with secret or mysterious supernatural or magical influences, agencies, or occurrences (The Free Dictionary).

The word *pharmakeia* in the Septuagint, the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek, two or three centuries before the time of Jesus regularly translated Hebrew words for sorcery. Healing obtained through the occult or sorcery – practices dealing with demons and evil spirits are strongly forbidden in the Bible by the Law of Moses, as were all forms of magic (Ex. 22:18; Deut. 18:10, 11; 2 Chr. 33:6). The Israelites were warned to have nothing to do with such practices as is clear from Deuteronomy 18:9-12.

In the day of Paul, the realm of magic was common practice and included divination, astrology, and the occult. Sorcery involved images of people made

and destroyed, curses placed on people through the invoking of powers of darkness. People believed that the wearing of amulets and charms would protect them against the effects of spells and witchcraft. In the book of Acts, several examples are evident: Simon the sorcerer (Acts 8), the Sons of the chief priest Sceva (Acts 19:19), and the sorcerer Elymas that attempted to prohibit Paul and Barnabas from bringing the word to the proconsul Sergius Paulus (Acts 13:8). A clear example of well-established occult practices in his time is found in Ephesus where those that heard the gospel went and burned many occult books that were estimated to be valued at fifty thousand pieces of silver, roughly around four to five million dollars today (Acts 19:19). It is evident that one of the main obstacles to the spread of the Gospel in the early Church was occult practices, and this is why miracles were so essential that confirmed the truth of the Gospel as the ultimate authority of God in the world (Turner and Hamilton, n.d: 5).

When Paul wrote to the congregation in Galatia and he uses the word *pharmakeia* translated as “sorcery” (Galatians 5:20) he most probably had the practices of sorcery and those things associated with it in mind. Hawks (1979) points out that “sorcery” is found in a preceding context of sexual immorality, impurity, and debauchery all related to illicit sexual activity. Idolatry follows these sexual activities which refer to the worship of pagan gods that also included acts of sexual immorality among its adherents associated with temple prostitution. In light of abortion being common practice in the days of Paul, it is safe to assume that Paul probably also used the word *pharmakeia* in a comprehensive sense to include abortifacient drugs associated with sorcery and the result of licentious sexual activity.

The apostle John’s use of the word *pharmakeia* and its cognates according to Hawks (1979:45) is condemned four out of the five times in the book of Revelation and it is placed alongside the sins of sexual immorality and murder and concludes that a primary meaning of *pharmakeia* in this context is “poison”. As previously pointed out abortions were induced using abortifacient drugs. This fact is evident in the writing of Soranus and the Hippocratic Oath. According to Noonan (1970: 9) abortion should be considered a reasonable possibility in translating *pharmakeia* in Revelation 9:21, 21:8, and 22:15 seeing that Christian literature such as the Didache (80 A.D.), written before Revelation (90-100 A. D.), and in the Paedagogus, written after Revelation, used *pharmakeia* about abortion.

In Revelation 18:23 *pharmakeia* is related to being the means of how Babylon functioned and enriched herself. It speaks of a secular paganistic system of the Roman Empire that was not deterred by anyone or anything in

its quest to enrich itself even if it meant doing it by deceiving all the nations and mesmerizing them “through her false doctrines, traditions, idolatry, superstition, and will worship, with which, as another Jezebel, she has bewitched, allured, and deceived the nations of the empire, and the kings thereof, Revelation 18:3” (Bible Hub, 2004).

In light of the above, it is clear that those that had faith in God and followed His law and precepts cannot follow any other god or subject themselves to any evil spirits as a source of life or healing. God created mankind and they should only serve, obey and submit to His law. Any other gods or goddesses are unacceptable in the Kingdom of God, so also any practices of the occult or any drug or potion associated with sorcery in obtaining health or life.

3. Relevance of sorcery – pharmakeia in our time

The word *pharmakeia* as mentioned above was used in the context of the occult and pagan worship. Furthermore, it is looked upon negatively in the Bible and believers are to refrain from any practice related to sorcery or the occult. In what sense must sorcery or *pharmakeia* and its variants be understood by believers? In the passages as pointed out before it is always related to another sin, be it sexual immorality or murder or pagan worship, sins of the flesh, or someone living according to their lustful desires ignoring the law of God. It is in this same context of the sinful lusts of mankind that we find the relevance of the word today. The main aim of *pharmakeia* is deception, to wander from God’s truth and find substitutes in idols and pagan worship practices. It is in these substituting commodities that deception is effective. It links the person to the Babylonian or secular worldly system. Thus, as in Bible times, believers should guard against the deception that appeals to the flesh and its desires that will estrange them from their relationship with God.

Another aspect to consider is the fact that occult practices including sorcery, witchcraft, divination, and casting of spells are still present and very alive in contemporary society and many are involved in these practices. Taking note of these demonic and evil spirits is emphasized in Ephesians 6 where the believer is admonished to put on the armor of God to be able to stand against this spiritual onslaught. The danger the Bible warns about is that if believers do not guard against the onslaught, these practices might be assimilated by the Christian Church or the people of God as they were in ancient times. This is especially evident in the light of the constant pressure society places on the modern church to also become tolerant of paganistic or occultic practices. Also, contemporary culture’s continual critiquing of biblical

truth always suggests amendments to the interpretation of biblical truth to be inclusive of imminent cultural changes, be it expressed in social justice or sexual confusion now rampant in the world. As in the times of the Bible, tolerance of outside practices can lead to the formation of a contemporary and secular way of worship. It can and has already led to syncretism, which is a conglomerate of Eastern mysticism, Western occultism and other beliefs and schools of thought combined with the expressed goal to deny the distinctions between different beliefs and views that will hinder a religious union. The aim is the creation of a “one fits all religion” that does away with the offensiveness of any religion. At the base of such religion lies the always appealing selfish desires of the flesh – sins of the flesh seeking to find some justification from the Bible for their twisted immoral behavior. This modern and progressive religion displays paganistic traits since it reminds us of the many different gods worshipped in ancient times, and in that array of choices it promotes Monism: that all is one, Pantheism: the belief that God is everything, and Panentheism: the belief that God is in everything. This self-created human religion places salvation in the hands of human beings through attaining the knowledge that they are already one with everything and one with the divine, meaning humans are divine, and are gods. It denies the truth that salvation from God’s judgment of sin can only be obtained through the finished and redemptive work of Christ.

Although the way the word *pharmakeia* is used in the different passages in the book of Revelation, does not justify it being explicitly equated to the big pharma or pharmaceutical industry of our day as Brown (2021) alluded to, it has implicit or spiritual meaning for today. The general understanding of *pharmakeia* related to the aspects of deception through some actions and harmful drugs or poison can implicitly refer to the promotion of some medical interventions and medicine of the day that are harmful to the human body produced and developed by big pharma. Especially if it is done through deceptive means of any form. In this sense, there is *pharmakeia*, drug use, *pharmakon*, the medical drug or intervention, and *pharmakos* the maker of these drugs, big pharma. According to UNODC’s world drug report 2022, the legalization of cannabis in parts of the world has led to an acceleration of daily use and related health impacts. Two hundred and eighty-four million people between the age of 15 and 64 years old use drugs worldwide (UNODC, 2022). The increase in prescription drug abuse in the United States is considered an epidemic by experts. Statistics indicate that prescription drug use as well as drug abuse has increased by 250% over 20 years. According to the Centre for Disease Control (CDC), drug overdose deaths have quadrupled since 1999 with a 5% increase between 2018-2019. The use of

prescription drugs increased with the Covid-19 pandemic, especially drugs that could treat Covid-19, supplements, antidepressants, and stimulants for attention deficit hyperactivity disorders (ADHD) (Single Care, 2023). This increase in human consumption of prescription and other drugs signifies a large population of the world's dependence and trust in big pharma products that in essence only bring relief from illness but no healing. The flaws in this dominating industry became evident with the Covid-19 interventions that turned out to be ineffective and even harmful as many across the world including scientists, medical professionals, legal professionals, and others speak out about its efficacy and adverse effects. Many court cases ensued in different countries about the lockdown measures and medical interventions. One recent case is the class action that was filed in the federal court in New South Wales, Australia to obtain compensation for the many Australians who have been injured by the vaccine (Aitchison, 2023). A wave of lawsuits around mandatory vaccination policies around Covid-19 in the USA also followed as is the case elsewhere (Faber, 2022).

Another classic example of modern harmful medicine or potion still used today is abortifacient medicine that induces abortions. Over-the-counter preparations such as acetaminophen, aspirin, and iron can be obtained to induce an abortion. Abortion's normalization in modern culture has deceived many people who have been led to believe that this practice is justifiable, while in God's eyes, it is murder and a sin. This practice is the continuation of the same evil practice in ancient times as was pointed out earlier. What about the production of our world's food supply through genetically modified organisms (GMOs), promising to be advantageous to humans while it is proven to be harmful to humans? Have big pharma as a sorcerer of old indeed captured and misled all the nations of the world through their drugs and marketing chants?

How are the masses moved to comply with all the propaganda on what is right and wrong in the secular world today? Do the mass media outlets represent a modern form of casting a spell on a non-suspecting audience? Casting a spell can be obtained by using magic to make something happen to someone or to have a strong emotional effect on someone, to win complete affection and submission. The purpose of mass media is to entertain, educate and advance political propaganda which is the spreading of ideas, information, or rumor to help or injure an institution, a cause, or a person or to damage an opposing cause (Volle, 2023). Who owns these media outlets and how far-reaching is the effect of these media outlets? It is a known fact that a few big Tech media houses control the mass media of the world. The underlying goal of sorcery is to deceive and bring false assurance through the deception and

casting of spells. Paul uses the word “bewitched” metaphorically speaking to the Galatians (Gal 3:1) to stress the sudden change in their belief that is similar to the effect of the magical art of casting a spell. The culture of modern society and its lawmakers and influential forces similarly deceive the world through their methods of propaganda through obtaining control and affording the right to be custodians of “the truth” presented by media platforms and outlets. Through different media outlets, schools, universities, legal institutions, social justice organisations, and many other avenues, people (including children) in this world are deceived to perceive the world in a particular secular way that causes more confusion that leads to deviation from God’s way. The influence of the media can be equated to bullying seeing that no avenues exist to expose the agendas pushed by these platforms and the ones behind them succeeding in bewitching the largest part of the world population. In this sense, the reference to sorcery and its wide implications in ancient times do have a bearing and continuation in society. Similarly, the Bible text’s “tycoons” or “great men” are steering this deception. The place, culture, and time may be different but the embedded qualities of sorcery still live on in our society in different forms and seem to have advanced to an even more effective global deception through occult practices. So wide and far is the reach of the media influence that it was able to shut down almost the whole world during the Covid-19 pandemic, dictating through this powerful medium how citizens of the world should act as per a universal script. It can be equated to the power a magician has over the audience under his spell and even termed global magical practices.

Whether the term *pharmakeia* and its variants can explicitly be equated with the big pharma companies or their affiliates is not the question. It is rather the implications of the general meaning in the context of the Bible passages that speak of deception with far-reaching spiritual effects that are established through the method of sorcery and witchcraft, the hidden and secretive by those in power, that is important. It is through this deception that the population of this world is sidetracked to submit to human institutions rather than to the sovereign God. The magic practices in our day are no longer just linked to pagan rituals of old but have evolved to global magic practices exercised by those guided in our time by the same Evil one (1 John 5:19) and these forces are still involved in sorcery and use methods, though they are modernized and have more effective ways to cast spells – cleverly downplaying the relevance of the truth of God’s word replaced by their own defined “good” and for “the good of all”. Through alienation and deception, they attempt to gain control over the human race through the spirit of the Antichrist already working in the world (1 John 4:3-4).

The dangers to the Christian believer associated with the meanings of *pharmakeia* and the wider implications of sorcery in the Bible are therefore still relevant in our time. The Bible's warning and command to stay away from these occult practices is even more relevant in this global world. The same paganistic secular system is in play today and, as of old, still mesmerizing and still deceiving the population of the world only on a larger scale through false doctrines, traditions, idolatry, and superstition. The merchants are oblivious to ethical codes or biblical commands and truths in their endeavor to become rich and to enrich at the expense of those that are deceived to satisfy the lustful desires of the flesh as depicted in Babylon.

4. Conclusion

It is evident from the study that the ancient pagan world is the context for the word *pharmakeia*, translated as sorcery, magic, medicine, and drugs, and it made no distinction between mythology, healing, and religion. Healing and well-being physically and spiritually involved the realm of magic where ecstasy was invoked, psychoactive substances taken to achieve a level of bliss and appease different gods and goddesses to ensure their physical and spiritual well-being. It aimed to deceive and lead them astray, making them believe that gods other than the only true God can heal and save. In this light, it is idolatry, and therefore vehemently rejected and opposed by the Christian Bible and the God of the Bible.

To equate *pharmakeia* and its variants explicitly to modern-day commodities is irresponsible but so is the complete dismissal thereof. With that also comes the danger of only finding the explicit meanings of texts as if the Bible has nothing to say in modern times. Understanding the meaning of a text in its rightful context will enlighten our understanding of its meaning and message and enable an interpretation of its meaning for today. Once the explicit meaning has been established, the implicit meaning tied to the passage is needed to understand its relevance today. The message of the Bible written in a specific time and circumstances will always have relevance for the now, albeit implicitly pointing to similar circumstances and events as shown above. The aim of it is always to ensure that God's people are directed by the all-encompassing timeless word of God even in changing times. Once again, they are reminded of the dangers of this secular system of this world and its aim to deceive and estrange from God through the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life (1 John 2:16). People need to be vigilant knowing that the underlying deception is from the spiritual

realm, from the rulers, powers of darkness and evil forces of the heavens (Eph 6:10-12), and through the sorcery of the occult influenced the world is subjected to in many different forms.

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