

Tarot Cards

By Dr. Brady Blevins

Inventor: Unknown¹

Created: 15th Century²

Decks: There are hundreds of decks; popular decks include: Rider-Waite,³ Rider-Waite-Smith, Motherpeace, The Angel Oracle, Universal Marseille, Druid Craft, The Modern Witches Deck, amongst others and a plethora of novelty decks.

Terms: Major arcana, minor arcana, question readings, open readings, spread

HISTORY

The ancient origins of tarot cards is shrouded in mystery and debate. Tarot cards have been known for centuries to be a tool of divination.⁴ Another term associated with tarot cards is *cartomancy*, which is the act of fortune telling by interpreting playing cards. A brief survey of the history would lead one to believe that the cards have been used for millennia. However, the documented origin of tarot cards is only a few hundred years old. The name *tarot* gives a glimpse into the modern day understanding and usage of the cards. Tarot comes from an Italian card game known as tarocchi.⁵ The game consisted of a deck of 78 cards (later reduced to 62) and is a complicated game focused on gaining points. While tarocchi was not based on or purposed for divination; many think that the original purpose of tarot cards was for occultic⁶ purposes. This idea has been challenged by the authors of *A Wicked Pack of Cards*, they wrote: “Tarot cards were invented in Italy in the early fifteenth century, and for almost four centuries used exclusively for playing games. In late eighteenth-century France, however, they were purloined from the card-players for fortune-telling and the occult.”⁷

The idea that the cards were not originally used for divination but a card game for Italian nobility seems to have some historical veracity. The origin of playing cards has been linked to Chinese literature in the 10th century.⁸ Tarot cards, as known today, were first referenced in correspondence between Italian nobility during the Renaissance.⁹ Duke Filippo Maria Visconti, in the early 15th century in Milan, is credited with designing the decks that are considered to be the genesis of modern-day tarot cards. The Visconti family commissioned decks containing images, based primarily, on members of the noble family as noted by their likeness and the blond hair of the people on the cards. There are approximately 16 remaining decks commissioned by the Visconti family (not all the decks are complete – the collection of the decks is known as the Visconti-Sforza). The Visconti-Sforza cards were used as the model for many of the decks that followed.

Occultic use of the cards, at least in modern thought, began in the late 18th century. The first noted use of the cards for divination was in France and was largely due to the 1773 publication of a multi-volume encyclopedia, “*Le Monde primitive*,” by Antoine Court de Gébelin. In the work, Gébelin purported that the cards were tied to the Book of Thoth and that the cards’ images were tied to spiritual symbolism.¹⁰ The tie to ancient Egyptian priesthood was discovered to be spurious; however, it was influential in the spread of popularity. But it was the work of an Algebra teacher turned publisher, Jean-Baptiste Alliette, who began publishing guides to the cards. Alliette’s work bolstered the use of the cards for divination and he even published his own deck under the pseudonym “Etteilla” in 1789. His work caught the eye of Eliphas Lévi who was a French occultist. Lévi connected the symbols of the tarot card to kabbalah.¹¹

In the 19th century seances and use of the Ouija Board¹² became mainstream amongst the elite and as a result there was an increase of interest in the occult. Revisions of tarot cards,

based on newly developed theories, began to spring up. The most influential adaptation was that of Arthur Edward Waite, who was a poet, mystic and member of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (an influential secret society in Britain). With the help of fellow Golden Dawn member, Pamela Colman Smith, Waite commissioned Smith to illustrate the deck. Smith used symbols drawn from occultic practices such as astrology,¹³ kabbalah, as well as Freemasonry¹⁴ and even Christianity. The Rider-Waite deck is regarded as the most popular and has been in continuous printing since 1909.

The perpetuation and popularity of the use of tarot cards into the 20th century was due in large part to another member of the Golden Dawn, Aleister Crowley.¹⁵ Crowley in life and death has remained an influential figure. In a 2002 BBC broadcast, he was ranked #73 of the 100 Greatest Britons.¹⁶ While Crowley had a greater interest in Thelema Magick, he did produce a set of tarot cards that were illustrated by his friend Lady Frieda Harris. He made two changes to the traditional deck; “strength” was changed to “lust” and “temperance” to “art.” Crowley’s idea was to have these cards accompany *The Book of Thoth* (which only had a printing of 200 copies). He published the book in his life time; however, the cards were not published until 1969, 22 years after his death. The 20th century saw a rise of New Age spirituality through mystical groups such as the Theosophical Society and the Rosicrucians. Thus the use of tarot cards and other occultic practices have not gone away. In fact, there are new decks being published every year and often carry some level of inspirations albeit from sports, mythology, or pop culture.

MEANING AND PRACTICE

Tarot cards consist of a deck of 78 cards and are divided into two groups: 22 major arcana cards and 56 minor arcana cards. **Major arcana** cards signify important life events, milestones, or lessons (e.g. marriage or joining a religion); while the **minor arcana** cards illustrate regular life events like unity, potential or stability. One could think of the division as major and minor life events and as there are fewer major events there are fewer major cards and vice versa.

The major arcana cards consist of 22 cards that are numbered 0 to 21. These cards represent strong, long-term or big events in a person’s life. Major arcana cards are characterized by images such as the Fool, Death, the Hanged Man and Temperance.¹⁷ What is purported is that the journey of self-development begins with the fool (or earliest awareness), to integration (the 20 cards in-between) and culminates with the world (fulfillment).

The minor arcana tarot deck is like regular playing cards, divided into four suits, except rather than having hearts, diamonds, clubs and spades; the suits are wands, swords, cups, and pentacles (circles). Each suit has a meaning pertaining to a specific approach to life. Like regular playing cards the tarot cards are numbered; however, they are numbered one through ten and include a king, queen, knight and page. These cards are purported to reflect day-to-day events and can give more context and details to the major arcana cards. While each card has a meaning, the suits respectively carry a meaning: *wands* are represented by the element of fire and reflect passion and inspiration; *swords* are represented by the element of air and suggest communication and wisdom; *cups* are represented by the element of water and are associated with emotions and relationships; and *pentacles* are represented by the element of earth and are linked to property and achievement. Within the suits are *court cards* (or face cards) each of the court cards are characters that highlight a skill, virtue, emotion or mindset (based on the particular card).¹⁸ The numbered cards of the minor arcana hold significance in conjunction with the suit to which it belongs. For example, the number two card can reflect union, opposites or harmony, and based on its suit would carry a general meaning (e.g. a two of cups may have something to do with a relationship the person being read has with someone).¹⁹ Every aspect of the card holds some type of meaning, even the color of the card (some decks are only black and white to help the reader maintain the focus of other colors like what the person is wearing).

Tarot cards are read in a specific manner; but before that can be discussed understanding the connection tarot has with the 20th century Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung is essential. Many involved in tarot cards will point to Jung’s concept of archetypes as to the explanation of how and why the cards “work.” An archetype is from the Greek (archetypos) and means original pattern or model. Thus an archetype is represented by universal themes varying by culture but expressed through literature, art and dreams. In short, Jung believed that shared concepts

(archetypes) permeate the collective unconscious which hold mental patterns, memory traces that are shared by all human beings. How this works with tarot is that the cards represent these archetypes and when read/interpreted are purported to give guidelines or potentially tell the future (though most will not claim that the cards will tell someone what will happen).

Reading Tarot Cards

There are two types of tarot readings: question readings and open readings. The **question readings** are designed to answer specific questions. This would not be intended to answer specific “yes” or “no” type questions. Instead, the idea is to let the cards guide the individual in their decision making. Thus, the way a question is stated can directly affect or influence how the card is interpreted. Therefore, one should understand that there is such a thing as a bad question in tarot. For example, a question should not be overly detailed but maintain generality (e.g. Can I help my roommate find a new place to live? vs. How can I better get along with my roommate?). The focus of the question(s) is to be maintained by the person asking the question(s) (e.g. what is the questioner’s role in the problem). **Open readings** aim at the larger aspects of life rather than specific issues. This type of reading focuses on whether one should enter into a new phase of life like college, career, marriage, having children; or other issues like health.

Tarot cards are read by first having the person receiving the reading shuffle the cards²⁰ while concentrating on the question or area where they desire guidance. The belief is that the person’s energy is transferred to the deck and this is how the cards fall to their proper place. After the cards have been shuffled and the deck has been cut, the reader lays out the cards, this act is referred to as the **spread**. There are multiple types of spreads. Spreads would include: the three card spread, four card spread, five card cross, the seven card horseshoe spread, the eight card spread, the pentagram spread, the Romany spread and the Celtic Cross layout (amongst many others).

For example, the three card spread is when the cards are laid out in three stacks, equally proportioned, or three cards picked from the deck at random (or by one’s intuition). Once the cards are chosen, they are laid out from left to right. The stacks represent the past (context), present (focus) and future (outcome). Another example is the Celtic Cross which is used more for focused questions. This method utilizes ten cards and is more complex than the three card spread. The cards focus on ten different areas: present, challenge, subconscious, past, future, near future, internal influences, external influences, hopes and/or fears, and outcome.²¹ The cards, when drawn, can be *upright* or *reversed*. If a card is upright, or in its normal view, its meaning does not change from the original understanding of the particular card. However, if the card drawn is upside down, or reversed, its meaning is lessened, weakened, delayed or possibly the complete opposite of its original meaning (depending on the divinator’s intuitive interpretation).

Readings can be done by an individual or accomplished by a professional tarot card reader. Many will have an altar where the reading is accomplished although it is not considered necessary. The process of reading cards is highly intuitive to the divinator and readings will change from one divinator to another even if the exact same cards were drawn from the same style deck. Readings may be done multiple times a day or simply when a person wishes to seek guidance on a question.

BIBLICAL RESPONSE

Tarot cards are a form of divination, which in this context, is the use of cards to maintain an answer or guidance from the divine²² or your higher self.²³ This practice fits under the larger term occult. As explained in previous *Profiles*, occult practices are an attempt to gain knowledge or power from supernatural forces, apart from the God of the Bible.²⁴ Tarot cards are attempting to gain knowledge through supernatural means apart from the God of the Bible.

Should Christ followers participate in tarot card readings? The Bible answers this question by directly addressing the issue of divination and occultic activities. Leviticus 19:26 specifically instructs not to interpret omens or tell fortunes. Five verses later (19:31) the Bible warns not to turn to mediums or necromancers nor to seek them out. Deuteronomy 18:9-14 forewarns

against the occultic practices of the Canaanites; specifically mentioning the practices of divination, fortunetelling, interpreting omens, seeking a medium or necromancer.

Occultic practices like fortunetelling and interpreting omens led to the fall of Israel to the Assyrians as noted in 2 Kings 17:6-20. Judah followed suit when Manasseh, king of Judah, in 2 Kings 21:6 reintroduced the occultic practices of fortunetelling, interpreting omens and seeking mediums and necromancers. As a result of these actions God judged the nation. Many other passages in the Old Testament echo the warning and show the consequences of a life lived in disobedience to God through the exercise of occult practices (Genesis 44:5; 2 Kings 9:22; 2 Chronicles 33:6; Jeremiah 27:9; Isaiah 8:19; Daniel 2:27). What is interesting is the view the Bible takes on occultic practices. These practices are thought of as so evil they were used as the example of how bad others sins were (1 Samuel 15:23). The Old Testament demonstrated a zero tolerance of those who participated in occultic practices (Exodus 22:18; Micah 5:12). Hosea 4:12 gives a warning as to what happens to the follower of God who seeks to gain wisdom by supernatural forces outside of God.

Some may point to an inherent value that can be gained in such practices but the Bible gives clear insight in that even if those using these practices can benefit or give glory to God the practice should not be sought. This is apparent in Acts 16:16-19 when Paul cast out the demonic spirit from a slave girl who could tell fortunes. She provided financial gain for her owners and spoke the truth of Paul and Silas being servants of the Most High God; yet the gospel is only damaged by such a source. Colossians 2:8-10 instruct the reader not to follow elemental spirits of this world. Satan will use false signs as a way to deceive and draw people away from the truth (2 Thessalonians 2:9); therefore, believers should be wary of the spiritual practices outside of those prescribed by Scripture (e.g. prayer and meditation on the Bible).

Activities such as the use of tarot cards, or similar divination tools, could be viewed for the believer as nothing more than trying to find a short cut to the wisdom of God. James 1:5 gives instruction on how to obtain wisdom and guidance and it is not through the use of any other means than God. The Christ follower may not get the immediate answer hoped for but it is better to wait on the movement of God than to attempt to supersede God by searching for an answer elsewhere (as Saul learned in 1 Samuel 28). The Bible's abundant and repeated warnings should be noted and heeded by all who profess to be followers of Christ.

Notes

- 1 The modern-day cards are based on the work of Visconti and Sforza.
- 2 This date represents the earliest known usage of tarot cards in the modern format. The exact beginning date is unknown.
- 3 The art is the same between Rider-Waite (RW) and Rider-Waite-Smith (RWS) with the exception that the colors on RWS is not as bright and vivid as the RW deck.
- 4 Divination is the use of supernatural forces outside of the God of the Bible to reveal hidden information or gain power. Divination is a practice within the larger category of occult.
- 5 Depaulis, Thierry., Dummett, Michael., Decker, Ronald. *A Wicked Pack of Cards: Origins of the Occult Tarot*. United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Academic, 1996.
- 6 A separate 4-page Profile has been published related to this subject: James K. Walker, "The Occult," *Profile Notebook* (Arlington, Texas: Watchman Fellowship, Inc. 1994-2021). A complete collection of Profiles (over 500 pages) is available at www.watchman.org/notebook. This Profile is available at: <https://www.watchman.org/profiles/pdf/occultprofile.pdf>
- 7 Depaulis, Dummett, Decker, *A Wicked Pack of Cards*, ix.
- 8 Parlett, D.. "Playing cards." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, December 20, 2017. Accessed June 4, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/playing-card>.
- 9 Babbityjean. *The Italian Roots of Tarot Cards*. December 10, 2020. Accessed June 4, 2021, <https://olivosantabarbara.com/2020/12/10/the-italian-roots-of-tarot-cards/>
- 10 Farley, Helen. *A Cultural History of Tarot: From Entertainment to Esotericism*. London: LB. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2009.
- 11 A separate 4-page Profile has been published related to this subject: Philip Arnn, "Kabbalah," *Profile Notebook* (Arlington, Texas: Watchman Fellowship, Inc. 1994-2021). This Profile is available at: <https://www.watchman.org/profiles/pdf/kabbalahprofile.pdf>. See also: Bob Waldrep, "The Kabbalah Centre," <https://www.watchman.org/profiles/pdf/kabbalahcentreprofile.pdf>.
- 12 Brady Blevins, "Ouija Board," *Profile Notebook* (Arlington, Texas: Watchman Fellowship, Inc. 1994-2021). This Profile is available at: https://www.watchman.org/Files/Profile_Ouija.pdf.
- 13 Marica Montenegro, "Astrology," *Profile Notebook* (Arlington, Texas: Watchman Fellowship, Inc. 1994-2021). This Profile is available at: <https://www.watchman.org/files/profileastrology2018.pdf>.
- 14 Ron Rhodes, "Freemasonry," *Profile Notebook* (Arlington, Texas: Watchman Fellowship, Inc. 1994-2021). This Profile is available at: <https://www.watchman.org/profiles/pdf/freemasonryprofile.pdf>.
- 15 James K. Walker, "Aleister Crowley," *Profile Notebook* (Arlington, Texas: Watchman Fellowship, Inc. 1994-2021). This Profile is available at: <https://www.watchman.org/profiles/pdf/aleistercrowleyprofile.pdf>.
- 16 Access to the broadcast is no longer available; however, the BBC has published the list here: http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2002/08_august/21/100_list.shtm.
- 17 For the names, pictures and explanations associated with both the major and minor arcana cards visit: <https://bit.ly/3ik8Ect>
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 For an introductory explanation of the suits and meanings of the numbers of the minor arcana cards visit: <https://www.tarot.com/tarot/meaning-of-numbers-in-minor-arcana>.
- 20 It is strongly discouraged for someone to do a reading on themselves.
- 21 For a diagram and further explanation of the Celtic Cross spread visit: <https://www.alittleparkofjoy.com/easy-tarot-spreads/>.
- 22 This is the connecting to spirits, though most practitioners would say that there are no evil spirits. This activity is seen as a "dance" with another spirit.
- 23 The "higher self" would be kin to reaching the top of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (self-actualization). From a global perspective this would be a pantheistic view of a person who has reached an understanding of their divinity within.
- 24 See end notes #6 and #12, respectively, for links to Profiles on the *Occult* and the *Ouija Board*.



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