

Footballer Brown Wants to Wear Now-Banned Helmet. Is This Superstition?

The Wired Word for the Week of August 25, 2019

In the News

Antonio Brown, wide receiver for the Oakland Raiders, wants to wear the same helmet he has worn for his entire nine years of playing for the NFL, even though that helmet is now banned by the NFL and replaced by others that provide more protection. So insistent is Brown, who is the only receiver in NFL history to record five receptions and at least 50 yards in every single game of an NFL season, to wear his old helmet, or one like it, that he has filed a grievance against the NFL. He is demanding a one-year grace period to continue wearing his unapproved helmet for this upcoming season. And to make his point, he continues to be a no-show at the Raiders' training sessions.

Brown, who played for the Pittsburgh Steelers until this season, was traded to the Raiders and gained a lucrative contract in the process, was already missing Raiders practices due to getting severe frostbite on the soles of his feet from wearing inappropriate footwear in a cryotherapy machine. But he is now apparently absenting himself because of the helmet impasse.

Brown says the new helmets interfere with his vision, and he's not the only player to make that complaint. But Brown, who is known for being difficult, is the only one to refuse to wear it. Some commentators, including some former players, say that there is also an element of superstition involved.

Nate Jackson, who played six years in the NFL, described a football helmet as a "bubble," and said, "You *become* something else in that bubble. For the best in the world, altering that perception *en combat* is a huge risk."

Jackson also said, "Most athletes are superstitious when it comes to equipment -- you dance with who brung you. I was a Riddell [helmet] man when I played. That was the basic model, and the one we all used. Your head adapts to it and you forget about it. It becomes an extension of your superego."

In more dispassionate terms, one's brain adapts to the helmet -- to the view it affords -- and "forgets" that it is there. When a different helmet -- with a different view -- comes along, it is perceived as a problem, until the brain adapts again.

The NFL is firm that the helmet Brown wants will not be allowed, and it's not known how this stalemate will end. There is talk that Brown, who has already earned nearly \$70 million while playing for the Steelers, and has the potential of receiving an additional \$50 million from the Raiders (with \$30 million guaranteed over the next two seasons) will retire if not allowed to wear the helmet of his choice.

For their part, the Raiders are counting on this matter being resolved. Raiders' head coach Jon Gruden stated that Brown is "going to be a huge factor for the Raiders for years to come."

We should also note that *The Wired Word* is not taking sides in this dispute, and that we recognize that there are other complicating factors. The analysis of what is called "risk compensation" is neither obvious nor simple. It has long been known that requirements for

equipment to reduce consequences -- such as football helmets -- will increase the extent and magnitude of risky behavior.

More on this story can be found at these links:

Antonio Brown's Helmet Saga Continues With a New Grievance Against the NFL. *DeadSpin*

How You Can Make Sense of the Antonio Brown Helmet Controversy. *SBNation*

Why Antonio Brown Needs His Helmet. *DeadSpin*

Football Physics: Safety Rules and Unintended Consequences. *Forbes*

Applying the News Story

It's unclear how much of Brown's resistance to wearing an approved helmet is related to superstition, but it appears to be at least one factor making him cling to his old helmet.

Superstition is commonly defined as "a widely held but unjustified belief in supernatural causation leading to certain consequences of an action or event, or a practice based on such a belief."

Christians sometimes cling, in a way that can be described as "superstitious," to notions that aren't supported by scripture or are incompatible with our faith, so this news story gives us an opportunity to examine such ideas.

The Big Questions

1. What common things do you avoid for superstitious reasons (such as not walking under ladders or not letting black cats cross your path)? What common sayings do you endow with the authority of scripture (such as "God helps those who help themselves")?
2. Do superstitions contradict Christian faith and practice? Explain your answer.
3. Is dabbling in such activities as witchcraft, tarot readings, horoscopes and the like harmless for a Christian? Why or why not?
4. What is the legitimate source of knowledge for things future?
5. Discuss each of these sayings, none of which are from the Bible, and consider whether for you, they fall into the realm of superstition or faith, and say why.
 - God helps those who help themselves.
 - Everything happens for a reason. (See Ecclesiastes 3:1 and discuss the differences between the saying and the text.)
 - When your number's up, it's up. (See Job 14:5 and discuss the differences between the saying and the text.)
 - God never gives you more than you can bear. (See 1 Corinthians 10:13 and discuss the differences between the saying and the text.)
 - Bad luck comes in threes.

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

2 Kings 18:4

[Hezekiah] removed the high places, broke down the pillars, and cut down the sacred pole. He broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it; it was called Nehushtan. (For context, read 18:1-7a.)

Hezekiah was a king of Judah who undertook religious reforms to bring his subjects back into obedience to God. The verse above notes that among his reforms was the destruction of the bronze serpent Moses had made at God's direction for the Israelites when they were in the wilderness and being bitten by poisonous snakes and dying from the bites. God told Moses to make the bronze serpent and put it on a pole. Bite victims could then look at the pole and recover from their bites (That incident is recorded in Numbers 21:4-9.)

The problem was, the bronze serpent was simply a means for the people to visualize God's help; it was God who healed them. But in the ensuing years, people began to think of the bronze serpent *itself* as the source of help, and in a superstitious way, made offerings to it and worshiped it. The people had even given the object its own name: Nehushtan, which was a play on the words for "bronze" and "serpent."

TWW team member Liz Antonson says that her mother, a non-Catholic Christian, had serious trust in Saint Christopher and had a St. Chris medal on the visor of her car. She was a devout Lutheran, but still believed that this medal protected her from travel harm.

Anyway, to turn his people back to God, Hezekiah wisely eliminated the bronze serpent.

Questions: When have you thought of a religious object as a token for good fortune? Have you, for example, kept a Bible around not to read but as a talisman for blessing?

1 Samuel 4:3-4

When the troops came to the camp, the elders of Israel said, "Why has the LORD put us to rout today before the Philistines? Let us bring the ark of the covenant of the LORD here from Shiloh, so that he may come among us and save us from the power of our enemies." So the people sent to Shiloh, and brought from there the ark of the covenant of the LORD of hosts. ... (For context, read 4:1-11.)

On an occasion when the Philistines came in war against Israel, the Israelite army sought to defend against the invaders, but were routed, losing 4,000 soldiers. So the elders of Israel decided that what they needed to do was send the ark of the covenant to the battlefield during the next clash between the two armies.

Note, however, the elders did not directly seek God's help or God's will. Instead, they treated the ark of the covenant in a superstitious way (as we might do with a rabbit's foot today), assuming its presence on the battlefield would bring Israel victory. What happened, however, is that the Philistines won the battle and killed 30,000 Israelite soldiers. And the Philistines captured the ark.

In the chapters following this incident, the Philistines made the same mistake, thinking that by capturing the ark of the covenant they now had the mastery and could use its power to maintain their authority. But as it turned out, the residents of each Philistine town that housed the ark were afflicted with tumors. They eventually put the ark in a cart pulled by two cows. The cows, without a driver, took it back to Israel.

Questions: When have you adopted some practice commonly considered superstitious on the idea that "it can't hurt"? Is that assumption correct? Can it hurt, and if so, what is injured or lost?

1 Peter 5:7

Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. (No context needed.)

This is a fine piece of advice from the Bible, but in a superstitious way, some people have absolutized it to mean that the *only* help one should seek when afflicted with anxiety is prayer.

Questions: Are all biblical promises intended for all situations? Is it possible to turn a promise into a superstition? Explain. What are the dangers, if any, of absolutizing biblical advice?

Revelation 13:18

This calls for wisdom: let anyone with understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a person. Its number is six hundred sixty-six. (For context, read 13:11-18.)

Here's an example of a verse from the Bible that our culture has converted to a superstition. Revelation says that the number 666 is the mark of a "beast" that in John of Patmos' vision people must wear on either their forehead or right hand to avoid being killed by the beast. The way one gets the number, according to the passage, is by worshiping the beast.

Until the invention of the Hindu-Arabic numerals, letters doubled as numbers. Hence, if one took the numerical value of the letters of the name Neron Kaiser (the Emperor Nero) in Hebrew and added them up, it came to 666, or else 616 if you added them up a different way. Some ancient texts of Revelation record 616 instead of 666, which shows the number itself is not evil. It was a code to hide the fact that Revelation was talking about the Roman emperor who was a persecutor of Christians.

But our culture has pulled the number out of the Bible and treated it superstitiously. For example, in New Mexico, highway US 666 was a 100-mile branch off the famed Route 66 and had one of the highest fatality rates of any in the state. It was said to be haunted. It was renumbered to US 491 in 2003. At the dedication, Gov. Bill Richardson declared, "After 77 years of concern and discontent, we have finally removed any reference to the devil from this highway."

Questions: Would you board an airliner that had the flight number 666? Why or why not? And if so, would you do it on Friday the 13th? What do your answers say about your trust in God?

Proverbs 3:5-7

*Trust in the LORD with all your heart,
and do not rely on your own insight.
In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths.
Do not be wise in your own eyes;
fear the LORD, and turn away from evil.*

(For context, read 3:1-12.)

1 Timothy 4:7 (RSV)

Have nothing to do with godless and silly myths. Train yourself in godliness ... (For context, read 4:1-9.)

Questions: In what ways might these verses be heard as a call away from superstition? Why?