

# **THE QUESTION OF JESUS' RELATION TO MAGIC**

by

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The idea that Jesus was a magician is ordinarily dismissed out of hand by scholars and churchmen alike. Scholars, with good reason, feel that after 200 years it is unlikely that such a "new" idea could be correct. Churchmen, although not often inclined in these modern days to reject the idea as blasphemy, nevertheless tend to dismiss it out of their need to discover an edifying, and not a mystifying, Jesus. However, the notion that Jesus practiced magic is very old, and traces back to his own lifetime. It is found in the gospels in passages which are not assigned to later accretions by the form critics. Examples are found in Mark 3:22-27 and parallels; Matt 10:25; John 7:20; 8:48, 52; 10:20, among other places. Sometimes the claim is subtle, as in Mark 6:14 and parallels, where Herod claims that John the Baptist has risen from the dead and that Jesus has his powers. This sort of thing could be done by necromancy and would be very dangerous, since according to the magical papyri the demon of a man killed violently is very powerful and easy to control. Mark 6:14d could be translated, "the inferior powers work by his orders," implying that Jesus now possessed John.

It is often overlooked that of the synoptic gospels, only one specifies under what charge Jesus was brought before Pilate. Matthew and Mark appear to suppress the accusation, which would not have been necessary if the charge given by Luke, "King of the Jews," were in fact the actual one. Perhaps a clue to the

historical accusation comes from John 18:30, where Pilate's question as to a charge is answered, "If this man were not an evildoer, we would not have handed him over." «Evildoer», «kakon poiwn» is apparently taken by Pilate as a specific accusation. The term is translated into Latin by Theodotion and Tertullian as «malethicus», a technical term for magician. The term is also used in I Pet 4:15 as one in a list of specific crimes which carry a capital penalty. «Mischief-maker», the usual translation, is not a capital crime, but «magician» is. If such was the charge against Jesus, it is not at all surprising that Matthew and Mark chose to suppress it. Another term used about Jesus, «planos» (deceiver) in Matt 27:63 can also be a technical term for magician.

From the accumulated evidence, it seems clear that Jesus was accused during his lifetime of being a magician. The charge comes in the peculiar section of Matthew, in Mark, and in John -- three separate sources. It is not derived from the resurrection experience or from the early church.

These early ideas of Jesus as a magician show that it seems to have been a relatively common charge in the early CE, and not merely the accusations of his enemies. What we have discovered is the social type to which Jesus' enemies and some of his friends thought he belonged, that of magos (vz. A. D. Nock, "Beginnings of Christianity," reprinted in *Essays on Religion in the Ancient World*, Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1972, I, 308ff.). It would seem that such an accusation at least had plausibility; i.e. it reflected the sort of person he really was externally. To test the charge, it will be necessary to look in the gospels, seeking those materials which are compatible with or reflect the notion. This is not easy, since the evidence will be minimized, as something in need of repression.

The birth narratives themselves reflect the notion of Jesus as a magician in that they appear to be deliberate arguments against the idea. That Jesus was fathered by a god indicates that his power is not that of a magician. That the magi came to see him shows that he needed no initiation, and that magicians should do him homage. the accusation seems to have preceded the birth narratives.

The story of the descent of the spirit as a dove and of the voice from heaven at Jesus' baptism are common to many accounts of magicians. A rather full example is found in the Berlin papyrus (PGM 1), from line 54 through the next two pages. The social types behind the myths of Jesus and of the magician are similar. The myth reflects the thought and real psychological experience of the time, if not objective fact; i.e. similar mythological thought tends to produce corresponding experiences. Other rites to obtain the spirit's assistance can be found in PGM 11a; 4.17-18; 70; 12.14-95; 1.1-42. In these other stories, the spirit becomes the assistant of or identical with the magician, but in the gospels, it is followed by the voice of God: "My beloved son."

The term «son of God» is not a customary messianic title. It occurs in the gospels usually in connection with miracles. These miracles are rarely attributed to Jesus' spirit or the Holy Spirit -- no explanation at all is given. This is because «son of God» implies its own conceptual type -- a supernatural being in human form who performs miracles by his own divine power. In Semitic thought patterns, it is clear that son of God is equivalent to the term God. If this is so, it would seem that the gospel of Mark gives a strong argument for the Monophysite point of view, at least in the story line, overlaid by nomenclature which is decidedly Jewish. For the sake of Jewish piety, Jesus is never called a god, but a son of God.

Nevertheless, the story shows a man made a god by the rite of purification, followed by the opening of the heavens and the coming of the spirit.

Parallels to this can be found in PGM 4.475-830 (the "Mithras Liturgy"), where the adept is deified by the spirit, becomes the sun, and accomplishes the miracle of ascending into heaven. In the Demotic Magical Papyrus of London and Leiden, col. 20, lines 31ff., it is stated, "I am the son of the living god," in which case the living god, in an Egyptian context, is Osiris. See also PGM 4.142-221, which concludes with union with the deity in form, a gift of power in the deity's name, and the believer achieving a nature like the god.

Because of the time factor, we must skip over a number of similar clues to the contemporary perception of Jesus as magician, and proceed immediately to the conclusion of the chapter:

Most of Jesus' miracles have parallels in the magical papyri. Except for ideas about the kingdom, much of his teaching has parallels also. The magical papyri were directed entirely toward the individual, and so did not promise to bring in a kingdom. In contrast to a few examples in the gospels, the papyri have very little about miracles involving power over external inanimate objects. Neither Jesus nor the magicians do major surgery (restoring limbs, etc.). The gospels and the papyri have many close parallels involving miracle stories and teaching material, including details of wording and liturgical procedures.

Note in particular the parallels which run all the way through the stories of Jesus and of Apollonius. Both were: itinerant miracle workers and teachers; rejected by townspeople and brothers who later became more favorable toward them; accompanied by an inner circle of disciples; credited with prophecy, exorcisms,

healings, raising of the dead; makers of severe moral demands on their hearers; speakers in oracular style, teaching with authority; in conflict with the established clergy at temples they visited to try to reform; accused of practicing magic; charged and tried by Romans for sedition (and magic); subject to legend as children of god, with precocious childhoods, demons in the wilderness, miracles, escape from actual or expected death, ascent to heaven, appearances for the conversion of unbelievers.

Even when the parallels to Apollonius run out, there are many other parallels concerning other magicians in the magical papyri which also fit the gospel accounts: baptism to purge from sin; making of a magician by the descent of the spirit; hearing self declared a god; visionary experiences and shamanic phenomena in the wilderness; exorcism and cures of certain types in Galilee; teaching with authority; calling of disciples who left with him as though enchanted; traveling as master and holy man, with disciples; successful and famous as an exorcist and healer, so that other magicians use his name; opposition developing regarding his neglect of Jewish laws, especially concerning fasting, Sabbath keeping, associating with the tax collectors and sinners, so that stories were spread about his evil magic; initiation of the disciples into his own magical experience (only hints in both gospels and papyri); 12 given the power to exorcise; several seeing him in a vision with supernatural beings. The eucharist is easily seen as a familiar type of magical rite of union between Christ and his disciples in love and in body; i.e. the identification of the magician with the deity, in which food becomes the body and blood of the deity.

Bultmann argues against a magical interpretation of the eucharist, but does so by determining that such a rite was inconsistent with the synoptic framework; i.e. it is not a Passover meal, but is a rite which the Hellenistic church

inserted in place of the Passover. This is wrong on both counts. The eucharist is no more or no less Hellenistic than is Jesus himself. Its magic is international, with its earliest forms in Egypt. The cultic emphasis of the eucharistic story is certainly secondary, showing that the story is older than even Paul and James, who connected it with the Passover and other Jewish ideas in a clearly midrashic manner. It does not fit the stories of Jesus, and is not even primitive, since it has different forms in different gospels (i.e. the Passover in the synoptics and crucifixion in John). The gospel writers are not trying to contradict each other, but are straining to find similarities in the Judaization of Jesus. The whole gospel seems to be an attempt to convert a miracle worker/magician into an acceptable Jew of Jerusalem in the time of the Christian church under James.

Note: the picture above is not based on material hostile to Jesus, but on the stories that Jesus' disciples preserved about him, in spite of their tendencies to minimize the things that made him look like a magician. Also, after "Jesus the Magician" was completed, it was noted that it was completely in accord with the picture of the leader and his gang, a psychological type involving the psychoanalytic stories of transference, cited by Ernest Becker in "The Denial of Death" (N.Y.: Free Press, 1973). See especially the chapter on "The Spell Cast by Persons --the Nexus of Unfreedom." The picture is consistent and credible, which can be evidence of historicity.

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What pagan Semitic materials give us the background for assuming that «son of God» means God? There are parallels in the OT and in Semitic linguistic usage. There are, however, no texts of Semitic speaking paganism in the first century CE. There was, certainly, such a paganism, which spoke a Semitic language, so that «son of God» = God

is a very possible expression. See the work of J. Teixidor in Syria over the past 7 or 8 years.

If the one major difference between Jesus and the magicians was the stress on the kingdom of God rather than on individual successes, how did these ideas of the kingdom come to be correlated with Jesus' message and activity? Jesus probably did come to think of himself as the Messiah, since he was open to the ideas of the world. However, this was not his starting point; it perhaps came from suggestions of those around him. Ideas of the kingdom do not explain Jesus' following, and were not the main point of his teaching.

Does it mean:

- (1) Jesus thought of himself as a magician;
- (2) Jesus thought of himself as a magician and other things; or
- (3) the nature of Jesus' public activity led others to call him a magician.

Certainly the latter. The book is on how Jesus is seen as a magician, although not necessarily even by his followers or himself. However, when a person does the things that a magician does, using magical techniques, and has magical experiences, he may certainly be thought of as a magician. Magic must be socially defined, since there is no essential difference between magic and religion.

Magic is a large collection of ways of dealing with a special group of deities in special ways for special purposes, not all bad. A magician thinks he has established communication with such a deity, is identified with the deity, is made divine by virtue of the indwelling deity, and has consciously adopted techniques of magic. We cannot pin Jesus down on all these aspects. We do not know his intent, his attitude toward magic, or his felt relationship to God. But for his purposes he adopted technique known in society

as magical, with many parallels to details of stories about magicians.

Why did not Jesus or the church call him «magos»? A «magos» is a member of the Persian para-priestly class. Not being Persian, to use such a title is to declare oneself an inferior imitator and not the real thing. Besides, as the church became Jewish, it became obvious that Jesus could not be tolerated as a god, so that the idea was dismissed, but not systematically eliminated from the literature.

My methodological starting point is that of "common sense"; e.g. since miracles concerning the movement of external objects are not possible, and since there is no supernatural population, therefore any story involving such items is historically false.

Miraculous cures involving psychosomatic symptoms are another matter. With no asylums or hospitals in the first century, there was a large number of lunatics in the streets, leading to the possibility of many cures of hysterical illnesses. The need for such cures was great, and a large crowd could gather under such circumstances. Therefore, these stories are quite credible.

Stories which go beyond what is credible reflect what was believed to have occurred -- not real in fact, but believed by those experiencing them.

It seems puzzling that James could have found Jesus and his ideas attractive unless they were put into an apocalyptic millenarian context, in which case magic becomes quite secondary. We read that his brothers did not believe in the widespread notion that Jesus was the Messiah. However, when Jesus was executed as a Messianic pretender, his family was involved almost involuntarily.

Note the contradictions in Jesus, teaching about the law:

(1) the law is abrogated; (2) his followers were released from some obligations, but not all; (3) the law is in force and binding.

This contradiction can be resolved by applying the various ideas to different groups. Some of Jesus' followers could get into the kingdom now, and were thus free from the law (1). Others were only partly free (2); this included most followers. For outsiders, however, the law was still binding (3). When Jesus died, there was only a small circle of (1) and (2), but many more (3).

In this new situation, Jesus' family, because of the idea of hereditary kingship, had to be members of the group. James, the successor to the Messiah until he returned, was not in (1) or even (2). He had to make the whole thing over to suit his own ideas. Under Herodian persecution, Peter left and James, with Jewish ideas, stayed. This seems to be a probable scenario.