

Jesus, Magician or Miracle Worker?¹

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Abstract: This paper sets out to answer the question, was Jesus considered a magician? And if so, why? In the face of a current inconclusive debate, using unsuitable definitions of magic, and likely entangled with twenty-first-century definitions, the second-century data is engaged to help re-sensitize a reading of the gospel data. There are clear charges of magic in the second century that enable twenty-first-century readers to see that observers of Jesus' ministry charged him with magic, but not for the reasons usually assumed. Some contemporary implications of this study are taken up in a contemporary coda.

Keywords: Beelzebul Controversy, Charismatics, defining magic, Jesus, magic, miracle worker, Pentecostals.

The study of magic in the ancient world has not always commanded interest or respect.² It has even been suggested that there was a conspiracy to ignore or minimize the motif of magic in the New Testament and early Christianity.³ This was probably because magic was assumed to have nothing to do with understanding Jesus or early Christianity.⁴ However, publications by John M. Hull, Morton Smith, David Aune and Hans Dieter Betz,⁵ in particular, have meant that in the

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- 1 This paper relies on a larger project, Graham H. Twelftree, *Magic and Miracle in Early Christianity: The First Three Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, in preparation). I am grateful to Krzysztof Mielcarek for the invitation for this paper to be part of the October 2019 Miracles Conference in the Institute of Theology John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Poland. In response to a kind invitation from Wolfgang Vondy an earlier version of this paper was delivered as the 2019 Hollenweger Lecture on 4 June 2019 for the University of Birmingham, UK.
 - 2 See the discussions by David E. Aune, "Magic in Early Christianity," *ANRW* 2/23/2 (1980) 1507–1510, cited here from the corrected reprint in D.E. Aune, *Apocalypticism, Prophecy and Magic in Early Christianity: Collected Essays* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2006) 368–370; and F. Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1997) 8–19.
 - 3 Aune, "Magic in Early Christianity," 368, suggests this is true of many of the authors of *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*. Cf. Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World*, 8–19.
 - 4 See the discussion in Graham H. Twelftree, *Jesus the Exorcist: A Contribution to the Study of the Historical Jesus* (WUNT 2/54; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 1993) 205–206.
 - 5 J.M. Hull, *Hellenistic Magic and the Synoptic Tradition* (*Studies in Biblical Theology* 2/28; London: SCM 1974); M. Smith, *Jesus the Magician* (London: Gollancz 1978) vii. Although the book has been republished with an introduction by Russell Shorto, as *Jesus the Magician: Charlatan or Son of God?* (Berkeley, CA: Seastone 1998), and as *Jesus the Magician, with a Foreword by Bart D. Ehrman* (San Francisco, CA: Hampton Roads – Red Wheel – Weiser 2014), the 1978 edition will be cited here as

last generation or so the motif of magic has become an unavoidably important and an increasingly popular topic of research for students of Jesus and his early followers.⁶

For Pentecostal, charismatic and renewal Christians the topic is doubly interesting. Not only might there be a historical interest, but with their claimed involvement in contemporary miracle working, those in this tradition attempting to model the ministry of Jesus are sometimes dealing with charges of fraud or magic.

One of the debates in Jesus research, often related to the reports of his miracle working, and the question for this lecture, is: was Jesus considered a magician? In a previous generation the question would not have been ‘was Jesus considered a magician?’ but, simply, was Jesus a magician? The assumption of this simpler question is that there is some substantive definition of magic that can be applied in different places or times to determine whether or not something is magic or someone is a magician. We begin, then, with a consideration of the definition of magic.

1. Defining Magic

The once-popular substantive definitions of magic have proven worthless when applied across different societies.⁷ It turns out that almost any act can elicit an accusation of magic.⁸ The new orthodoxy in defining magic is to say, with Jonathan

in the later editions the endnotes have been disconnected from their pages. Aune, “Magic in Early Christianity,” 368–420; H.D. Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation including the Demotic Spells. I. Texts* (Chicago – London: University of Chicago Press 1986, 2nd ed. 1992).

6 Note the work of David Aune, Hans Dieter Betz, Gideon Bohak, Derek Collins, Matthew Dickie, Christopher Faraone, John Gager, Fritz Graf, Sarah Iles Johnston, David Jordan, Todd Klutz, Roy Kotansky, Georg Luck, Marvin Meyer, Paul Mireki, Daniel Ogden, Peter Schaefer and Shaul Shaked is testimony to the current interest in magic in antiquity (cf. Silke Trzcionka, *Magic and the Supernatural in Fourth-Century Syria* [London: Routledge 2007] 2), and the surveys and reviews by, e.g., D. Frankfurter, “Luke’s *μαγεία* and Garrett’s Magic,” *USQR* 47 (1993) 81–82; W.M. Brashear, “Out of the Closet: Recent Corpora of Magical Texts,” *CP* 91 (1996) 372–383; P. Green, “The Methods of Ancient Magic,” *Times Literary Supplement* April 19 (2002) 5–6; S.I. Johnston, “Describing the Undefinable: New Books on Magic and Old Problems of Definition,” *HR* 43 (2003) 50–54; E.P. Cueva, “Recent Texts on the Ancient World and the Occult,” *CB* 82 (2006) 181–207; David E. Aune, “‘Magic’ in Early Christianity and Its Ancient Mediterranean Context: A Survey of Some Recent Scholarship,” *ASE* 24 (2007) 229–294 (esp. 229).

7 J.Z. Smith, “Trading Places,” *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power* (eds. M. Meyer – P. Mirecki) (RGRW 129; Leiden: Brill 1995) 16.

8 As an example, Smith notes the observation of the Zande people by E. E. Evans-Pritchard that ‘A witch performs no rite, utters no spell and possesses no medicines. An act of witchcraft is a psychic act.’ Smith, “Trading Places,” 16, citing E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford: Clarendon 1937) 21.

Z. Smith, that ‘It is the accused individual or group, and their network of social relations ... that is held to be the prime motivation for the charge.’⁹ This increasingly accepted socially constructed understanding of magic was nicely simplified and summarised some years earlier in the oft-quoted statement by Robert M. Grant: ‘in polemical writing, your magic is my miracle, and vice versa.’¹⁰ In other words, magic is a socially constructed label used to identify opponents and their ideas and activities.¹¹

As the meaning of magic varies, to answer our question, was Jesus considered a magician, we have to do two things. Of course, on the one hand, we need to give close attention to the texts that help answer our question. On the other hand, we also need to keep in mind that, if we are not conscious of them and manage them well, our twenty-first-century notions of magic are likely to inhibit our investigations significantly.

Given that Wikipedia values the freedom that allows anyone to edit it, those twenty-first-century ideas about magic that may cloud our thinking are probably reasonably reflected in this vilified though popular fount of contemporary knowledge.¹² Wikipedia says that ‘magic’ can refer to a number of things for us.¹³ (a) One article suggests magic or illusion can be ‘a performing art that entertains audiences by staging tricks or creating illusions of seemingly impossible or supernatural feats’.¹⁴ (b) Magic can also refer to the paranormal, ‘an attempt to understand and exploit supernatural forces, using rituals, symbols, actions, gestures and language’.¹⁵ Further (c), as in some of the writings of C. S. Lewis or J. K. Rowlings, magic can refer to fantasy or the fictional treatment of magic

⁹ Smith, “Trading Places,” 19.

¹⁰ R.M. Grant, *Gnosticism and Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (New York – London: Columbia University Press 1966) 93. Grant is also quoted by, e.g., W.D. Davies – D.C. Allison, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (ICC; Edinburgh: Clark 1991) II, 338; H.S. Versnel, “Some Reflections on the Relationship Magic–Religion,” *Numen* 38 (1991) 189, 190; N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK 1996) 189n169; Peter Schäfer, “Magic and Religion in Ancient Judaism,” *Envisioning Magic: A Princeton Seminar and Symposium* (eds. P. Schäfer – H.G. Kippenberg) (Leiden – New York – Cologne: Brill 1997) 22; Aune, “‘Magic’ in Early Christianity,” 260; K.B. Stratton, *Naming the Witch: Magic, Ideology, & Stereotype in the Ancient World* (New York: Columbia University Press 2007) 7–8; and not always attributed; e.g., see A.M. Reimer, “Virtual Prison Breaks: Non-Escape Narratives and the Definition of ‘Magic’,” *Magic in the Biblical World: From the Rod of Aaron to the Ring of Solomon* (ed. T.E. Klutz) (London – New York: Clark 2003) 128.

¹¹ Cf. A.M. Reimer, *Miracle and Magic: A Study in the Acts of the Apostles and the Life of Apollonius of Tyana* (JSNTSup 235; London: Sheffield Academic 2002) 8n25.

¹² Cf. K. Osman, “The Free Encyclopaedia that Anyone can Edit: The Shifting Values of Wikipedia Editors,” *Culture Unbound* 6/3 (2014) 593–607. DOI 10.3384/cu.2000.1525.146593. Also, see P. Koniczny, “Teaching with Wikipedia in a 21st-Century Classroom: Perceptions of Wikipedia and Its Educational Benefits,” *JASIST* 67/7 (2016) 1523–1534. DOI 10.1002/asi.23616.

¹³ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magic>.

¹⁴ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magic_\(illusion\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magic_(illusion)).

¹⁵ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magic_\(paranormal\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magic_(paranormal)).

in literature.¹⁶ (d) Another contemporary category of magic can be the portrayal of magic in roleplaying games. Most famous of these is ‘Dungeons & Dragons’.¹⁷

In our investigations we need to keep in mind not only that there is no substantive definition of magic, but also, therefore, that these, our contemporary, notions of magic may bear little or no relationship to any accusation directed against Jesus. We need to be vigilant against using our understanding of magic as determinative in the discussions of whether or not Jesus was considered a magician. With this in mind, to answer our question, was Jesus considered a magician, we will begin by setting out the main contours of the debate.

2. The Current Debate

The words ‘magician’ (μάγος)¹⁸ or ‘sorcerer’ (γόης)¹⁹ are not descriptions used of Jesus in the New Testament. Yet, the question as to whether or not Jesus was seen as a magician remains and is controversial.²⁰ On the one hand, Morton Smith (1915–1991) began his book *Jesus the Magician* by asserting that “‘Jesus the magician’ was the figure seen by most ancient opponents of Jesus’. Smith went on to say that ‘the works that pictured “Jesus the magician” were destroyed in antiquity after Christians got control of the Roman empire’.²¹ Nevertheless, Smith argued that there remain in the Gospels a great many hints that Jesus was functioning as a magician.

David E. Aune (1939–) also concluded that Jesus made ‘use of magical techniques which must be regarded as magical’, and that the ‘wonders performed by Jesus are magical’.²² Aune says that, ‘The great gulf which some New Testament scholars would place between “the powerful works of the Son” and “magical

16 E.g., C.S. Lewis, *The Magician’s Nephew* (New York: Macmillan 1955); and the Harry Potter books by J. K. Rowling.

17 <http://www.wizards.com/dnd/>; D. Waters, ‘What Happened to Dungeons and Dragons?’, BBC News Online (26 April, 2004). http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/3655627.stm.

18 Μάγος (“magician”) occurs in the NT at Acts 13:6, 8 of Elymas and, in the plural (μάγοι), of the magi in Matt 2:1, 7, 16 (2x). The verb μαγεύω (“practice magic,” Acts 8:9) and the noun μαγεία (“magic,” 8:11) is used of Simon the magician.

19 Γόης (‘sorcerer’) occurs in the NT only at 2 Tim 3:13, paralleled with ‘evil men’: ‘evil men and swindlers’ or ‘seducers’, ‘sorcerers’ or ‘magicians’ (πονηροὶ δὲ ἄνθρωποι καὶ γόητες), ‘leading astray and being led astray’ (πλανώτης καὶ πλανώμενοι).

20 B. Kollmann, “Jesus and Magic: The Question of Miracles,” *Handbook for the Study of the Historical Jesus* (eds. T. Holmén – S.E. Porter) (Leiden: Brill 2011) IV, 3057.

21 Smith, *Jesus the Magician*, vii.

22 Aune, “Magic in Early Christianity,” 400, 401.

incantations” is simply nonexistent’.²³ Similarly, Graham Stanton (1940–2009) stated: ‘In his healing miracles and exorcisms Jesus undoubtedly used techniques which would have been perceived by contemporaries to be magical’.²⁴

On the other hand, in *Jesus and Magic*, Richard Horsley (1939–) comes to the conclusion that Jesus was not performing magic.²⁵ Indeed, Horsley put the point sharply and with emphasis: there is ‘no basis in ancient sources for applying the scholarly construct of ancient magic to the healings and exorcisms of Jesus’.²⁶

In the light of such divergent views, the purpose of this lecture is to re-examine the evidence in order to come to our own conclusions as to whether or not Jesus was considered a magician. It will be argued not only that second- and third-century critics most obviously charged Jesus with being a magician, but that, with the benefit of noting how these critics understood Jesus, we will be able to see that embedded in the gospel accounts is evidence that some of those who witnessed his ministry also considered him a magician. It will be seen that at least not all the evidence has been destroyed and that the reasons why Jesus was considered a magician had nothing to do with his techniques as a healer. Some of the possible implications of our conclusions will be considered in a contemporary coda (§8 below). Our examination of the evidence commences with post-canonical literature.

3. Post-Canonical Literature

To answer our question, was Jesus considered a magician? and, if so, to determine why, we will examine data in the Gospels. However, because the evidence is clearest in them, we will begin by cross-examining, in chronological order, the early non-Christian witnesses Morton Smith called to make his case: Josephus, Tacitus, Pliny, Suetonius, Celsus and rabbinic literature.²⁷ Then, still calling on

²³ Aune, “Magic in Early Christianity,” 394, citing E. Stauffer, “ἐπιτιμία, ἐπιτιμία,” TDNT II, 626, as making this artificial distinction.

²⁴ G.N. Stanton, “Jesus of Nazareth: A Magician and a False Prophet who Deceived God’s People?,” *Jesus of Nazareth: Lord and Christ: Essays on the Historical Jesus and New Testament Christology* (eds. J.B. Green – M. Turner) (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans – Carlisle, UK: Paternoster 1994) 164–180, revised and cited here as “Jesus of Nazareth: A Magician and a False Prophet who Deceived God’s People?,” G.N. Stanton, *Jesus and Gospel* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press 2004) 145.

²⁵ R.A. Horsley, *Jesus and Magic: Freeing the Gospel Stories from Modern Misconceptions* (Eugene, OR: Cascade 2014) 163; cf. 35.

²⁶ Horsley, *Jesus and Magic*, 68, his emphasis. Concluding similarly, see P. Busch, “War Jesus ein Magier?,” ZNT 4 (2001) 29–30.

²⁷ Without any confidence or certain conclusions, Smith, *Jesus the Magician*, 56–57, also discusses Lucian of Samosata. See also P. Gemeinhardt, “Magier, Weiser, Gott. Das Bild Jesu bei paganen

those outside the canon, we will turn to the Christian witness of Quadratus and Justin Martyr, on whom Morton Smith also depends. While these writers are not first-hand observers of Jesus' ministry they may reflect long-established and possibly historically reliable assessments of him. If so, in turn, these texts could be expected to help us more sensitively read the earlier canonical data for evidence that Jesus was seen as a magician by his contemporaries.

(a) Flavius Josephus (c.37–c.100 CE). Smith brings in this Jewish writer as his first outside, non-canonical witness for his case that Jesus was a magician.²⁸ In the extant text of *Jewish Antiquities* there is a paragraph on Jesus (Ant. 18.63–64).²⁹ Opinions on the authenticity of the so-called *Testimonium Flavianum* vary.³⁰ The majority view, accepted here, is that although during its history Christian tradents have modified the text, his interest in events and movements such as that initi-

antiken Autoren," *Jesus in apokryphen Evangelienüberlieferungen: Beiträge zu außerkanonischen Jesusüberlieferungen aus verschiedenen Sprach- und Kulturtraditionen* (eds. J. Frey – J. Schröter) (WUNT 254; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2010) 467–492.

²⁸ Smith, *Jesus the Magician*, 45–46.

²⁹ J.W. probably came out after 75 CE. See T. Rajak, *Josephus* (London: Duckworth 2002) 195n23 and 237–238. On the history of the discussion of the paragraph, see A. Whealey, *Josephus on Jesus: The Testimonium Flavianum Controversy From Late Antiquity to Modern Times* (StBibLit 36; New York: Lang 2003).

³⁰ For an older list of those holding various views, see P. Winter, "Excursus II: Josephus on Jesus and James: Ant. xviii 3, 3 (63–64) and xx 9, 1 (200–203)," *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ* (ed. E. Schürer et al.) (Edinburgh: Clark 1973) I, 428–430. More recent lists are supplied by C.A. Evans, "Jesus in Non-Christian Sources," *Studying the Historical Jesus: Evaluations of the State of Research* (eds. B.D. Chilton – C.A. Evans) (NTTS 19; Leiden: Brill 1998) 466–468; and F. Bermejo-Rubio, "Was the Hypothetical Vorlage of the *Testimonium Flavianum* a 'Neutral' Text? Challenging the Common Wisdom on *Antiquitates Judaicae* 18.63–64," *JSJ* 45 (2014) 327–329. On the Syria and Arabic versions of the *Testimonium Flavianum*, see A. Whealey, "The *Testimonium Flavianum* in Syriac and Arabic," *NTS* 54 (2008) 573–590, who argues that the only change to the *textus receptus* in Michael the Syrian's text, which is loosely paraphrased in the Arabic chronicle of Agapius of Hierapolis, 'is the alteration of the phrase "he was thought to be the Messiah" to the *textus receptus* phrase "he was the Messiah"' (588).

on Eusebius (c.264–c.340 CE) being the author of the *Testimonium Flavianum* (cf. Eusebius, *Dem. ev.* 3.5.124; *Hist. eccl.* 1.11.7–8; *Theoph.* 5.44) see S. Zeitlin, "The Christ Passage in Josephus," *JQR* (1927–1928) 231–255; S. Zeitlin, *Josephus on Jesus, with Particular Reference to the Slavonic Josephus and the Hebrew Josippon* (Philadelphia: Dropsie College for Hebrew and Cognate Learning 1931) 61–64; K.A. Olson, "Eusebius and the *Testimonium Flavianum*," *CBQ* 61 (1999) 305–322; K.A. Olson, "A Eusebian Reading of the *Testimonium Flavianum*," *Eusebius of Caesarea: Tradition and Innovations* (eds. A. Johnson – J. Schott) (*Hellenic Studies* 60; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press – Center for Hellenic Studies 2013) 97–114; L.H. Feldman, "On the Authenticity of the *Testimonium Flavianum* Attributed to Josephus," *New Perspectives on Jewish Christian Relations* (eds. E. Carlebach – J.J. Schechter) (Leiden: Brill 2012) 14–30. To the contrary, e.g., see J. Carleton Paget, "Some Observations on Josephus and Christianity," *JTS* 52 (2001) 539–624; A. Whealey, "Josephus, Eusebius of Caesarea, and the *Testimonium Flavianum*," *Josephus und das Neue Testament* (eds. C. Böttrich – J. Herzer) (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2007) 73–116. On Origen's allusion to the *Testimonium* (Origen, *Cels.* 1.47), see Whealey, *Josephus on Jesus*, 12–18.

ated by Jesus in Palestine in the period³¹ suggest that Josephus is likely to have mentioned Jesus.³²

On critical examination of the extant text of the *Testimonium Flavianum*, the first few lines of what Josephus wrote can be reconstructed as:

‘About this time there lived a certain³³ Jesus, a wise man.³⁴ For he was one who wrought surprising feats and was a teacher of such people as accept the unusual gladly. And he won over (ἐπηγάγετο) many Jews and many Greeks’ (Ant. 18.63).³⁵

It is the interpretation of the statement ‘And he won over many Jews and many Greeks’ that is critical in deciding whether or not Josephus considered Jesus a magician. In line with an earlier translation of ἐπάγω as ‘seduce’,³⁶ Smith takes Josephus to mean that Jesus ‘led <astray>³⁷ many Jews and many of the Gentiles’.³⁸ Stanton finds support for this reading in the lexical definition of ἐπάγω: ‘to cause a state or condition to be or occur, ... mostly something bad’.³⁹ However, a careful examination of the work of Josephus shows that, over against

31 Cf. Josephus, Ant. 18.4–10, 23–25; 20:97–99, 102; J.W. 2.118, 433; 7.253, 437–442. See G.H. Twelftree, “Jesus in Jewish Traditions,” *The Jesus Tradition Outside the Gospels* (ed. D. Wenham) (Gospel Perspectives 5; Sheffield, UK: JSOT 1984) 296.

32 See the discussion in Twelftree, “Jesus in Jewish Traditions,” 303–307. Cf., e.g., A.A. Bell, “Josephus the Satirist: A Clue to the Original Form of the *Testimonium Flavianum*,” *JQR* 67 (1976) 17; L.H. Feldman, *Josephus* (LCL; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press – London: Heinemann 1981) IX, 49nb; Carleton Paget, “Some Observations on Josephus and Christianity,” 572–578; Bermejo-Rubio, “Was the Hypothetical Vorlage of the *Testimonium Flavianum* a ‘Neutral’ Text?,” 328.

33 On the probable originality of τις (‘a certain one’), which occurs only in Codex A of Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.*, see the discussion by Carleton Paget, “Some Observations on Josephus and Christianity,” 565; Bermejo-Rubio, “Was the Hypothetical Vorlage of the *Testimonium Flavianum* a ‘Neutral’ Text?,” 357–358.

34 In the extant text, the phrase immediately following here—‘if indeed one ought to call him a man’ (εἰ γὰρ ἄνδρα αὐτὸν λέγειν χρή ἦν, Josephus, Ant. 18.63)—implies that Jesus was more than a man and, therefore, likely to be from a Christian hand. Cf., e.g., A. Pelletier, “Ce que Josèphe a dit de Jésus (Ant. XVIII 63–64),” *REJ* 124 (1965) 14; E. Bammel, “Zum *Testimonium Flavianum* (Jos Ant 18, 63–64),” *Josephus-Studien Untersuchungen zu Josephus, dem antiken Judentum und dem Neuen Testament*, O. Michel Festschrift (eds. O. Betz – K. Haacker – M. Hengel) (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1974) 18, reprinted in E. Bammel, *Judaica: kleine Schriften* (WUNT 1.37; Tübingen: Mohr 1986) I, 186; J.P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus. I. The Roots of the Problem and the Person* (New York: Doubleday 1991) 60.

35 My translation. See the discussion in Twelftree, “Jesus in Jewish Traditions,” 301–308.

36 R. Eisler, *The Messiah Jesus and John the Baptist* (New York: Dial 1931) 61–62.

37 In his Preface Smith, *Jesus the Magician*, viii, says that in his ‘translations, pointed brackets <> frame words added to make the sense clear’.

38 Smith, *Jesus the Magician*, 46. The text of Josephus, Ant. 18.63 reads: καὶ πολλοὺς μὲν Ἰουδαίους πολλοὺς δὲ καὶ τοῦ Ἑλληνικοῦ ἐπηγάγετο. For a case that this statement is likely to come from Josephus, see Twelftree, “Jesus in Jewish Traditions,” 305–306.

39 BDAG, “ἐπάγω,” 356.

the lexical definition, he uses ἐπάγω mostly in a positive or neutral sense.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, as we can show, the context of his statement most probably requires the reading that Josephus thought Jesus had deceived people and was, therefore, a magician.⁴¹

There is probably support for a view that Josephus thought Jesus a magician in calling him a ‘teacher’, for many of his references to teachers are negative.⁴² Indeed, Josephus has said that Jesus was a teacher of ‘those who accept the unusual gladly’. In the term ‘gladly’ or ‘pleasure’ (ἡδονή),⁴³ there is very often a negative connotation of an evil or sensual desire.⁴⁴ Also, Josephus goes on to say that even after being crucified his followers ‘did not give up their affection for him’, probably intending to imply they were deceived. Moreover, consistent with τις (‘a certain one’) which, with proper names, commonly carried a sense of contempt or is deprecatory,⁴⁵ towards the end of the statement about Jesus, Josephus is probably sarcastic in saying that, ‘the prophets of God had prophesied these and countless marvellous things about him’ (Josephus, Ant. 8.64). For Josephus, then, the miracles of Jesus, as well as his misleading teaching, were the grounds for his implying that he was a magician.

In short, Smith and Stanton’s reading of Jesus as deceiving or leading many astray most probably does reflect what Josephus had in mind. Importantly for the

⁴⁰ Aside from Ant. 18.63, the reference in question, Josephus uses ἐπάγω neutrally or positively 66 times (Ant. 1:162, 165, 207, 208, 243, 263, 326; 2:173, 182; 3:100; 4:273; 5:96, 217, 318; 6: 196, 232, 311, 355; 7:7, 263; 8:167, 254, 261, 380; 11:29, 122, 199, 339; 13:190; 14:354, 361; 15:126, 170; 16:376; 17:97, 219, 225, 312, 327; 18: 97; 19: 341, 363; 20:7, 55, 78, 149, 252; J.W. 1:103, 172; 2:21, 527; 3:454; 4:130; 7:164; Life 1:107, 112, 118, 119, 153, 201, 219, 331, 387; Ag. Ap. 1:242, 271, 275), negatively 30 times (Ant. 1: 208, 311; 4:128; 5: 210, 259; 6:97; 10:150; 12:334, 383; 13: 382; 14:79, 317, 371; 15:92, 139, 174, 366; 18: 197, 277, 19:105, 110; 20: 163, 166; J.W. 1:19; 2: 374, 511, 597; 5:39, 396; 6:110; Life 1:18), and in the remaining 9 uses the term could be read either way (Ant. 4: 229; 13:101; 15: 277; 16:86; 18: 346; J.W. 1: 275; 6: 131; 7: 330; Life 1: 115).

⁴¹ For a credible case that the Vorlage of the Testimonium Flavianum was at least implicitly negative, see Bermejo-Rubio, “Was the Hypothetical Vorlage of the Testimonium Flavianum a ‘Neutral’ Text?,” 326–365. Further on general tenor of the Testimonium Flavianum, see Carleton Paget, “Some Observations on Josephus and Christianity,” 616–619.

⁴² Apart from Ant. 18.63, which is under discussion, of the 16 uses of διδάσκαλος, Josephus uses the word positively 9 times (Ant. 3.49; 13.115; 15.373; 18.16; 20.46; Life 274; Ag. Ap. 1.176, 178; 2.145) and negatively 7 times (Ant. 1.61; 17.325, 334; 19.172; 20.41; J.W. 7.442, 444). See Twelftree, “Jesus in Jewish Traditions,” 304 and n80, and, more recently, Bermejo-Rubio, “Was the Hypothetical Vorlage of the Testimonium Flavianum a ‘Neutral’ Text?,” 354.

⁴³ In the works of Josephus, ἡδονή is common, occurring 127 times, 50 of them in Antiquities 17–19, a section likely the responsibility of a separate amanuensis. See H.St.J. Thackeray, Josephus, The Man and the Historian (New York: Ktav 1967) 108–110.

⁴⁴ E.g., see Josephus, Ant. 18.6, 59, 70, 77, 85, 176. Cf. Twelftree, “Jesus in Jewish Traditions,” 304, followed by Bermejo-Rubio, “Was the Hypothetical Vorlage of the Testimonium Flavianum a ‘Neutral’ Text?,” 354.

⁴⁵ LSJ, 1796, citing Homer, Iliad 5.9; Xenophon, Anabasis 3.1.4; Sophocles, Philoctetes 442. Cf. BDF §301. Also, see Acts 25:14, 19; Rom 3:8; 1 Cor 4:18; 15:34; 2 Cor 3:1; 1 Tim 1:3, 19; 2 Pet 3:9; Josephus, Ant. 18.4 (codices MWE); J.W. 2.118, 433. Twelftree, “Jesus in Jewish Traditions,” 332n69.

case that Jesus was considered a magician, as Stanton notes, and as we will see, this understanding of Josephus brings his view of Jesus close to that of a ‘deceiver of the people’ (λαοπλάνοϛ), a term used by Justin Martyr of magicians.⁴⁶ Given its authenticity, the historical value of the statement by Josephus for our project is probably high as he does not appear to be depending on Christian sources, at least not those known to us.⁴⁷ He is, therefore, likely to be handing on an earlier independent tradition about Jesus misleading people, a tradition that takes us to around at least as early as the writing of the Gospels.

(b) Publius Cornelius Tacitus. Morton Smith also calls on Tacitus (c.56–after 118 C.E.) to support his view that the Christians, and by implication their founder, practised magic. In his description of Nero’s suppression of the rumour that the fire of Rome had been ordered, Tacitus says ‘Nero fabricated scapegoats’. Tacitus goes on to say that large numbers of Christians were condemned, ‘not so much for incendiarism as for the hatred of the human race’ (Annals 15.44).

Smith says this accusation – ‘hatred of the human race’ (odium humani generis)⁴⁸ – is ‘most plausibly understood as referring to magic’. He attempts to connect the phrase with magic by showing that magic and cannibalism were connected.⁴⁹ However, he provides no evidence that hatred of the human race was

⁴⁶ See Justin Martyr, Dial. 69.7 (cf. §3 (h) below); and Stanton, *Jesus and Gospel*, 133.

⁴⁷ G.J. Goldberg, “The Coincidences of the Emmaus Narrative of Luke and the Testimonium of Josephus,” *JSP* 13 (1995) 77, speculates that Josephus obtained his information from the Jerusalem church.

Views on the relationship between Josephus and the NT, notably Luke and Acts, have fluctuated. In the nineteenth century M. Krenkel, *Josephus und Lucas: Der schriftstellerische Einfluss des jüdischen Geschichtsschreibers auf den christlichen Nachgewesen* (Leipzig: Haessel 1894), in particular, defended the view that Luke was dependent on Josephus. Then, for most of the twentieth century, this view was generally seen as ‘not quite conclusive’ – F.J. Foakes Jackson – K. Lake (eds.), *The Beginnings of Christianity. Part I. The Acts of the Apostles* (London: Macmillan 1920–1933) II, 357–358 (cf. 355–358, and those cited) – or ‘highly speculative’ – J.A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles* (AB 31; New York – London: Doubleday 1998) 53 (and those cited); also, see F.F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans – Leicester, UK: Apollos 1990) 43–44. More recently, for some there has been a return to at least limited confidence in seeing Luke depending on Josephus. E.g., see S. Mason, *Josephus and the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson 2003) 291–293; S. Mason, *Josephus, Judea, and Christian Origins: Methods and Categories* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson 2009) 372–373; R.I. Pervo, *Acts* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress 2009) 12. Others maintain that Josephus and the NT authors wrote independently of each other. E.g., see H. Schreckenberg, “Flavius Josephus und die lukanischen Schriften,” *Wort in der Zeit: Neutestamentliche Studien, Festgabe für Karl Heinrich Rengstorf* (eds. W. Haubeck – M. Bachmann) (Leiden: Brill 1980) 179–209 (and bibliography, 207–209); and L.H. Feldman – G. Hata (eds.), *Josephus, Judaism, and Christianity* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press 1987) 317.

⁴⁸ On taking *humani generis* as an objective genitive see J.T. Walsh, “On Christian Atheism,” *VC* 45 (1991) 258, citing H. Fuchs, “Der Bericht über die Christen in den Annalen des Tacitus,” Tacitus (ed. V. Pöschl) (*Weg der Forschung* 97; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 1969) 578–584.

⁴⁹ Smith, *Jesus the Magician*, 52, citing principally Lucan, *Pharsalia* 6.706–711. Further, see Smith, *Jesus the Magician*, 180 (notes to page 52).

a charge related to cannibalism. Also, Smith's view that Tacitus was charging the Christians with something different from that of the Jews runs against the evidence. For Tacitus also characterizes Jews as displaying a similar hatred of fellow humans (Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.5.2).⁵⁰ Indeed, in this, Tacitus was probably dependent on a longstanding view of Jews.⁵¹ In fact, the epithet 'hatred of the human race' was more generally used of misanthropy.⁵² In other words, Tacitus is saying that the Christians were arrested 'not so much for incendiarism as for their anti-social behaviour', as Michael Grant translates it.⁵³ Therefore, the witness of Tacitus must be ruled inadmissible in an attempt to show that the followers of Jesus were thought to be involved in magic.⁵⁴

(c) Pliny the Younger. Morton Smith draws attention to the celebrated letter that Pliny (c.61/62–c.112 CE), when governor of Bithynia-Pontus (from c.110), wrote to the emperor Trajan.⁵⁵ In describing the Christians Pliny said, 'they were accustomed on a fixed day to assemble before dawn to sing a hymn antiphonally to Christ as a god' (Letters 10.96.7).⁵⁶

50 See the brief discussion by Erwin J. Urch, "Early Roman Understanding of Christianity," *CJ* 27 (1932) 257. Cf. E. Zeller, "Das odium generis humani der Christen," *ZWT* 34 (1891) 356–367.

51 Diodorus Siculus (first century BCE) also says, 'the Jewish nation had made their hatred of mankind into a tradition' (Bib. 34.1.2). The view was still current in the late second century for Celsus says that the Jews are 'proud and turn away from the society of others' (Origen, *Cels.* 5.41), and that they 'wall themselves off and break away from the rest of mankind' (8.2). See M. Borret, *Origène Contre Celse* (SC 150; Paris: Cerf 1967–1976) IV, 182–183n3.

52 See Seneca, *Tranq.* 15.1 (*odium generis humani*); Pliny, *Nat.* 7.80; Syme, *Tacitus*, 2.530n5. On the accusation by Plutarch and Epictetus that the Epicureans hated the human race in that they withdrew from society, see L.T. Johnson, *Among the Gentiles: Greco-Roman Religion and Christianity* (AYBRL; New Haven – London: Yale University Press 2009) 34, 69, 106, 107, 113, 328, 329, citing Plutarch, *Against Colotes* 22 (Mor., 1119F); 27 (Mor., 1123A); 33 (Mor., 1126E–1127C); Epicurus, *Sovereign Maxims* 19, 20, 21, 37, 41; Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.23.1–103.7.19–28.

53 M. Grant, *Tacitus: The Annals of Imperial Rome* (London: Penguin 1989) 365. Also, see Zeller, "Das odium generis humani der Christen," 367; H. Furneaux, *Cornelii Taciti: Annalium ab Excessu Divi Augusti Libri. The Annals of Tacitus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1896, Oxford: Clarendon 1907) II, 375–376; E.M. Smallwood, "Domitian's Attitude towards the Jews and Judaism," *CP* 51 (1956) 5–7.

54 Cf. Walsh, "On Christian Atheism," 271n25.

55 Pliny, Letters 10.96. On the probable authenticity and integrity of the letter see A. N. Sherwin-White, *The Letters of Pliny: A Historical and Social Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1998) 691–692.

56 Pliny, Letters 10.96.7: *quod essent soliti stato die ante lucem convenire, carmenque Christo quasi deo dicere secum invicem seque*. This statement has been subject to intense scrutiny, particularly by liturgists. See D.H. Tripp, "Pliny and the Liturgy – Yet Again," *StPatr* 15 (1984) 581–585; J.C. Salzmänn, "Pliny (ep. 10,96) and Christian liturgy – A Reconsideration," *StPatr* 20 (1989) 389–395; M. Daly-Denton, "Singing Hymns to Christ As to A God (cf. Pliny Ep. X, 96)," *The Jewish Roots of Christological Monotheism* (eds. C.C. Newman – J.R. Davila – G.S. Lewis) (SJSJ 63; Leiden: Brill 1999) 277–292; A.C. Stewart, "The Christological Form of the Earliest Syntaxis: The Evidence of Pliny," *SL* 41 (2011) 1–8. Liturgists have supposed that in the context of Pliny's statement the *carmen* ('song') referred to an antiphonal hymn, or a responsive prayer, or question-and-answer baptismal confession. Cf. Sherwin-White, *The Letters of Pliny*, 704–705.

In an attempt to establish that Roman authorities thought Christianity ‘was an organisation for the practice of magic’ Smith takes *carmen* to refer to the singing of spells.⁵⁷ Indeed, ‘recite a song’ (*carmen . . . dicere*) could suggest Pliny thought the Christians were reciting a magical rite, for elsewhere he uses *carmen* of a sacred formula of an oath.⁵⁸

However, there is much to be said against Smith’s supposition. (1) The phrase *carmen . . . dicere* ordinarily referred to singing a song.⁵⁹ In particular, (2) Horace (65 BCE–8 CE) used forms of the phrase to refer to singing to the gods.⁶⁰ Then, (3) Tertullian (160–220 CE), our earliest ‘commentator’ on Pliny’s letter, took the phrase to mean ‘sing to Christ’ (*canendum Christo*; Tertullian, *Apology* 2.6).⁶¹ Also, (4) as the *carmen* to Christ is linked to the phrase ‘as a god’ (*quasi deo*), it is more likely to be a hymn of praise than a magical spell.⁶² It is not reasonable, therefore, to conclude with Smith that Pliny thought that the early Christians, or by extrapolation their founder, were involved in magic.

(d) Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus. Suetonius (c.70–c.130 CE), best known for biographies of emperors from Caesar to Domitian,⁶³ says that during the reign of Nero a great many public abuses were suppressed (Nero 16.2). Suetonius is important to us for Smith renders one of those acts of suppression as: ‘Penalties were imposed on the Christians, a kind of men <holding> a new superstition <that involved the practice> of magic’ (16.2).⁶⁴ Smith has added the specification that the Christians were practising something in particular, and translated *maleficus* as ‘magic’.⁶⁵ A more literal rendering would be: ‘Punishments were inflicted on Christians, a class of people with a new and evil superstition’.⁶⁶ Smith’s objection that the word ‘evil’ would have been too vague to be a legal accusation under Roman law is without grounds.⁶⁷ Apart from major specified crimes in the

⁵⁷ Smith, *Jesus the Magician*, 53.

⁵⁸ Pliny, *Panegyricus* 92.3; cf. Sherwin-White, *The Letters of Pliny*, 705.

⁵⁹ Sherwin-White, *The Letters of Pliny*, 705, cites Seneca, ep. 108.11; *Acta Arvalium*; see H. Dessau, *Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae* (Berlin: Weidmannos 1902) II/1, 5040.3.

⁶⁰ Horace, *Carmen saeculare* 8; *Odes*, 4.12.9–10. See the discussion by R.P. Martin, *A Hymn of Christ: Philippians 2:5–11 in Recent Interpretation & in the Setting of Early Christian Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity 1997) 8.

⁶¹ Cf. Martin, *A Hymn of Christ*, 7–8.

⁶² Cf. Salzmann, “Pliny (ep. 10,96) and Christian Liturgy – A Reconsideration,” 392; Sherwin-White, *The Letters of Pliny*, 705.

⁶³ B. Baldwin, *Suetonius* (Amsterdam: Hakkert 1983) 1–51; A. Wallace-Hadrill, *Suetonius: The Scholar and His Caesars* (New Haven – London: Yale University Press 1984) 3–8.

⁶⁴ Smith, *Jesus the Magician*, 50.

⁶⁵ So also W.H.C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church* (Oxford: Blackwell 1965) 163.

⁶⁶ My translation. See Suetonius, *Nero* 16.2: *afflicti suppliciiis Christiani, genus hominum superstitionis nouae ac maleficae*.

⁶⁷ Smith, *Jesus the Magician*, 33.

statutes, Roman governors were largely left to their own discretion in identifying and punishing crimes.⁶⁸

The adjective *maleficus* had a basic range of meanings around the idea of ‘evil’ or ‘wicked’; it was a catch-all term for something bad or evil.⁶⁹ The meaning could extend to ‘magic’,⁷⁰ but not without qualification or context.⁷¹ Therefore, without qualification or a determining context, Suetonius describing Christians as ‘people with a new and evil superstition’ is not credible evidence that he thought they were punished because of their involvement with magic.

(e) Celsus. There is no doubt that Celsus, now principally known for his systematic attack on Christianity in *True Doctrine* (written probably between 175 and 181 CE),⁷² charged Jesus and his followers with practicing magic. Origen, who preserves much of the text of *True Doctrine*, reports that Celsus considered

68 Cf. Pliny, *Letters* 10.96.3; Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.44. Also see A.N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1963) 13–23; C.R. Phillips, “Nulum Crimen sine Lege: Socioreligious Sanctions on Magic,” *Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion* (eds. C.A. Faraone – D. Obbink) (New York – Oxford: Oxford University Press 1991) 260–276.

69 Cicero, e.g., can describe Dionysius I of Syracuse (c.430–367 BCE), though temperate in his way of life, as ‘evil and unjust by nature’ (*maleficum natura et iniustum*; *Tusc.* 5.20.57). Cicero also describes a prison ‘for foreigners, for wicked people [*malefici sceleratique homines*], for pirates, and for enemies’ (*Verr.* 2.5.144). For further examples, see C.T. Lewis – C. Short, s.v. “*maleficus*,” *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon 1879). Tacitus says that in the floor and walls of the bedroom of the ailing Germanicus ‘the remains of human bodies, spells, curses, lead tablets inscribed with the patient’s name, charred and bloody ashes, and other malignant objects [*malefica*]’ were found (*Ann.* 2.69). Further examples, see P.G.W. Glare – C. Stray, “*maleficus*,” *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2012) 1174.

70 See Glare – Stray, “*maleficus*,” 1174.

71 In his defense against the charge of magic, Apuleius uses *magus* and *maleficus* as synonyms (*Apol.* 51.27). And in his *Metamorphoses* Apuleius describes the ‘magical enticements’ (*inlecebras magiae*) of a woman as *maleficus* (*Metam.* 3.16).

72 For the date of Celsus see *Cels.* 8.69, 71, and the discussion by Henry Chadwick, *Origen: Contra Celsum* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1965) xxvi–xxviii. On the identity of Celsus, see Chadwick, *Origen*, xxiv–xxix; R.J. Hoffmann, *Celsus On the True Doctrine: A Discourse Against the Christians* (New York – Oxford: Oxford University Press 1987) 30–33; H.E. Lona, *Die ‘Wahre Lehre’ des Kelsos* (*Kommentar zu frühchristlichen Apologeten 1*; Freiburg–Basel–Vienna: Herder 2005) 27–50.

Wherever Celsus is to be located (Rome, Alexandria, Caesarea Maritima or Pergamum) – S. Goranson, “Celsus of Pergamum: Locating a Critic of Early Christianity,” *The Archaeology of Difference: Gender, Ethnicity, Class and the ‘Other’ in Antiquity: Studies in Honor of Eric M. Meyers* (eds. D.R. Edwards – C.T. McCollough) (Boston, MA: American Schools of Oriental Research 2007) 363–369 – his travels through Phoenicia and Palestine (*Cels.* 7.3–11) most likely gave him wide access to information about Christianity. The immediate importance of Celsus is that his critique of Jesus and Christianity depended not on hearsay but on his observations and knowledge of Jewish-Christian literature. E.g., see Origen, *Cels.* 1.26; cf. A.D. Nock, *Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1933) 205; M. Borret, “Sources et Influence du ‘Discours Véritable’,” *Origène Contre Celse* (ed. M. Borret) (*SC* 227; Paris: Cerf 1976) 183–198; S. Benko, “Pagan Criticism of Christianity During the First Two Centuries A.D.,” *ANRW* 2/23/2 (1980) 1101–1102.

Jesus a magician (μάγος, Cels. 1.38), calling him a sorcerer (γόης)⁷³ and saying that it was by magic (μαγεία, 1.38; cf. 1.57, 68) or sorcery (γοητεία)⁷⁴ – which are synonyms for both writers⁷⁵ – that Jesus was able to do miracles.⁷⁶

Through the interchange in which Origen engages with Celsus it is clear they share a common view of magic. First, for example, for both writers the results of magic are illusory. Celsus says Jesus only ‘appeared’ (ἔδοξε) to do the miracles (Cels. 1.6; cf. 3.36); Origen counters the charge by affirming or assuming their reality (1.28; cf. 3.5). Second, Origen agrees that magic involves ‘charms’ (ἐπωδοί, 1.60; cf. 5.9), though he is firm in the view that Jesus and the Christians do not use them (1.6). Third, it is repeatedly agreed that magic is empowered by⁷⁷ or invokes demons (6.39).⁷⁸

Fourth, it will turn out to be important for our discussion of Jesus to note that Origen and Celsus share the view that magicians lead people astray.⁷⁹ Fifth, it is not surprising, then, that Origen is at pains to show the moral character and the results of the miracles of Jesus and his followers. He says the miracles were for the good and benefit of mankind,⁸⁰ rather than for selfish profit (6.42).

The importance of these observations for our project is that Celsus associates the four factors: false prophecy (or deception), magic, miracles and the demonic. Also, from Celsus, a critic of Christianity in the mid- to late-second century, we have a solid tradition that Jesus, along with his followers, was argued to be functioning as a magician. Although his dependence on Christian texts means he does not give us access to independent knowledge of Jesus, Celsus shows how a critic assessed Jesus and his followers in the last part of the mid- to late-second century.

(f) Rabbinic literature. This literature is important not only as evidence that Jesus was considered a magician by the tradents of the material but also as witness to a perspective on magic that can be seen reflected in the New Testament.⁸¹ Of particular interest is a section of the Babylonian Talmud:

⁷³ Cels. 1.71; 2.32; 7.9; 8.41, cf. 1.68; 8.43. For further examples, see Borret, *Origène Contre Celse*, 381.

⁷⁴ Origen, Cels. 1.6, 49; 2.9, 14, 32, 48, 51, 53; 3.1; cf. 2.16, 44, 50, 59; 3.36; 5.51.

⁷⁵ Origen, Cels. 2.51, has the phrase *μαγείαν καὶ γοητείαν* (‘magic and sorcery’); cf. 2.52; 6.39.

⁷⁶ Celsus supposes that Jesus learnt his magic while in Egypt (Origen, Cels. 1.28, 68).

⁷⁷ Origen, Cels. 1.60; 2.49, 51, 52; 5.38.

⁷⁸ For example, Celsus says that miracles such as those done by Jesus are the work of those possessed by an evil spirit (Cels. 1.68). As could be expected, Origen counters that, instead, Jesus did the miracles by ‘a divine power’ (1.38; 8.9).

⁷⁹ Celsus conceived magic as deluding (Cels. 2.59) or deceiving people (2.54; 5.41; cf. 1.51) and leading them ‘astray’ (πλάνη, 2.55). Cf. Origen, Cels. 7.36: οἱ πλάνοι ‘the deceivers’, i.e., leading people astray; 7.40 (x2): πλάνοι καὶ γόητες, ‘deceivers and sorcerers’. Similarly, Origen says that magic is ‘trickery’ (μαγγανεύω, 1.60; cf. 5.9) and a ‘forgery’ (πλάσματα, 6.31), or a ‘fabrication’ (πλασάμενος, 3.1), in order to ‘deceive’ (ἀπατάω, 1.57; cf. 1.51; 3.5; ἐχαπατά, 6.32) and ‘draw away’ (ὀφέλω, 1.57) people.

⁸⁰ Origen, Cels. 2.51; cf. 44, 49; 1.68; 6.39.

⁸¹ Stanton, *Jesus and the Gospel*, 130–132. Cf. Smith, *Jesus the Magician*, 46–50.

On the eve of the Passover Yeshu was hanged. For forty days before the execution took place a herald went forth and cried, He is going forth to be stoned because he has practised sorcery (כִּשְׁף) and enticed Israel to apostasy (וְהָסִיט וְהָדִיחַ) ... Ulla retorted: Do you suppose that he was one for whom a defence could be made? Was he not an enticer concerning whom Scripture says, Neither shalt thou spare, neither shalt thou conceal him?82 (b. Sanh. 43a)

Over against the influential medieval view that this text did not originally refer to Jesus of Nazareth,⁸³ William Horbury has shown that its earlier history can be more easily reconstructed assuming Jesus was its subject.⁸⁴ In particular, because of inconsistencies with their context, the sentences ‘on the eve of Passover Yeshua was hanged’ and ‘he practiced sorcery and enticed and led Israel astray’ may be older than this context,⁸⁵ which, in turn, is at least older than Ulla, the late-third century rabbi who comments on the tradition.⁸⁶

Therefore, what is to be noted for our project is that, perhaps in late second or early third century there was a Jewish tradition that Jesus practiced sorcery and enticed and led God’s people astray.⁸⁷ The resulting same double accusation occurs in the same order elsewhere in this tractate (b. Sanh. 107b), and also corresponds closely with traditions in Justin Martyr: that Jesus practice sorcery or magic and led people astray.⁸⁸

Although in the New Testament Jesus is charged with leading people astray (Matt 27:63, 64; John 7:12), he is not subject to this double accusation of sorcery and leading people astray, which does not, therefore, seem to be dependent on Gospel traditions. Therefore, in the rabbinic literature we probably have a widely circulating independent tradition that Jesus was considered a magician.⁸⁹

82 Cf. Deut 13:8.

83 Cf. J. Maier, *Jesus von Nazareth in der talmudischen Überlieferung* (EdF 82; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 1978) 219–237.

84 W. Horbury, “The Benediction of the Minim and Early Jewish-Christian Controversy,” *JTS* 33 (1982) 56–57; cf. P. Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2009) 63–74.

85 Horbury, “The Benediction,” 57. Cf. Stanton, *Jesus and the Gospel*, 131.

86 Cf. Stanton, *Jesus and the Gospel*, 131.

87 The verbs ‘entice’ and ‘lead astray’ both have Israel as their object (Stanton, *Jesus and the Gospel*, 131), and are treated as essentially the same in the Mishnah (cf. m. Sanh. 7.10). Cf. J.L. Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, 3rd ed. (NTL; Louisville – London: Westminster John Knox 2003) 81n110.

88 Cf. Justin Martyr, *Dial.* 69.7 (see below); the discussions by Martyn, *History and Theology*, 81, and Stanton, *Jesus and the Gospel*, 131.

89 Stanton, *Jesus and the Gospel*, 131.

(g) Quadratus. The little we know about this first Christian Apologist from the early second century⁹⁰ comes from Eusebius.⁹¹ All that Eusebius offers from Quadratus reads:

But the works of our Saviour were always present, for they were true. Those who were healed, those who were raised from the dead, not only appeared as healed and raised, but were always present, not only while the Saviour was here, but even for some time after he had gone, so that some of them survived until our times (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 4.3.2).⁹²

From the context it is clear that by ‘the works’ (τὰ ἔργα) Quadratus is referring to the miracles of Jesus.⁹³ Moreover, in saying that ‘they were true not only appeared as cured’, Quadratus is implying the charge against them is that the miracles were fraudulent or only apparent. That is, Quadratus is countering a charge of magic against Jesus.⁹⁴ For one of the distinctive criticisms of magic in the period is its fraudulent or fleeting nature.⁹⁵ The response by Quadratus is to say that those who experienced the cures and raisings not only maintained their health after Jesus left, but even though they were dead at the time of writing, they had lived⁹⁶ into the time of Quadratus. For our purposes, the importance of this statement by Quadratus is that it is evidence of charges of magic (in terms of fraudulence) against Jesus being laid just beyond living memory of the events in question.

90 For a discussion of issues relating to dating, see P. Foster, “The Apology of Quadratus,” *ExpTim* 117 (2006) 354–355.

91 Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 4.3.1; Chron. On the probable mistaken identification of this Quadratus, the apologist, with a bishop of Athens with the same name (*Hist. eccl.* 3.37.1; 5.17.3) by Jerome (*Vir. ill.* 19; *Ep.* 70.4), see the discussion by Robert M. Grant, “Quadratus, The First Christian Apologist,” *A Tribute to Arthur Vöörbus: Studies in Early Christian Literature and Its Environment, Primarily in the Syrian East* (ed. R.H. Fischer) (Chicago, IL: Lutheran School of Theology 1977) 178–179, and Paul Foster, “The Apology of Quadratus,” 355–356.

92 With whom Quadratus is contrasting the Saviour is not known. Hadrian, Aesclepius and the Gnostics have been suggested. See Grant, “Quadratus,” 180–182. It is most likely a group or class of people is in mind rather than an individual, for Eusebius says that Quadratus wrote his apology because ‘some evil men’ (τινες πονηροὶ ἄνδρες) were attempting to trouble the Christians (*Eusebius, Hist. eccl.* 4.3.1).

93 On the use of ἔργον (‘work’) for miracle, see BDAG, “ἔργον,” 390, citing, e.g., Matt 11:2; John 5:20, 36; 7:3, 21; 9:3; 10:25, 37–38; 14:10, 11, 12; 15:24; Acts 13:41; 15:18; also Lampe, “ἔργον,” 546, A.4.iii.c, citing, e.g., Justin, *Dial.* 69.6.

94 Cf. Smith, *Jesus the Magician*, 55.

95 E.g., Irenaeus of Lyon charged not only the gnostic Carpocratians, but also particularly the followers of Simon the magician with exhibiting phantasms that do not endure for even a moment (Irenaeus, *Ad. Haer.* 2.32.3–4).

96 Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 4.3.2, quotes Quadratus as using ἀφικόντο, the second person, plural aorist middle indicative of the verb ἀφικνέομαι, ‘to come or reach’. Cf. LSJ, “ἀφικνέομαι,” 290.

(h) Justin Martyr. Although Smith makes very little of it,⁹⁷ with this early Christian Apologist (c.100–c.165), we have another clear report of an accusation that Jesus was a magician. In a paragraph on the counterfeits of the devil he says the devil was responsible for the false prophets in Elijah’s day (Dial. 69.1).⁹⁸ Earlier Justin had said that, in contrast to divine prophets, false prophets ‘are filled with the lying unclean spirit’ (7.3), that is, the devil or Satan (cf. 63.9).⁹⁹ In the paragraph of interest to us, Justin also says the devil was responsible for the work performed by the magi in Egypt (69.1) and for the raisings and healing miracles of Asclepius (69.3). Then he says those who saw Jesus’ miracles ‘said it was magical art. For they dared to call him a magician and a deceiver of the people’.¹⁰⁰ Importantly, as we have also seen in Celsus, in this paragraph (69) Justin connects the four concepts: false prophecy (or deception),¹⁰¹ magic, miracles, and the demonic (69.7).

There is a high probability that Justin’s claim is old that witnesses of Jesus’ ministry called him a magician and a deceiver of the people. We have seen that in two rabbinic traditions the same double accusation occurs in the same order: Jesus practiced magic and led God’s people astray (b. Sanh. 43a and 107b).¹⁰² Given that any interdependence between Justin and the rabbinic material is unlikely, they are probably independently using a stock polemical tradition.¹⁰³ Moreover, although the gospel writers say Jesus was charged with leading people astray,¹⁰⁴ as we have noted, they do not say he was called a μάγος (‘magician’, see n17 above). That is, the tradition Justin is using is also most probably independent of the Gospels.¹⁰⁵ What is important to note for our project is not only that the accusation Justin reports is potentially old, but also that it connects false prophecy (or deception), magic, miracles, and the demonic (Dial. 69.7), a point that will be seen significant as we proceed.

⁹⁷ Smith, *Jesus the Magician*, 54–55.

⁹⁸ In the fourth century, Epiphanius of Salamis (c. 315–410) accuses the false prophets of Montanism with being inspired by the devil (Panarion 48).

⁹⁹ Justin Martyr, Dial. 7.3: τοῦ πλάνου καὶ ἀκαθάρτου πνεύματος ἐμπιπλάμενοι ψευδοπροφήται. In the singular, and with the definite article, ‘the lying unclean spirit’ is to be taken as a reference to the devil or Satan (cf. 69.3).

¹⁰⁰ Justin Martyr, Dial. 69.7: οἱ δὲ καὶ ταῦτα ὀρῶντες γινόμενα φαντασίαν μαγικὴν γίεσθαι ἔλεγον: καὶ γὰρ μάγον εἶναι αὐτὸν ἐτόμων λέγειν καὶ λαοπάνον.

¹⁰¹ The offense in such a charge can be seen in it having roots in the description in Deut 13 and 18 of those who are to be marginalized. Cf. Stanton, *Jesus and the Gospel*, 130–131, 141.

¹⁰² Cf. Martyn, *History and Theology*, 80–81.

¹⁰³ Stanton, *Jesus and Gospel*, 132; Martyn, *History and Theology*, 80–81.

¹⁰⁴ Before Pilate Matt 27:63 has the chief priests and Pharisees call Jesus ‘the seducer’ (ὁ πλάνος) or one who leads astray.

¹⁰⁵ Stanton, *Jesus and Gospel*, 132; Martyn, *History and Theology*, 80–81. Also, Stanton, *Jesus and the Gospel*, 132–133, notes that in the Acts of Thomas 96, the same accusation of ‘that magician and deceiver’ (ὁ μάγος ἐκεῖνος καὶ πλάνος) is applied to Thomas, an alter ego of Jesus, further supporting the view that the Jewish accusation was probably widespread and well known.

4. So Far...

To this point we have seen that at least some of Morton Smith's evidence for his case that opponents saw Jesus and his followers as magicians is inadmissible. Tacitus was not saying Nero arrested Christians because they were magicians, but because they were anti-social. Nor was Pliny or Suetonius suggesting Christians were guilty of magic. However, from Josephus, Celsus, and rabbinic literature, we have been able to establish that by late in the first century, and into the second, there were traditions that undoubtably and firmly considered Jesus and his followers culpable of magic. Notably, in the case of Josephus and rabbinic literature, the charges of magic are most probably independent of gospel traditions, with the tradition in Josephus likely going back at least to the time of the writing of the Gospels. Also, the writings of Quadratus and Justin are evidence that Christians from the early second century were contending with those who charged Jesus and his followers of practicing magic. In the case of Quadratus the evidence takes us back almost to living memory of witnesses to Jesus' ministry. Notably, for Quadratus, Josephus, Justin and Celsus the charge of magic is associated with miracle working.

5. Method

In that, at least for twenty-first-century readers, there is no record of an apparently explicit charge of magic against Jesus in the New Testament, two important methodological points need to be established as we turn to examine the gospel data for clues as to whether or not Jesus was accused of magic by those who witnessed his ministry.

First, in view of traditions independent of the Gospels carrying clear charges of magic from as early as the late first century, it would be surprising if the charges had not been made earlier, including in the reports by those who witnessed the ministry of Jesus. Therefore, we approach the gospel data with an expectation of finding a positive answer to our question as to whether or not Jesus was accused of magic by those who knew him. In this approach there is, of course, as Stanton pointed out, the risk of anachronism.¹⁰⁶ However, our intention is not to use views of a later time to determine our reading of earlier literature. Rather, we are using later views as initial pointers to possible similar earlier views. This leads to a necessary refinement in our next methodological point.

¹⁰⁶ Stanton, *Jesus and the Gospel*, 128–129.

That is, second, we have seen that all of the early charges of magic against Jesus and his followers take magic to involve deception.¹⁰⁷ We could anticipate, therefore, that charges of deception or false prophecy against Jesus in the gospel traditions were, if not implicit charges of magic, at least pointers to such a charge. However, in view of the varying understanding of magic, this could not be relied upon to produce reliable results. It is helpful to note, then, that the most developed of the early charges we noted against Jesus – by Celsus and in Justin – associated magic not only with deception or false prophecy and miracles, but also the demonic. Therefore, in order to decrease the chance of mistakenly reading a charge of magic into the literature, we will give attention to those places in the historically reliable data where Jesus is said to be labelled with, or involved in, at least two of the three other factors or activities: miracles, deception or false prophecy and the demonic. In this we refine Stanton’s approach in which he was working with only three factors (he called them labels): magic, false prophecy, and demon possession, but not performing miracles.¹⁰⁸ Having identified places among the arguably historically reliable reports of Jesus’ ministry in which any two factors are associated with Jesus, we will then seek further clues to confirm that the tradition carries hints of a charge of magic against the historical Jesus.

6. The Gospels

Even though they do not explicitly mention ‘magic’, there are a number of places in the Gospels where any one of the three factors – miracles, deception or false prophecy, or the demonic – is mentioned. However, it is in the common occurrence of at least two of them that we anticipate finding reliable pointers to the charge of magic. In a few places ‘false prophets’ (ψευδοπροφήται)¹⁰⁹ or ‘deception’ (πλανάω)¹¹⁰ are mentioned with the motif of miracles, but they do not refer to Jesus. Two other passages that refer to Jesus (Matt 27:62–66; John 7:1–13), though not standing up to historical scrutiny as reflecting views of Jesus’ contemporaries and are at least useful pointers to a possible charge.¹¹¹ This leaves two passages to consider.

¹⁰⁷ On Josephus, Ant. 20.97, 169–172; J.W. 2.261–263; Berl. Gr. Pap. 11517.45; Philostratus, Life 5.12; Lucian, Per. 13. Also see BDAG, “γόης,” 204; Stanton, Jesus and the Gospel, 136.

¹⁰⁸ Stanton, Jesus and the Gospel, 135–139.

¹⁰⁹ Matt 7:15–24; (cf. Luke 6:43–46; 13:25–27).

¹¹⁰ Mark 13:5–6 (/Matt 24:4–5/Luke 21:8); Mark 13:22 (/Matt 24:24).

¹¹¹ (a) Matt 27:62–66. The miraculous and deception are associated in this story of Pilate appointing guards at Jesus’ tomb. Pilate acts on the basis of the Pharisees saying, ‘Sir, we remember how that imposter (πλάνος) said, while he was still alive, “After three days I will rise again”’ (27:63). On the grounds that, for example, Matthew likely had access to independent sources of a Jewish character,

(a) John 9:1–10:42. Reflecting on the healing of a man born blind, some Jews asked, ‘Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?’ (10:21). This was in response to others saying that Jesus had a demon and was ‘mad’ (μαίνομαι, 10:20). Notably,

and the credibility of appointing guards (a story of little import for the Easter narrative), attempts have been made to support the historicity of the Matt 27:62–66 story. See, e.g., G.M. Lee, “Guard at the Tomb,” *Theology* 72 (1969) 169–175; D. Wenham, “The Resurrection Narratives in Matthew’s Gospel,” *TynBul* 24 (1973) 47–51; and W.L. Craig, “The Guard at the Tomb,” *NTS* 30 (1984) 273–281. However, three factors tell against the possibility of salvaging the story’s historicity. First, only Matthew carries the story, which is shot through with his characteristic vocabulary and style. See R.H. Gundry, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1982) 582–584. Second, although the other three Gospels have the women visit the tomb (Mark 16:3; Luke 24:2; John 20:1) they know nothing of the guards who would have presented an obstacle for the women. It could be that the guards fled, but that is not what Matthew says. See R.E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah* (ABRL; New York: Doubleday 1994) II, 1311–1312, and the discussions by Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28* (WBC 33B; Nashville, TN: Nelson 1995) 861–862 and Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI – Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans 1999) 697. Third, it is unlikely the Jewish authorities or Pilate would have taken a resurrection prediction seriously. See Davies –Allison, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, III, 653. Further against the historicity of the story, see I. Broer, *Die Urgemeinde und das Grab Jesu. Eine Analyse der Grablegungsgeschichte im Neuen Testament* (SANT 31; Munich: Kösel 1972) 60–74.

(b) John 7:1–13. Deception and the miraculous are also found together in the story of Jesus going secretly to Jerusalem. The Jews look for him, some saying ‘he deceives (πλανῶ) the crowds’ (7:12). In view of the brothers urging Jesus to go to Jerusalem to perform miracles readers could be expected to assume the charge of deception was generated by reports of miracles.

Two features of this story probably go back to that of the historical Jesus. First it is more plausible that Jesus, an observant Jew, visited Jerusalem not once, as the Synoptic Gospels suppose (Matt 20:17/Mark 10:32/Luke 18:31), but a number of times, of which this is one, according to the Fourth Gospel (John 2:23; 5:1; 7:10 [cf. 14]; 12:12). Second, the tension between Jesus and his brothers is unlikely to have been invented by the early church. On the criterion of embarrassment evoked in this assessment, e.g., see S.E. Porter, “How Do We Know What We Think We Know? Methodological Reflections on Jesus Research,” *Jesus Research: New Methodologies and Perspectives* (ed. J.H. Charlesworth) (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2014) 96–97. Further, the idea of family tension is also found in Mark 3:21, 31–35, and the limited verbal links between Mark and John—substantial links between Mark and John are limited to a single word, ἀδελφοί (“brothers,” Mark 3:31, 32, 33, 34, 35; John 7:3, 5, 7, 10) – suggests they are using independent traditions. See B. Lindars, *The Gospel of John* (London: Oliphants/Marshall – Morgan & Scott 1972) 281. On the other hand, however, the first part of the story in which Jesus interacts with his brothers (John 7:1–9) contains a number of distinctive Johannine features that suggest it is the creation of the writer. To begin with, Jesus’ refusal to take instructions or to act as expected is a motif also found in the story of changing water into wine (2:4) and the raising of Lazarus (11:6), but not in the other gospels, suggesting the motif is of Johannine origin. Also, Jesus speaking of his time, and it not yet coming (7:6, 8), is thoroughly Johannine. That is, though καιρός (“time”) is used here (7:6 [x2], 8), it is indistinguishable from ὥρα (“hour,” 2:4; 7:30; 8:20; cf. 12:23, 27; 13:1; 17:1). See C.K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St John* (London: SPCK 1978) 312; R.E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (AB 29; London: Chapman 1971) I, 306. The phrase, ἔρχεται ὥρα (“hour is coming”) occurs only in John (4:21, 23; 5:25, 28; 6:2, 25, 32). Also thoroughly Johannine is the motif of the “world” (κόσμος 78 times in John, Matt has it eight times, Mark and Luke each use it three times) and its hatred of Jesus and his followers (7:7; cf. 15:18, 19; 17:14). Thus, even if the charge of deception (7:12) – which is not particularly Johannine (cf. 7:47) – reflects a criticism that can be traced back to Jesus’ contemporaries, we cannot be sure it was here associated with the miraculous.

in John saying ‘the Jews were divided because of these words’ (10:19) – teaching about Jesus as the good shepherd (10:1–18) – madness is associated with an unbelievable message (10:19–20).¹¹² A charge of madness, unlikely to have been created by the church, may be from a tradition independent of Mark who uses ἐξίστημι rather than μάνιομαι for Jesus being out of his mind (Mark 3:21) in relation to his exorcisms.¹¹³ Even if John has eschewed exorcism the charge remains associated with the miraculous and a false or misleading message. Therefore, we have early support for the historicity of the criticism that Jesus’ miracles were associated with a false message and performed under the auspices of Satan, a clear pointer to Jesus being seen functioning as a magician.

(b) The Beelzebul Controversy. The synoptic Gospels maintain a tradition where the joint motifs of miracles and the demonic are found in a charge against Jesus. In the so-called Beelzebul Controversy, in relation to casting out demons, Jesus is accused of being possessed by the prince of demons.¹¹⁴ In Mark the accusation is: ‘He is possessed by Beelzebul, and by the prince of demons he cast out demons’ (Mark 3:22). That Q also has the accusation¹¹⁵ favours the historicity of the charge. In any case, the early Church is unlikely to create such a potentially damaging charge.

This is the earliest known use of the term Beelzebul, which was probably derived from ‘Baal-Prince’.¹¹⁶ Having pagan origins, the term Beelzebul was used derisively for the prince of demons and Satan, and pejoratively of Jesus’ exorcistic authority, probably because pagan gods were considered demons¹¹⁷ and Baal was associated with exorcism.¹¹⁸

For our purposes, what is to be noticed is that in the association of the demonic and the miraculous – in this case exorcism – the Beelzebul charge amounts to a charge of magic against Jesus.¹¹⁹ This conclusion is strengthened by

¹¹² Also, see Acts 12:15; 26:1–23; H. Preisker, “μάνιομαι,” TDNT IV, 361.

¹¹³ Cf. Twelftree, *Jesus the Exorcist*, 177; J. Lambrecht, “ἐξίστημι,” EDNT II, 7–8.

¹¹⁴ Mark 3:22–27/Matt 9:32–34/12:22–30/Luke 11:14–15, 17–23.

¹¹⁵ ‘But some said, “By Beelzebul, the prince of demons, he casts out demons”’ (Matt 12:24 (cf. 9:34)/ Luke 11:16).

¹¹⁶ Further, see G.H. Twelftree, “Beelzebul,” NIDB I, 417–418.

¹¹⁷ Deut 32:17; Pss 95:5 (LXX); 106 (LXX 105):37; Bar 4:7; 1 Cor 10:20; Rev 9:20; L. Gaston, “Beelzebul,” TZ 18 (1962) 253; J. Day, *Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses of Canaan* (JSOTSup 265; London – New York: Sheffield Academic – Continuum 2002) 80–81.

¹¹⁸ KTU 1:169. As Matthew juxtaposes ‘master of the house’—that is, Jesus, leader of his disciples (Matt 10:24–25)—with ‘Beelzebul’, and in late Hebrew בֵּלְזֵבּוּל meant residence, especially the temple and also heaven as the dwelling place of God (1Q28 10:3; 1Q33 12:1, 2; b. ag. 12b. Further, see “בֵּלְזֵבּוּל”, M. Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Bavli, Talmud Yerushalmi and Midrashic Literature* [New York: Judaica Press 2004] 378), this term for Satan was able to convey the idea that he was leader or head of a household of demons (Mark 3:22–27) over against God (cf. Twelftree, “Beelzebul,” 417–418).

¹¹⁹ Cf. Stanton, *Jesus and the Gospel*, 144–145. To the contrary, Horsley, *Jesus and Magic*, 35, 154–162, who does not explore possible magical connotations associated with the term ‘Beelzebul’.

two further observations. First, we have seen that magicians were thought to be demon possessed.¹²⁰ Moreover, second, to charge that Jesus was working under the auspices of a spiritual power with a name that had pagan roots and connotations increases our confidence that it was a charge that implied magic. For, to be charged with working under the control of a foreign deity would be taken as a charge to mislead God's people, a charge levelled at magicians.¹²¹ In short, we can have considerable confidence that the charge that Jesus was performing exorcisms by Beelzebul amounted to a charge that he was a magician.

That Jesus' critics did not directly charge him with being a magician or sorcerer was probably because Beelzebul, the term they created for the moment, was not only more graphic. As we have just noted, the charge was also more specific in that in the one term they were able to convey the specific criticism that his behaviour was empowered by the chief demonic figure, and that Jesus was, in turn, associated with foreign and, therefore, subverting deities to mislead God's people.

Further, using the name Beelzebul to carry the accusation also shows that his critics were not interested in his techniques. What is notable, therefore, is the distance between the basis of this charge and twenty-first-century perspectives on magic. Over against what we noted as twenty-first-century understandings of magic, the charge against Jesus had nothing to do with his method or technique. His use of readily recognizable incantations¹²² may cause a twenty-first-century reader to conclude that Jesus was a magician, but his methods appeared to be of no interest to his contemporary critics in this regard. The charge also had no basis in the perception that Jesus was involved in creating illusions. There is no denial of the reality of what Jesus was doing; we have seen that this comes later.¹²³ Instead, the charge arose out of a concern for Jesus' agency or power-authority for his activity. Associated with this was an assumption that, in the charge that Satan was his means of success in healing, Jesus was misleading God's people.

In the light of Jesus probably taking up miracle working from the example of John the Baptist (his mentor and a figure on the fringe of society and at odds with the establishment), along with his acting as a prophet with an unbelievable message, it can be seen why Jesus would have found it difficult not to act in

120 See Origen, *Cels.* 1.68 (cf. §3 [e] above); Justin Martyr, *Dial.* 69.7 (cf. §3 [h] above).

121 See §3 (a) above on Josephus, *Ant.* 8.64.

122 See G.H. Twelftree, "Jesus the Exorcist and Ancient Magic," *A Kind of Magic. Understanding Magic in the New Testament and its Religious Environment* (eds. M. Labahn – B.J. Lietaert Peerbolte) (LNTS 306; London – New York: Clark 2007) 57–86. O.E. Alana, "Jewish-Hellenistic Magical Influence on Some of Jesus' Healing Techniques: An Appraisal [in Greek]," *DBM* 19 (2000) 102, supposes that in his popular magical techniques Jesus replaced the magical power with the power of God; cf. H.C. Kee, *Medicine, Miracle and Magic in New Testament Times* (SNTSMS 55; Cambridge, UK – New York: Cambridge University Press 2005), e.g., 123.

123 See Quadratus in Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 4.3.2; cf. §3 (g) above.

a way that avoided the charge of magic. Also, Jesus' answer to the charge of magic was determined by his miracle working and intentions. That is, he does not deny he was subversive or conducting miracles. Instead, noting his success in exorcism he affirms his eschatological perspective, and questions the assumptions that Satan is the source of his power-authority for exorcism on the grounds that in these cures Satan could not defeat himself, and that his critics were also performing exorcisms. Jesus may have been successful in answering the charge in that it is not pervasive in the gospel traditions, and it is not carried through to his trial. However, one component of, or factor contributing to, the charge—his subversive behaviour or misleading God's people—followed him to his trial (in the charge of speaking against the temple) and his execution (in the titulus).¹²⁴

7. Jesus as Magician

Given that early non-Christian and post-canonical Christian traditions independent of the Gospels carry or assume the charge of magic against Jesus, it would be surprising if the earliest Christian traditions also did not carry evidence of the charge. The post-canonical evidence helped us see that an accusation of magic against Jesus was likely to involve a charge of false prophecy or deception – that is misleading people – in relation to miracle working or the demonic. Indeed, from our reading of the Gospels, even if they did not use the words 'magician' or 'sorcerer', we have seen strong evidence that critics among Jesus' observers accused him of being a magician, but using a more nuanced and descriptively specific term. We saw that John's Gospel probably carries the memory of a charge of magic, for in response to his miracle working Jesus is charged with demon possession and madness (John 10:20–21). In that the Beelzebul charge in the synoptic Gospels¹²⁵ was one of miracle working being empowered by Satan it was an accusation of magic. For, as we have seen, magicians were thought to be demon possessed. Further, to function under the auspices of Satan was the equivalent of being under the control of a foreign deity, and hence be someone who would mislead God's people.

The predisposition to charge Jesus with being a magician in misleading God's people, probably arose from their knowledge that he came out of the Baptist's movement. Also, he presented himself as the eschatological prophet preaching the arrival of the kingdom of God, expressing his intentions in such subversive

¹²⁴ On the titulus see D.W. Chapman – E.J. Schnabel, *The Trial and Crucifixion of Jesus: Texts and Commentary* (WUNT 344; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2015) 293–298.

¹²⁵ Mark 3:22–27/Matt 9:32–34/12:22–30/Luke 11:14–15, 17–23.

public acts as his disturbance in the temple and choosing precisely twelve followers.

Therefore, over against Richard Horsley, in Morton Smith's favour, we are obliged to conclude that the Gospels contain evidence that Jesus' observers considered him a magician. However, against both David Aune and Graham Stanton, as well as Smith,¹²⁶ we have seen no evidence to suggest that it was Jesus' healing or exorcism techniques that drew the charge of magic. Rather, as we have just noted, it was his misleading God's people, therefore exorcizing under the auspices of Satan, that was the focus of the charge.

Having been mentored by John the Baptist, who most probably included miracle working in his ministry (cf. Mark 6:14),¹²⁷ and expressing himself as the eschatological prophet, including taking up and developing the eschatological message of the subversive Baptist, it is difficult to see how Jesus could have avoided the charge from threatened authorities of being a magician. Although from a twenty-first-century perspective the charge of magic is different in form from what might be expected, it is clear the charge has not been removed, or at least not entirely removed, from the gospel traditions. In aligning himself with the exorcisms of his critics (Matt 12:27/Luke 11:19) Jesus may have successfully answered the charge of magic in turning it back on them. Yet, in the accusation that he spoke against the temple, as we have seen, aspects of the charge of magic followed him to his trial and execution.

So, to return to our opening question, was Jesus considered a magician? Yes, but not because of his healing methods or creating illusions, but because his

126 See the brief and sober criticism of Smith, *Jesus the Magician*, by Graham Anderson, Sage, Saint, and Sophist (London – New York: Routledge 1994) 224–227.

127 Mark 6:14: 'Some were saying, "John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason, these miracles (δυνάμεις) are at work in him [Jesus]"'. There are a number of reasons for picking up the inference in this statement that John was a miracle worker. (1) The assumed close alignment of the competitors, John and Jesus, in miracle working, is unlikely to be a creation of the early Church. (2) In that Jesus probably equated John with Elijah (Mark 9:12–13) who, in turn, was seen to be a miracle worker (see E. Koskenniemi, *The Old Testament Miracle-Workers in Early Judaism* [WUNT 2/206; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2005]), Jesus is likely to have thought John to be a miracle worker. (3) Jesus' contemporaries and competitors are reported as conducting miracles (Mark 9:39; Matt 12:27/Luke 11:19). On the historicity of these references, see Twelftree, *Jesus the Exorcist*, 40–43, and G.H. Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker: A Historical and Theological Study* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity 1999) 283. (4) We know of other wilderness radicals who appear to have included miracles in their repertoire (Josephus, *Ant.* 20.97, 168–172; *J.W.* 2.261–263). See R. Gray, *Prophetic Figures in Late Second Temple Jewish Palestine: The Evidence from Josephus* (New York – Oxford: Oxford University Press 1993) 118–120. (5) The Fourth Gospel's statement 'John performed no sign', not only flies in the face of the widespread tendency in the period to associate holy men with performing miracles (see E. Bammel, "John Did No Miracle," *Miracles: Cambridge Studies in Their Philosophy and History* [ed. C.F.D. Moule] [London: Mowbray 1965] 181–202, esp. 181–183), it is also thoroughly consistent with the Johannine determination to present John not as the Messiah (John 1:20) or as a competitor to Jesus (1.19-37; 3.22-4.3), but as a mere voice (1.23). Cf. G.H. Twelftree, "Jesus the Baptist," *JSHJ* 7 (2009) 112–114.

critics thought his miracle working was empowered by Satan, an expression of his misleading God's people.

8. Contemporary Coda

From what we have seen of the charges of magic against Jesus – solidly related to the miracle tradition – there are at least two lines of enquiry that might be explored in engaging this discussion with twenty-first century Christian interests. Indeed, these lines of enquiry may help answer that other question, Pentecostals, miracle workers or magicians?

One line of thought is to consider the nature of the charges against Jesus and how he responded to them. In the charge of conducting exorcisms by Beelzebul the accusation was of not being empowered by God. This charge arose because, from the perspective of his critics, he was operating outside of the community and was by definition, therefore, misleading people. Regardless of whether or not we agree with the perspective of his critics, those seeking to avoid similar criticisms would do well to conduct ministry not as lone mavericks but in the context of the Christian tradition and community. The colloquial definition of heresy as 'theology done on your own' is helpful here. For the same might also be said of ministry, and could readily be taken as a test for the authenticity of contemporary ministry. For, ministry appearing disconnected from the Christian tradition and community readily gives rise to the credible charge of having sinister motives, not least of being self-motivated rather than Spirit motivated, and intending to glorify the practitioner rather than God. Perhaps those in the twenty-first century anticipating charges of leading people away from God would need to be ready with evidence of functioning in the context of the Christian tradition and community. For this they might be able to show that those benefiting from their ministry have a desire to be an active part of the ecumenical church rather to be separate from, or critical of, it.

Jesus' response to the charge relating to his authority and motives was to claim a number of things: he claimed (a) that his ministry was possible because it was empowered by nothing other than the Spirit of God.¹²⁸ He also claimed (b) that his miracles brought about the kingdom or powerful presence of God in that those healed were experiencing the kingdom of God.¹²⁹ Further, Jesus claimed (c)

¹²⁸ Mark 3:28–30; Matt 12:28/Luke 11:20.

¹²⁹ Matt 12:28/Luke 11:20; cf. Matt 11:2–6/Luke 7:18–23.

that in his miracles the work of Satan was being destroyed rather than advanced,¹³⁰ obvious from those who experienced God's powerful presence in their healing.

In countering criticism could it not be expected of contemporary ministry that there would be evidence of bringing release from expressions of Satan's presence, and wholeness in the lives of those responding to the ministry? The Jonestown Massacre of over 900 people, including some 300 children, on 18 November 1978,¹³¹ is a classic and extreme modern case of a ministry showing signs quite other than wholeness in its results and therefore could reasonably be described as having sinister associations.

The other line of enquiry that might engage our discussion with the twenty-first century is to consider what we think of as magic and how we might answer charges of magic in our own time. One of the definitions of magic that we share with the first-century critics of Jesus is that it is deceptive – 'smoke and mirrors' (cf. §1 [a] above). Movies, such as 'Leap of Faith' (1992) starring Steve Martin as Jonas Nightengale a faith healer, have drawn attention to preachers and healers whose ministries are largely or completely deceptive. There are no healings only expensive suits, watches and jet planes made possible by a focus on the content of the offering buckets. One thinks of Søren Kierkegaard's statement that 'When Christianity ... is not reduplicated in the life of the person presenting it, it is not Christianity he presents.'¹³²

Another of our notions of magic is that what is claimed to take place depends on uttering certain words, perhaps in certain ways, and carried out through certain actions (see §1 [b] and [c] above). Perhaps in a Christian context this would be an insistence on the use of speaking in tongues or the Lord's Prayer in exorcism and healing, or the way hands are laid or not laid on an ailing supplicant. It is notable that the Jesus tradition does not show a great interest in Jesus healing methods. They were not seen by his critics or his followers as crucial to his success. Jesus simply did what contemporary healers and exorcists did, though generally with greater ease.¹³³ With this perspective as a guide, those who see healing and exorcism dependent on what is said and done have clearly taken up a ministry that is not in the same tradition as Jesus or even his early followers. We might reasonably call an attention to method rather than to the empowering of the Spirit as magical.¹³⁴

In short, Jesus the miracle worker has left his followers, even those in the twenty-first century, with approaches to ministry and answers to his critics that help avoid the charge of magic in terms of approach (from within the Christian

¹³⁰ Mark 3:23–27/Matt 12:25–29/Luke 11:17–23.

¹³¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000d27r>

¹³² S. Kierkegaard, *Papers and Journals: A Selection* (London: Penguin 1996), 323 [48 IX A 207].

¹³³ See Twelftree, "Jesus the Exorcist and Ancient Magic."

¹³⁴ Mark 3:28–30; Matt 12:28/Luke 11:20.

tradition and community), results (evidence of the powerful presence of God resulting in release from Satan's power) and an attention not on method but on a dependence on the Spirit.

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