



## Was Jesus Tried for Sorcery?

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**“If this man were not an evildoer, we would not have handed him over to you.”<sup>1</sup>**

According to the gospels, Rome in the person of Pontius Pilate found Jesus guilty of *something* and had him crucified. However, the specific charges against Jesus are never explicitly stated in the New Testa-

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<sup>1</sup> John 18:30 (Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.)

ment, an omission that might lead a cynic to suspect the charge that led to Jesus' hasty execution was even more embarrassing to the early church than the fact its founder died an ignominious death reserved for heinous felons. Indeed, the judicial procedure described in the gospels contains so many incongruities and is so historically implausible that its accuracy overall can be safely dismissed, but if it is conceded that Jesus existed and that some basic elements of his career are preserved in the gospels, we are left to ponder what charges led to him being so summarily and brutally dispatched.

It must be acknowledged that the trial accounts present serious, perhaps insurmountable, barriers to historical reconstruction. The gospels, composed decades after the events they purport to relate, almost certainly contain no direct eyewitness testimony—Eusebius says of Mark, the putative author of the earliest gospel, “he had not heard the Lord, nor had he followed him,”<sup>2</sup> and it is widely believed that inconsistencies in the trial narratives reflect apologetic intent as well as a lack of institutional memory within the early Christian communities. Nevertheless, I would make the case that the charge(s) brought against Jesus may still be plausibly established.

The gospel account leading up to Jesus' arrest is worth briefly unpacking: six days before the festival of Passover, Jesus and his disciples arrive at Bethany, a small town within walking distance of Jerusalem.<sup>3</sup> Jesus sends two disciples into the village where they find a donkey, they throw their cloaks over it, and Jesus rides into Jerusalem much as described in the prophecy of Zechariah:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on an ass, on a colt, the foal of an ass.<sup>4</sup>

This is Matthew's reconstruction of events:

They brought the donkey and the colt, and laid their outer garments over them, and he sat upon them. And a very large crowd spread their outer garments in the road...And the crowds that preceded him and those following him shouted, saying, “Hosanna to the Son of David. Blessed is the one

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<sup>2</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* III, 39.

<sup>3</sup> Mark 11:1, John 12:1.

<sup>4</sup> Zechariah 9:9, RSV.

coming in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heavens!”

And as they came into Jerusalem the whole city was in commotion, saying, “Who is this?” And the crowd said, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”<sup>5</sup>

The author of Matthew, whoever he may have been, was obviously not an eyewitness. He misses the parallelism of the Old Testament passage, misreading the text of Zechariah as referring to *two* animals—Mark, Luke, and John all have one donkey, and in John’s retelling, Jesus finds the donkey on his own<sup>6</sup>—and presents the reader with the ludicrous image of Jesus astraddle both animals, the donkey and its colt. The gospel of John very nearly admits that the connection between Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem and the prophecy of Zechariah is a pious invention: “His disciples did not realize these things about him at first, but after he had been glorified they later recalled that these things had been written about him and they had done these things to him.”<sup>7</sup>

On the day of his arrival, possibly the first of the six days mentioned in John,<sup>8</sup> Jesus went to Jerusalem, entered the temple for a look around, and then left “as it was already late,” and returned to Bethany.<sup>9</sup> The next day—day two according to Mark—he returned from Bethany with a group of disciples and created a disturbance in the temple, overturning the tables of the money exchangers, but was not arrested by the temple police at that point. This *soi-disant* “cleansing of the temple” was, as noted by Crossan, “not at all a purification of the Temple but rather a symbolic destruction.”<sup>10</sup>

Jesus and his followers apparently left the city that evening and returned on the following day, the third day of Jesus’ temple activities. At this point the temple authorities confronted Jesus but were not able to arrest him publicly—Jesus, aware of the sympathies of the crowd, asked them, “John’s baptism, was it from heaven or from men? Answer me!” The temple authorities retreated for the time being; “they were in fear of the crowd, because all of them considered that John was a prophet.”<sup>11</sup> The gospels are unanimous on this point:

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew 12:4-11.

<sup>6</sup> Mark 11:2, Luke 19:30, John 12:14.

<sup>7</sup> John 12:16.

<sup>8</sup> John 12:1.

<sup>9</sup> Mark 11:11, John 12:1.

<sup>10</sup> Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, 357.

<sup>11</sup> Mark 11: 30, 32.

the temple authorities *feared* Jesus.<sup>12</sup> Stroumsa, regarding the aggressive imagery of the gospels, notes the “deep-seated ambiguity is directly related to the radical nature of earliest Christianity, a movement born within the chiliastic content of Jewish apocalypticism.”<sup>13</sup>

The confrontations between Jesus and the temple authorities were an ugly business. Jesus denounced them in offensive terms:

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees!<sup>14</sup> Hypocrites! You build the tombs of the prophets and you adorn the graves of the righteous and you say, ‘If we lived in the days of our forefathers, we would not have been their partners in shedding the blood of the prophets.’ So you testify against yourselves that you are the sons of those who killed the prophets! Fill up the measure of your fathers, you! Snakes! Offspring of vipers! How are you to flee from the judgment of Gehenna?”<sup>15</sup>

The woes pronounced against the temple leaders culminate in the prediction that the temple itself will be destroyed:

As he left the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Teacher, look what large stones and amazing buildings!” Jesus said to him, “Do you see these great buildings? By no means will a stone be left upon a stone here and not be demolished!”<sup>16</sup>

Jesus’ curse on the temple is reported by all four gospels, repeated by his accusers at his hearing before the temple authorities, and thrown back in his face during his crucifixion.<sup>17</sup> The prediction appears in the *Gospel of Thomas*,<sup>18</sup> and the witnesses against Stephen accuse him of

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<sup>12</sup> Matthew 21:26, Mark 11:32, Luke 20:19, John 12:19.

“One underlying and commonly shared fear—the fear associated with magic or the supernatural—may have played a much more instrumental role in this case than is usually thought...fear provides the driving undercurrent that best explains the irregularities and vagaries in all four accounts of the trial of Jesus.” (Welch, *Jesus and Archaeology*, 253, 257.)

<sup>13</sup> Stroumsa, *Barbarian Philosophy: The Religious Revelation of Early Christianity*, 10.

<sup>14</sup> The historical Pharisees were never in charge of the Second Temple cultus. As the only religious sect to survive the Roman invasion of 68 CE, they became the source of modern rabbinic Judaism.

<sup>15</sup> Matthew 23:29-33.

<sup>16</sup> Mark 13:1-2.

<sup>17</sup> Matthew 24:1-2, Mark 14:58, 15:29-30, Luke 21:5-6, John 2:19-21.

<sup>18</sup> “I shall destroy this house and no one will be able to build it.” (*Gospel of*

repeating Jesus' curse.<sup>19</sup> A trace of the charge appears to survive in the *Gospel of Peter*: "But I and my companions were grieving and went into hiding, wounded in heart. For we were being sought out by them *as if we were evildoers* (ως κακοουργοι) who wanted to burn the Temple."<sup>20</sup> Jesus' curse even finds an eerie echo in the magical spells of the *Sepher Ha-Razim*: "Smite it to dust and let it be overturned like the ruins of Sodom and Gemorah, and let no man place stone upon a stone on the place..."<sup>21</sup> Here is the chain of events as summarized by John Welch:

As he drew near to Jerusalem, Jesus healed two blind men, Matthew says, by touching their eyes, and they heralded him as "Lord" or "Son of David"<sup>22</sup>...as Jesus came to Jerusalem from Bethany, he cursed a fig tree and it mysteriously withered<sup>23</sup>...Significantly, the magical-appearing curse of this tree is conjoined directly with the cleansing of the Temple<sup>24</sup>...Coupling these manifestations of numinous power with what his opponents would consider an incantation against the Temple—"I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and within three days I will build another made without hands"<sup>25</sup>—yields a potent formula for fear and the need to take action against these out-of-boundary signs and wonders.<sup>26</sup>

There is no reason to doubt Jesus' animosity toward the temple authorities and their fear of him is well documented. They believed the crowd would riot if they arrested him publicly.<sup>27</sup> Freyne describes how the tension between Jesus and the Jerusalem authorities builds to a crescendo in the gospel of John:

John's Pharisees...send emissaries to investigate the identity of John (1:19, 24) and they are obviously concerned about the success of new religious movements (4:1); they send servants to arrest Jesus (7:32, ff.); they cross-examine the parents of the man born blind and it is they who will be responsible

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*Thomas*, 71)

<sup>19</sup> Acts 6:13-14.

<sup>20</sup> Ehrman & Pleše, *The Apocryphal Gospels: Texts and Translations*, 383.

<sup>21</sup> Morgan, *Sepher Ha-Razim*, 28.

<sup>22</sup> Mark 10:46-52; Matthew 20:31-34; Luke 18:35-43.

<sup>23</sup> Mark 11:20, Matthew 21:19.

<sup>24</sup> Mark 11:11-15, Matthew 21:12-13.

<sup>25</sup> Mark 14:58.

<sup>26</sup> Welch, *Jesus and Archaeology*, 261.

<sup>27</sup> Mark 14:2.

for expulsion from the synagogue (9:13, ff.); they are deeply involved in the decision to have Jesus removed, actually summoning a meeting of the council (11:46 ff.).<sup>28</sup>

Needing a pretext to cover his arrest that would engage the attention of the Roman prefect, the Jewish authorities approached Jesus with a trick question: should Jews pay Roman taxes that helped support the occupation?<sup>29</sup> A flat refusal would imply Jesus supported insurrection. Agreement would alienate the crowd that was unenthusiastic about paying for its own subjugation. Jesus adroitly turned the tables on the Jewish leadership: Roman coins bore Caesar's image and Jesus responded to the temple leaders, indirectly pointing to their collaboration, "It's Caesar's coin—give it back to him."<sup>30</sup> Jesus, it turned out, had proven a slippery fish indeed.

Jesus came preaching the imminent arrival of the kingdom of God<sup>31</sup> and the overthrow of the old order, including, as we have seen, the destruction of Herod's temple. It is impossible to imagine that any prophet foretelling the overthrow of king and kingdom in the midst of Passover, a festival commemorating the deliverance of the Jews from the yoke of Gentiles, would be tolerated. It is also impossible that Jesus did not realize this. The annual festivals, with their crowds caught up on the high tide of nationalistic religious fervor, presented perfect opportunities for revolt—Josephus tells of "the whole city, overrun with people from the country, *the majority carrying weapons* (το πλεον οπλατων)" during the feast of Pentecost.<sup>32</sup> It is reasonable to assume that the multitude of Jewish pilgrims, who had traveled with their families from far and wide<sup>33</sup> on roads plagued by highway robbery, arrived at festivals armed in self-defense. Paul attests to the risk that accompanied travel between cities—"always on the move, in danger from rivers, in danger *from bandits* (ληστων)..."<sup>34</sup> Significantly, the men crucified along with Jesus were "robbers" (λησται);<sup>35</sup> the dense Passover crowds represented an abundance of opportunity for criminals.

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<sup>28</sup> Freyne, *Galilee, Jesus and the Gospels*, 125-126.

<sup>29</sup> Mark 12:14.

<sup>30</sup> Borg, *The Last Week*, 64.

<sup>31</sup> Mark 9:1, 13:29-30; 14:62.

<sup>32</sup> Josephus, *Jewish War*, I, 253.

Elsewhere Josephus documents disturbances that occurred during Passover. (*Jewish Antiquities*, XX, 106, ff.)

<sup>33</sup> Compare Acts 2:1, 8-10.

<sup>34</sup> 2 Corinthians 11:26.

<sup>35</sup> Matthew 27:38.

Given the potential for disorder and insurrection among the Passover throng, Pontius Pilate, the embodiment of law and order, traveled to Jerusalem from his usual residence in Caesarea accompanied by a large contingent of troops. A permanent garrison in the fortress of Antonia, adjacent to the temple precinct, warily surveyed the Jewish pilgrims from the ramparts, alert for signs of disturbance. In the event of problems, the Jewish and Roman leadership would present a unified front, dealing swiftly and efficiently with rabble-rousers—“When the governor arrived in town, death came with him.”<sup>36</sup>

According to the gospels, Jesus and his entourage were a source of consternation.

Therefore the chief priests and the Pharisees assembled the Sanhedrin and they said, “What will we do? This man is performing many signs! If we tolerate him like this, everyone will believe in him and the Romans will come and take away both our Temple and people!”

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So from that day forward they planned how they might kill him.<sup>37</sup>

The gospel accounts of Jesus’ arrest and trial are riddled with inconsistencies—Luke reports the temple police used spies to follow Jesus in preparation for his arrest<sup>38</sup> so it makes little sense to suppose they would pay Judas to betray his location. It has been suggested that Judas betrayed Jesus’ claim to be the ‘King of the Jews,’<sup>39</sup> but the record is not wholly consistent with that explanation—“That Jesus never asserted directly or spontaneously that he was the Messiah is admitted by every serious expert...The firmness of early Christian emphasis on Jesus’ Messianic status is matched by the reluctance of the Synoptic tradition to ascribe to him any unambiguous public, or even private, declaration in this domain.”<sup>40</sup> Mark has Judas indicate which man is Jesus by approaching him and kissing him,<sup>41</sup> whereas in John’s gospel, Jesus steps forward and identifies himself not once but three times<sup>42</sup> while Judas simply stands by.

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<sup>36</sup> Fuhrmann, *Policing the Roman Empire*, 186.

<sup>37</sup> John 11: 47-48, 53.

<sup>38</sup> Luke 20:20.

<sup>39</sup> Ehrman, *Jesus, Apocalyptic Prophet*, 216-219.

<sup>40</sup> Vermes, *Jesus the Jew*, 140, 152.

<sup>41</sup> Mark 14:44-45.

<sup>42</sup> John 18:4-8.

Carmichael points out that the gospel accounts of the arrest and trial are related “in contradictory and ambiguous ways; both the procedure and the content of the trial are deeply confusing.”<sup>43</sup> Cohn, who has produced a thorough analysis to the trial narrative concludes, “The spectacle of the Roman governor coming out of his court to ask the people assembled outside why they would not try his prisoner, and acquiescing in the finality of their reply that, notwithstanding his invitation, they had no power to, is just too grotesque for credence.”<sup>44</sup>

It is already established by the gospels that the temple authorities arrested Jesus by night, hastily interviewed him, pronounced his guilt, and hustled him away to Pilate for speedy execution. It is therefore absurd to have Pilate stand Jesus before the crowd and argue for his acquittal. “The gospels, especially Matthew and John, want Jesus to have been condemned by the Jewish mob, against Pilate’s better judgment...The stories of Pilate’s reluctance and weakness of will are best explained as Christian propaganda; they are a kind of excuse for Pilate’s action which reduces the conflict between the Christian movement and Roman authority.”<sup>45</sup> The Gentile author of Luke exonerates the Romans by shifting the blame for Jesus’ death to the chief priests and scribes,<sup>46</sup> omits the presence of Romans at the moment of Jesus’ arrest<sup>47</sup>—in contrast with John<sup>48</sup>—and deletes the reference to Gentile “sinners” found in Matthew and Mark.<sup>49</sup> Luke has Herod Antipas’ officers abuse Jesus,<sup>50</sup> not the Romans who perform this task in Matthew and Mark.<sup>51</sup> Nonetheless, Luke concedes, perhaps inadvertently, that Pilate murdered Jews.<sup>52</sup>

According to the gospel of John, Pilate leaves his court and asks the assembled throng of the unwashed, “What accusation do you bring against this man?”<sup>53</sup>—“indicating, so far, none had been brought. This is—to say the least—most surprising: how could Jesus have been admitted into the *praetorium* unless a charge was pending against

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<sup>43</sup> Carmichael, *The Unriddling of Christian Origins*, 83.

<sup>44</sup> Cohn, *The Trial and Death of Jesus*, 155.

<sup>45</sup> Crossan, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, 273-274.

<sup>46</sup> Luke 22:2.

<sup>47</sup> Luke 22:52.

<sup>48</sup> John 18:12.

<sup>49</sup> Matthew 26: 45, Mark 14:41.

<sup>50</sup> Luke 23:11.

<sup>51</sup> Matthew 27:27-31, Mark 15:16-20.

<sup>52</sup> Luke 13:1.

<sup>53</sup> John 18:29.



him? If he was, as yet, under no indictment, he would not be let in any more than any other member of the public...a Roman cohort under the command of a tribune would never have been detached for the arrest of Jesus unless a charge had already been preferred against him...This is no less surprising: if the Jews were as interested as all that in having Jesus tried on a capital offense, why did they not take the opportunity offered and formulate a charge accordingly?"<sup>54</sup>

Clearly the Temple authorities regarded Jesus as a serious problem and wanted rid of him, but to achieve that end they had to prefer a criminal charge that would stand up in a Roman court. To haul Jesus up before Pilate over a purely religious dispute would not do; the Romans did not bother to understand, much less enforce, Jewish religious laws.<sup>55</sup> The best evidence portrays Pilate "as lacking in concern for Jewish religious sensibilities and as capable of rather brutal methods of crowd control,"<sup>56</sup> hardly the sort of administrator one would expect to be drawn into arcane theological disputes.

Thanks to the 1<sup>st</sup> century historian Josephus, we know of the tight connections between prophecy, magic, and social disturbance. Kingdom-of-God apocalyptic preachers who established their bona fides by the performance of miracles were considered *sorcerers*. Theudas' brief career is mentioned—Josephus calls him a *γοης* (*goēs*), a *sorcerer* or *impostor*, and a *προφητης* (*profētēs*), *prophet*. The prophet Theudas was credited with miracles—at his command the river Jordan was expected to part so the mob that followed him could cross on dry ground.<sup>57</sup> "In the Jewish world, the major motif is proof of prophecy by miracle sign."<sup>58</sup> Theudas' actions constituted insurrection; he was killed and his head brought back to Jerusalem and put on display—*pour encourager les autres*—as a warning to other would-be magician/prophets, but notwithstanding Theudas' sticky end Josephus tells of "those deceived by a certain man, a magician (*υπο τινος ανθρωπου γοητος*), who proclaimed salvation and an end to their troubles" if they chose to follow him "into the wilderness."<sup>59</sup> This man and his partisans were also promptly hunted down and dispatched.

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<sup>54</sup> Cohn, *The Trial and Death of Jesus*, 151-152.

<sup>55</sup> Compare Acts 18:15.

<sup>56</sup> Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus?*, 148.

<sup>57</sup> Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, XX, 97.

Theudas and Judas the Galilean are mentioned in Acts 5:36-37 where they are specifically compared to the first Christian missionaries.

<sup>58</sup> Kolenkow, *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt* II.23.2: 1471.

<sup>59</sup> Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, XX, 188.

Origen acknowledged the existence of prophetic figures who Celsus compared to Jesus—deceivers “of Jesus’ type” (οποιοις ην ο Ιησους)—among them Theudas, a certain “Judas of Galilee” who was executed, Dositheus, a Samaritan who was supposedly “the one prophesied by Moses” (ο προφητευμενος υπο Μωυσεως) and the infamous “Simon the Samaritan magician (Σιμων ο Σαμαρευς μαγος) [who] beguiled some by magic.”<sup>60</sup> It is clear both that Celsus recognized Jesus as belonging to a familiar category, and that Origen regarded ‘signs and wonders’ as the calling card of a prophet, even of a false prophet: “If there arise among you *a prophet* (προφητης) or one who receives revelations in dreams, and he gives you *a sign or wonders* (σημειον η τερας) ...”<sup>61</sup> Regarding the terms πλανος (*planos*), *deceiver*, μαγος (*magos*), *magician*, and ψευδοπροφητης (*pseudoprophētēs*), *false prophet*, Stanton notes that “the most widely attested ancient criticism of Jesus: he was a magician and a false prophet who deceived God’s people...accusations of magic and false prophecy are very closely related to one another.”<sup>62</sup>

The attraction of the Jordan River and the adjoining wilderness for prophets and miracle workers was no doubt based on the legendary exploits of Elijah and Elisha.<sup>63</sup> Elijah parted the waters of the river by striking them with his cloak, a wonder that Elisha duplicated, and Elijah ascended to heaven in a chariot of fire from the bank of the river.<sup>64</sup> The waters of the Jordan cured Naaman’s leprosy, and Elisha performed magic in its stream by causing an ax head to float.<sup>65</sup> Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan caused early Christians to regard the river itself as magical—a spell against weakness and witchcraft begins, “I adjure you by the river Jordan and by his baptism (Ορκίζω σε κατα του Ιορδανου ποταμου και του βαπτισματος αυτου)...”<sup>66</sup> “Desert and Jordan, prophet and crowds, were always a volatile mix calling for immediate preventive strikes.”<sup>67</sup>

Laws throughout the ancient world regulated the use of “magic,” a concept that was highly variegated and whose

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<sup>60</sup> Origen, *Contra Celsum* I, 57, II, 8.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, II, 53. The reference is to Deuteronomy 13:1.

<sup>62</sup> Stanton, *Jesus of Nazareth Lord and Christ*, 166-167.

<sup>63</sup> Grant, *Jesus*, 79.

Compare Matthew 3:13, Mark 1:9, Luke 3:21, John 1:32.

<sup>64</sup> 2 Kings 2:6-14.

<sup>65</sup> 2 Kings 5:14, 6:5-6.

<sup>66</sup> Giannobile & Jordan, *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 46 (2006): 74-79.

<sup>67</sup> Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, 235.

manifestations were not often legally differentiated. The term “magic” typically covers a broad range of numinous activities, including sorcery, divination, astrology, wonder-working, exorcism, and all other such activities that cross over into the realm of the supernatural.

Modern people have difficulty understanding the pervasive roles and driving fears associated with unseen spirits, demons, powers, names, curses, and wonders in the world of the New Testament.<sup>68</sup>

The charge of practicing magic, which could expand to include “prophets who disturb the peace,”<sup>69</sup> could kill more than one’s reputation. “There was thus no period in the history of the empire in which the magician was not considered an enemy of society, subject at the least to exile, more often to death in its least pleasant forms.”<sup>70</sup> “The empire had long shown an exceptional interest in the policing of ritual systems—diviners, spell-mongers, *magoi*, ‘foreign’ cults,” and by the time of Jesus, magic had become “a criminal form of ritual subversion in the Roman Empire.”<sup>71</sup> Roman authorities often moved against religious figures “deemed potentially subversive” and various types of “holy men,” including astrologers, who “were expelled from Rome at least ten times from 33 BC to AD 93.”<sup>72</sup>

### **“If this man were not an evildoer...”**

That Pilate tried Jesus for practicing sorcery could be reasonably imputed from two passages, one of which is found in John. Asked by Pilate what charges they are bringing against Jesus, the Jewish leaders reply: “If this man were not *an evildoer* (*κακον ποιων*), we would not have handed him over to you.”<sup>73</sup> Whatever evil Jesus was accused of doing, it was apparently a capital offense, but the specifics are vague. Plumer notes, “In the Johannine trial of the Jesus the material evidence for the prosecution has conveniently gone missing!” and concludes that the Beelzeboul controversy,<sup>74</sup> i.e., the accusation that Jesus

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<sup>68</sup> Welch, *Jesus and Archaeology*, 253.

<sup>69</sup> Rives, *The Religious History of the Roman Empire*, 98.

<sup>70</sup> MacMullen, *Enemies of the Roman Order*, 125-126.

<sup>71</sup> Frankfurter, *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 46 (2006), 59.

<sup>72</sup> Fuhrman, *Policing the Roman Empire*, 49.

<sup>73</sup> John 18:30.

<sup>74</sup> Plumer, *Biblica* 78 (1997): 359-361.

practiced sorcery by controlling the prince of the demons,<sup>75</sup> formed the basis for the indictment that brought Jesus before Pilate.

In addition to *evildoer*, *κακοποιος* (*kakopoios*) could mean *sorcerer*—the most authoritative lexicon of New Testament Greek offers “sorcerer” as one of several definitions of *κακοποιος*.<sup>76</sup> Calling sorcerers “evildoers” was evidently very old even in Jesus’ day: “As a rule the sorcerer was called ‘the evildoer’ and ‘the malevolent man’ in the old Accadian conjurations...his rites and formulae for enchantment subjected demons to his orders...He could even take away life with his spells and imprecations.”<sup>77</sup> Among a collection of Babylonian prayers, King translated one, “By the command of thy mouth may there never approach anything evil, the magic of the sorcerer and of the sorceress! ...May the evil curse, that is unfavorable, never draw nigh, may it never be oppressive.”<sup>78</sup>

Kotansky notes, “the adjective *κακοποιος* is used in the magical papyri specifically of malevolent planetary influences” as well as documenting an amulet with the conjuration, “Depart from her [name], *harmful and destructive evil spirit* (*πονηρον πνευμα κακοποιον και φθοροποιον*)! O Ptah, entirely beautiful, thabiasa!”<sup>79</sup> Although short, the spell captures a smorgasbord of magical terms: *πονηρον πνευμα* (*ponēron pneuma*), *evil spirit*, a term from the Septuagint that has been carried over into the New Testament,<sup>80</sup> and *φθοροποιος* (*phthoropoios*), *causing destruction*, used of demons only by Christian writers. But just in case, the spell includes an invocation of Egyptian Ptah and ends with the neologism *thabiasa*, likely compounded from Aramaic ܛܒ (*tāb*), *good*, and ܐܫܐ (*asā*), *remedy*.<sup>81</sup> *Κακοποιος* and its cognates are embedded in the magical papyri—“*for doing good* (*επι μεν των αγαθοποιων*) offer storax, myrrh, sage, frankincense, fruit pit. *But for doing harm* (*επι δε των κακοποιων*) offer magical material of a dog and a dappled goat (or in a similar way, of a virgin untimely dead).”<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Mark 3:22, Matthew 12:24, Luke 11:15.

<sup>76</sup> Bauer, Arndt & Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Early Christian Literature*, 482.

<sup>77</sup> Lenormant, *Chaldean Magic*, 60-61.

<sup>78</sup> King, *Babylonian Magic and Sorcery*, 62.

<sup>79</sup> Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets*, 102.

<sup>80</sup> As at Luke 7:21 and Acts 19:12, for example.

<sup>81</sup> Kotansky, 102-103.

<sup>82</sup> Preisendanz, *Papyri Graecae Magicae* IV, 2870-2876. (As rendered in Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation*, 92.)

Charges of evildoing through magic were leveled at Jesus' closest associates. The *Apocriticus* of Macarius Magnus, an attempted refutation of Porphyry's *Against the Christians*, preserves this charge made against the apostle Peter: "This man Peter is *proved unrighteous* (*αδικων ελεγχεται*) in other matters also. A certain man called Ananias and his wife Sapphira...*he killed though they had done nothing wrong* (*εθανατωσε μηδεν αδικησαντας*)..."<sup>83</sup> From the pagan standpoint, Peter had murdered Ananias and Sapphira by magical cursing,<sup>84</sup> a premeditated criminal act captured by the term *αδικημα* (*adikēma*), *deliberate wrongdoing*.

By the standards of Roman law, Christianity's founding documents celebrated criminality. The category of *evil doing* (*κακον ποιειν*) by magic was well established: "...if I have given a *pharmakon* [*φαρμακον*, *potion* or *poison*, my note] to Asklepiadas or contrived in my soul *to do him harm* (*κακον τι αυτω ποισαι*) in any way..."<sup>85</sup> Magic and murder by poisoning were closely associated in legal texts; the Latin *veneficus* might be either a *poisoner* or a *magician* or both, and *veneficium*, like the Greek *φαρμακεια* (*pharmakeia*), "can refer to spells or to a generalized notion of magic." The *Lex Cornelia de sicariis et veneficiis*, the Cornelian law on assassins and poisoners, established in 81 BCE, was the principle law under which magicians were prosecuted "because the very name 'poisoner' (*veneficus*) was the same as that for 'magician'...to Romans of the first century CE, magic was the 'ultimate *superstitio*.'"<sup>86</sup>

In short, Porphyry claimed that Peter's curse on Ananias and Sapphira was subject to legal sanction. Peter is *αδικος* (*adikos*), a *criminal*. Commenting on the phrase *και ει τις με αδικησι επεικινα αποστειψον*, "And if anyone shall injure me henceforth, turn [him] away!" Kotansky points out that the verb *αδικειν* (*adikein*) "generally means 'to damage, injure,' but when it occurs in the formula *ει τις αδικειν* is used specifically of committing *legal* injury or wrong" and cites several instances of such use from decrees and letters.<sup>87</sup> Magical injury offended true religion; as Marcus Aurelius said, "*Wrongdoing* (*αδικων*) is sacrilege."<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Blondel, *Μακαριου Μαγνητος Αποκριτικος η Μονογενες*, XXI.

<sup>84</sup> Acts 5:1-10.

<sup>85</sup> Quoted from Versnel, *The world of ancient magic*, 134.

<sup>86</sup> Collins, *Magic in the Ancient World*, 144-147.

<sup>87</sup> Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets*, 183, 184, 189, 190.

<sup>88</sup> Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* IX, 1.

Roman law considered magic “above all as a murderous activity, which explains the severity of the punishments inflicted to prevent it,”<sup>89</sup> punishments that included being burned alive, thrown to the beasts in the arena and banishment. The New Testament itself connects magic with murder: “Outside are the dogs and the *sorcerers* (φαρμακοι)...and the murderers....”<sup>90</sup> and the curse against “Babylon,” generally read as standing for Rome, links sorcery and murder: “all the nations *were deceived by your sorcery* (εν τη φαρμακεια σου επλανηθησαν)...in her was found the blood of the prophets and saints...”<sup>91</sup> A charge of murder was brought against the famous seer and miracle worker Apollonius, accused of sacrificing a young boy in order to foretell the future by examination of his entrails.<sup>92</sup>

Reports of magical cursing in Acts, where the apostle Peter performs “a punitive action, which is a typical feature of magic,”<sup>93</sup> expand to include the apostle Paul—“Elymas the magician is struck blind in consequence of an imprecation pronounced by Paul<sup>94</sup> ...in early Christian apocryphal literature, the incidence of *Strafwunder* attributed to both Jesus and the apostles exhibits a marked increase in frequency.”<sup>95</sup> Besides calling down fire from heaven,<sup>96</sup> ritualistic magical behavior is everywhere present in the gospels and Acts—“shake the dust from your feet,”<sup>97</sup> and “he shook out his clothing.”<sup>98</sup> It bears pointing out that “shake” and “curse to death” are both derived from the same Hebrew stem, לָקַח,<sup>99</sup> and that the ritual of shaking the dust from one’s clothing, so that no trace of the place remains, presages eternal damnation—“Truly I tell you, it will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town.”<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Heintz, *Simon “Le Magicien”: Actes 8,5-25 et L’Accusation de Magie Contre les Profètes Dans L’Antiquité*, 34.

My translation of “avant tout comme une activité homicide permet de comprendre la sévérité des châtements infligés au contrevenant...”

<sup>90</sup> Revelation 22:15.

<sup>91</sup> Revelation 18:23-24.

<sup>92</sup> Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius* VII, 11.

<sup>93</sup> Kee, *Medicine, Miracle and Magic in New Testament Times*, 118.

<sup>94</sup> Acts 13:6-13.

<sup>95</sup> Aune, *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt*, II.23.2: 1552-1553.

*Strafwunder* refers to a miracle of punishment. The German *straf* is the basis of the English *strafe*.

<sup>96</sup> Luke 9:54.

<sup>97</sup> Matthew 10:11-15, Luke 9:5, 54.

<sup>98</sup> Acts 18:6.

<sup>99</sup> Brown, Driver & Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 886.

<sup>100</sup> Matthew 10:15 (NIV).

Magical cursing is richly documented in the authentic writings of Paul: “For even if we, or an angel from heaven, proclaim a gospel different from the gospel we preached to you, a curse on him! As we have said before, even now I repeat it, if anyone proclaims a gospel contrary to what you received, a curse on him!”<sup>101</sup> “Galatians begins with a conditional curse, very carefully constructed, cursing every Christian who dares to preach a gospel different from what Paul had preached...What does this mean for the literary function of the letter? It means that as the carrier of curse and blessing the letter becomes a ‘magical letter.’ This category is well-known from ancient epistolography.”<sup>102</sup>

Regarding the bewitchment of the Galatian Christians—“Who *bewitched* (εβασκανεν) you?”<sup>103</sup>—Neyrey states, “It is my hypothesis that Paul is using it [the term for casting the evil eye, my note] in its formal sense as an accusation that someone has bewitched the Galatians,” and in his extended analysis, goes on to note “evidence of an intense sense of rivalry, competition, and even jealousy...Galatians fairly bristles with a sense of rivalry and competition.”<sup>104</sup> So the short answer to Paul’s question, “Who bewitched you?” is “*Other Christian preachers.*” In the era in question, as for centuries before and after, *βασκανια* (*baskania*), *jealousy* or *envy*, was thought to be the driving force behind the *βασκανος οφθαλμος* (*baskanos ophthalmos*), the *evil eye*. By extension, *baskania* extended to bewitchment, and *βασκανος* (*baskanos*), *slanderer*, *malicious*, could also mean *sorcerer*. The term *αβασκαντος* (*abaskantos*), “unharmed by the evil eye,” is well attested in Christian letters recovered from Oxyrhynchus: “I greet *your children* by name, *unharmed by the evil eye* (τα αβασκαντα σου παιδια), and I pray for their health and yours in the Lord God.” As Blumell notes, “this phrase [*αβασκαντος*, my note] can be found in other letters where Christian provenance is secure” and points out that Athanasius, the bishop of Alexandria, “felt compelled to devote an entire treatise urging his fellow Christians in Egypt to stop using charms and amulets to ward off malevolent forces, such as the evil eye.”<sup>105</sup> A tradition of magical cursing thrived in early Christianity: “The body and blood of Jesus Christ strike Maria, daughter of Tsibel ...” or “You must bring [Martha] away by the method of an ulcerous

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<sup>101</sup> Galatians 1:8-9.

<sup>102</sup> Betz, *Galatians*, 25.

<sup>103</sup> Galatians 3:1.

<sup>104</sup> Neyrey, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 50 (1988): 72, 97.

<sup>105</sup> Blumell, *Lettered Christians: Christians, Letters, and Late Antique Oxyrhynchus*, 57.

tumor...she pouring forth worms...My lord Jesus Christ, you must bring her down to an end.”<sup>106</sup>

Evidence that Jesus employed magical cursing is less direct, but hardly absent. References to Jesus directly cursing anyone to death, if such occurred, have been removed from the gospels, but that Jesus could curse something to death is evident from the story of the withered fig tree—“Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!” To which Jesus replies, “Trust in God!”<sup>107</sup> It is telling that the episode of the blighted fig tree occurs in the context of Jesus’ conflict with the temple leaders.<sup>108</sup> Eitrem noted the moral ambiguity revealed in the story: “Actually an *εξορκισμος* [exorcism, my note]—just as an *ορκος* [oath], an *αρα* [curse, execration], or an *αναθεμα* [a thing cursed, bound by a curse]—is ambivalent, it can be used for good or for bad. Ambivalent is also Jesus’ own mighty command, as we see from his destruction of the fig tree near Jerusalem...”<sup>109</sup> After noting the case of Jesus cursing the fig tree, Ritner points out that “the notion of cursing was not alien to the evolving Judeo-Christian traditions” and supports his contention by citing a number of gospel examples.<sup>110</sup>

The method by which Jesus hands Judas over to Satan is clearly magical:

After saying this, Jesus *became disturbed in spirit* (*εταραχθη τω πνευματι*) and declared, “Most certainly I tell you, one from among you will betray me!”

The disciples looked around at one another, uncertain about whom he was speaking. One of the disciples, the one that Jesus loved, was lying up against Jesus. Simon Peter motioned for him to ask him about whom he was speaking, so the disciple leaning against Jesus’ chest said to him, “Lord, who is it?”

Jesus answered, “It is the one I give *the morsel* (*το ψωμιον*) [of bread] that I dip.” Then he took the morsel and dipped it and gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. And after the morsel, then Satan entered into him.

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<sup>106</sup> Meyer & Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic: Coptic Texts of Ritual Power*, 193, 207.

<sup>107</sup> Mark 11:21, 22.

<sup>108</sup> Mark 11:15-17.

<sup>109</sup> Eitrem, *Some Notes on the Demonology in the New Testament*, 14-15.

<sup>110</sup> Ritner, *Ancient Christian Magic: Coptic Texts of Ritual Power*, 185.

Specifically cited, Mark 11:12-22, Matthew 10:11-15, 21:18-19, Luke 9:5, 10:13-15, Acts 18:6.



Jesus said to him, “Do what you are doing *more quickly* (ταχίον).” But none of those reclining with Jesus knew why he said that to him.<sup>111</sup>

As soon as John tells us that Jesus “became disturbed in spirit” we are put on notice of an impending supernatural event—such disturbances in the gospel of John precede miraculous occurrences. When the water of the pool of Bethzatha is “stirred” by an angel, the first sick person into the pool is healed<sup>112</sup>—a sort of divinely sponsored ‘race for the cure’—and when Jesus’ soul is “troubled” a heavenly voice is heard.<sup>113</sup> Jesus becomes similarly “disturbed” when first encountering the mourners at Lazarus’ tomb and again as he stands before the tomb itself—the raising of the beloved Lazarus quickly follows.<sup>114</sup> The verb in each case is the same, *ταρασσω* (*tarassō*).

In the case of the revelation of Judas’ perfidy, Jesus’ disturbance of spirit again signals a preternatural event, two of them to be exact. First, Jesus foresees Judas’ betrayal<sup>115</sup>—it should nearly go without saying that the power to read minds is a frequent preoccupation of the magical spells: “...let me foresee today the things in the soul of each person...”<sup>116</sup>

Next Jesus hands Judas over to Satan so that Satan can destroy him. There is a clear precedent for this action; he has previously given over a herd of swine to the demons that drove the animals over a cliff to their death.<sup>117</sup> “Demons were among the later Jews supposed to be capable of being transferred from one individual to another, or from human beings to animals.”<sup>118</sup> Magical transference might be accomplished through words, gestures, a look, spells, and poppets or by food: “There need not always be a lack of proximity between victim and witch...she causes her victim to incorporate witchcraft by means of food, drink, washing, and ointment.”<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> John 13:21-28.

<sup>112</sup> John 5:7.

<sup>113</sup> John 12:27-28.

<sup>114</sup> John 11:33, 38.

<sup>115</sup> That Jesus has the power to read thoughts is everywhere stated in John (1:47-48, 2:24-25, 4:16-18, 5:42, 6:61, etc.). Jesus has foreknowledge of which disciples do not believe and of who would betray him (6:64).

<sup>116</sup> Preisendanz, *Papyri Graecae Magicae* III, 265, to cite but one of many examples.

<sup>117</sup> Mark 5:12-13.

<sup>118</sup> Davies, *Magic, Divination, and Demonology Among the Hebrews and Their Neighbors*, 104.

<sup>119</sup> Abusch, *Mesopotamian Witchcraft*, 7.

The piece of bread that Jesus hands to Judas is the equivalent of Judas' kiss of betrayal: it is the sign for the adversary to approach and take possession. "The notion that a demon can be sent into food so as to enter anyone who eats the food is common."<sup>120</sup> In short, Jesus betrays Judas to Satan before Judas betrays him to the temple police, much as Yahweh sends evil spirits into those whom he disapproves.<sup>121</sup>

There is a close parallel to Jesus' action in the magical papyri, in this case an incantation that uses morsels of bread to call up the gods of the underworld:

Leave a little of the bread you did not eat, and after breaking it apart, make seven morsels and go to where the heroes and gladiators and men who died violently were slain. Say the spell *into the morsels* (εις τους ψωμους) and toss them.

This is the spell to be pronounced into the morsels..."<sup>122</sup>

That powerful entities, good and bad, can be transferred into or out of a subject is the basis for both exorcism and for hexing victims and that this belief predated Jesus and persisted long after him is certain:

God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, protect Alexandra, daughter of Zoë, from demons and enchantments...flee from Alexandra, Zoë's daughter...lest you use potions on her, *either by a kiss* (μητε απο φιληματος)...*or by food* (μητε εν βρωσει), or by drink...or by the [evil] eye, or by an article of clothing...One God and his Christ, help Alexandra.<sup>123</sup>

As noted by Morton Smith,<sup>124</sup> Jesus dismisses Judas by telling him, "Do what you are doing *more quickly* (ταχιον),"<sup>125</sup>—the comparative use of ταχυς (*tachus*), *quick*, appears to echo a frequently attested conclusion to magical spells, ηδη ηδη ταχυ ταχυ, *now, now, quick, quick*, "the battle cry of late antique magicians."<sup>126</sup> "Woe to that man through whom the Son of Man is handed over"<sup>127</sup> could be considered a preemptive curse.

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<sup>120</sup> Smith, *Jesus the Magician*, 110.

<sup>121</sup> Judges 9:23, 1 Samuel 16:15, 16, 23, 18:10, 19:9.

<sup>122</sup> Preisendanz, *Papyri Graecae Magicae* IV, 1392-1395.

<sup>123</sup> Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets*, 278-281.

<sup>124</sup> Smith, 111.

<sup>125</sup> John 13:27.

<sup>126</sup> Bohak, *Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists*, 36 (1999): 35.

<sup>127</sup> Mark 14:21.

Given the power attributed to magical cursing, it is little wonder that under Roman law some forms of magic were considered *lèse-majesté* and were punishable by death. The performance of exorcism and the report that he raised Lazarus from the dead, whose appearance in Jerusalem advertised Jesus' power and drew a substantial crowd of supporters,<sup>128</sup> "blatantly and publicly defied the emergent Jewish standards of ritual boundaries,"<sup>129</sup> and surely would have qualified as sorcery. Agents of the state "repressed certain forms of magic and unsanctioned religious practices, especially those deemed potentially subversive" and this was particularly true of "wonder workers."<sup>130</sup> According to Philostratus, who recorded the marvelous feats of Apollonius, magic is "condemned *by nature* (*φύσει*) and *by law* (*νομῶ*)." <sup>131</sup> "Religious deviance could indeed play a central part" in accusations of magical practice, which, as noted by Rives, included such figures as "magicians, *magi*, and evildoers, *malefici*" and the penalties for such practices were severe. According to the *Opinions of Paulus*, "those guilty of the magic art (*magicae artis conscios*) be inflicted with the supreme punishment, i.e., be thrown to the beasts or *crucified* (emphasis added)." <sup>132</sup> Punishment was particularly severe for the lower classes given that direct access to the world of the supernatural, the realm commonly thought to guide the destiny of individuals as well as nations, "made the magic of Antiquity a kind of super-religion, above the states."<sup>133</sup>

Although never cited (to the best of my knowledge) as evidence favoring an accusation of sorcery, Luke describes the charge made against Jesus as "*perverting* (*διαστρεφοντα*) our people"<sup>134</sup>—which is perhaps not coincidentally the very same terminology he has Paul use against the magician Bar-Jesus: "will you not stop *making crooked* (*διαστρεφον*) the paths of the Lord?"<sup>135</sup> Or perhaps Luke simply overlooked the implications of his choice of vocabulary.

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<sup>128</sup> John 12:9-11.

<sup>129</sup> Kee, *Medicine, Miracle and Magic*, 74.

<sup>130</sup> Fuhrmann, *Policing the Roman Empire*, 49.

<sup>131</sup> Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius* VII, 39.

<sup>132</sup> Rives, *The Religious History of the Roman Empire*, 75, 92, 98.

<sup>133</sup> Heintz, *Simon: "Le Magicien,"* 32.

"...faisaient de la magie dans l'Antiquité une sorte de supra-religion, au-dessus des états..."

<sup>134</sup> Luke 23:2.

<sup>135</sup> Acts 13:10.

**“We remember that deceiver said...‘I will raise myself.’”**

A second text one might cite in support of a charge of sorcery comes from Matthew, also voiced by the Jewish authorities: “My lord, we remember *that man, the deceiver* (εκεινος ο πλανος), said while still alive, ‘After three days I will raise myself.’”<sup>136</sup> In response to the possibility of such a fraud, guards are posted at Jesus’ tomb.<sup>137</sup>

It bears note that by calling Jesus “that man, the deceiver,” Matthew is more or less tactfully rephrasing the traditional Jewish charge against Jesus. As Eitrem noted, “common Jewish people considered Jesus a μαγος”<sup>138</sup> (*magician*, my note), an assessment confirmed by the early apologist Justin Martyr: “But those who saw the things he did said it was *magical illusion* (φαντασια μαγικην), daring to call him *a magician* (μαγον), and *a deceiver of the people* (λαοπλανον).”<sup>139</sup> That πλανος (*planos*), *deceiver*, could be applied to apocalyptic prophets is evident from Josephus who describes “men, *fakes and deceivers* (πλανοι...και απατεωνες)” who led crazed multitudes into the wilderness promising that God would give them “signs of deliverance.”<sup>140</sup>

The term φαντασια (*phantasia*), from which *fantasy*, then as now carried distinct connotations of unreality, the imaginary, in short, *illusion*. The charge that Jesus was, in effect, an illusionist, and therefore a *deceiver*, πλανος (*planos*), of the λαος (*laos*), *people* or *laity*—a λαοπλανος (*laoplanos*)—confirmed his identity as a μαγος (*magos*), a *magician*. After a lengthy analysis of the passage in Matthew, Samain concluded, “...by the epithet πλανος, Matthew refers to a man who has won over the crowd not only by his doctrine and his words, but also by his activities and his wonders, that is to say, a magician.”<sup>141</sup> In a seminal essay, Aune characterizes Samain’s evidence as “an iron-clad case for understanding the charge of imposture as an accusation that Jesus performed miracles by trickery or magical techniques.”<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Matthew 27:63.

<sup>137</sup> Matthew 27:64-66.

<sup>138</sup> Eitrem, *Some Notes on the Demonology in the New Testament*, 41.

<sup>139</sup> Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho*, LXIX, 7.

<sup>140</sup> Josephus, *Jewish Wars* II, 229.

<sup>141</sup> Samain, *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 15 (1932): 458-459.

My translation of “pour...l’épithète de Matthieu désigne un homme qui a séduit la foule, non seulement par sa doctrine et ses paroles, mais aussi par ses gestes prodiges: c’est à dire un magicien.”

<sup>142</sup> Aune, *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* II, 23.2 (1980), 1540.

Celsus specifically alleged that Jesus “was some wicked sorcerer, hated by God” (θεομισους ην τινος και μοχθηρου γοητος)<sup>143</sup> and that he had learned magic in Egypt, the ancient seat of sorcery.<sup>144</sup> And while Origen strenuously denied that Jesus was a magician, he does not hesitate to label other Christians with whom he disagreed “frauds and sorcerers” (πλανοι και γοητες).<sup>145</sup>

To substantiate their claim that Jesus practiced magic, the temple authorities cite Jesus’ prediction: “After three days *I will raise myself* (εγειρομαι),”<sup>146</sup> adding that should Jesus’ disciples make off with his corpse, “This last *deception* (πλανη) will be worse than the first.”<sup>147</sup>

If the verb εγειρομαι (*egeiromai*) is construed as middle voice, indicating what the subject does to or for himself, it would appear that Jesus predicted that he would raise himself from the dead. Parallel passages in the Synoptics suggest precisely such an interpretation: “and they will flog him and kill [him] and after three days *he will raise himself* (αναστησεται).”<sup>148</sup> Matthew<sup>149</sup> and Luke<sup>150</sup> preserve the tense and voice of the verb when quoting it, but some copyists may have considered that the literal reading, “he will raise himself,” presented doctrinal problems—they substituted a different verb and changed the voice to passive: εγερθησεται (*egerthēsetai*), “*he will be raised.*”

In defense of the apparently ridiculous charge made by the Jewish leaders, it must be pointed out that the Jesus of the gospels *clearly foretells that he will raise himself from the dead.*

In response the Jews said to him, “What sign are you showing us that you are doing these things?”

In reply Jesus said to them, “Destroy this temple and in three days *I will raise* (εγερω) it.”

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<sup>143</sup> Origen, *Contra Celsum* I, 71.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 38.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, VII, 40.

<sup>146</sup> Matthew 27:63.

<sup>147</sup> Matthew 27:64 (NIV).

<sup>148</sup> Mark 10:34.

This is Jesus’ third prediction of his death and (self) resurrection. Compare Mark 8:31, 9:31.

<sup>149</sup> Matthew 20:19.

<sup>150</sup> Luke 18:35.

Then the Jews said, “This temple was built in forty-six years and in three days you will raise it?” But he said that about the temple of his body.<sup>151</sup>

“Instead of displaying another sign on the spot, Jesus promises one—it will be his greatest and will give the best apology imaginable for his death. That he is to accomplish his own resurrection is virtually unique in the N[ew] T[estament]. If there was any doubt that he had been alluding to his own death (and resurrection), it is dispelled by the formula, *in three days*.”<sup>152</sup> In fact, the fourth gospel is quite explicit on this point:

“That is why the Father loves me, because I lay aside my life in order that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it aside of my own volition. *I have the authority* (εξουσιαν εχω) to lay it down and I have authority to take it up again. This is the order I received from my Father.”<sup>153</sup>

It is crucial to note the claim of *authority*—“the belief that some people have supernatural powers as a gift”<sup>154</sup>—is elsewhere consistently linked to the performance of miracles.<sup>155</sup> After this shocking declaration the Jews respond, “He has a demon and he’s raving!”<sup>156</sup> The contrast is clear: Jesus claims to have authority and his opponents claim he has a demon; both are claims that Jesus can perform amazing works of power. The question, as the context reveals, is the source of Jesus’ power.

The remarkable notion that Jesus could raise himself from the dead is mentioned in a letter of Ignatius, composed around the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. Writing against the Docetist heresy that claimed Jesus was a spirit that only appeared to be material, Ignatius says, “He suffered all these things on our account that we might be saved, and he truly suffered *as also he truly raised himself* (ως και αληθως ανεστησεν εαυτου).”<sup>157</sup> That raising oneself from the dead is exactly the sort of thing a magician might do is confirmed by Hippolytus’ accusation that Simon Magus made precisely such a claim.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> John 2:18-21.

<sup>152</sup> Miller, *The Complete Gospels*, 187 (footnote on John 2:19).

<sup>153</sup> John 10:17-18.

<sup>154</sup> Luck, *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: Ancient Greece and Rome*, 165.

<sup>155</sup> Compare Luke 4:36, 9:1.

<sup>156</sup> John 10:19.

<sup>157</sup> Ignatius, *Ad Smyrnaeos*, 2.

<sup>158</sup> Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* VI, 15.

Christianity's opponents certainly knew of Jesus' amazing prediction. That Celsus believed the resurrection to be an act of magic is clear: "[Jesus] foretold that after dying *he will raise himself* (αναστησεται)," and offers the claim as a case of "exploiting others *by deceit* (πλανη)." Accordingly, Jesus appears post mortem to "a woman in a frenzy" (γυνη παροιστρος) as well as "some others *under the same spell* (εκ της αυτης γοητειας)."<sup>159</sup> The term *πλανος* (*planos*), *deceiver*, is used elsewhere in the New Testament in relation to spiritism—"turning to *deceptive spirits* (πνευμασιν πλανοις) and teachings of demons."<sup>160</sup> Significantly, the same authorities who accuse Jesus of controlling demons also say, "he *deceives* (πλανα) the crowd."<sup>161</sup>

Given Origen's response, it appears Celsus linked Jesus' execution to a charge of sorcery: "That it is perfectly obvious the accounts written about Jesus' suffering have nothing in common with those most miserable of men dispatched *on account of sorcery* (δια γοητειων) or some other grounds is clear to everyone."<sup>162</sup> Commenting on legal charges brought against Christians, Smith observed, "These persecutions require explanation both because of their frequency and because of the general tolerance throughout the Roman empire for cults of oriental gods and deified men...the Christians had to explain the persecutions as inspired either by the demons or by the Jews who, they said, denounced them to the authorities...What they were accused of was the practice of magic and other crimes associated with magic... Moreover, as the passages from Eusebius show—and they could be paralleled by many more from Irenaeus, Hippolytus, and Epiphanius—the Christians made considerable use of this charge against one another. Presumably they knew what they were talking about."<sup>163</sup> A brief quotation from Eusebius serves to reinforce Smith's comments:

Formerly [the Devil] had used persecutions from without as his weapon against [the church], but now that he was excluded from this he employed *wicked men and sorcerers* (πονηροις και γοησιν), like baleful weapons and ministers of destruction against the soul, and conducted his campaign by other measures, plotting by every means that *sorcerers and*

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<sup>159</sup> Origen, *Contra Celsum* II, 54-55.

<sup>160</sup> 1 Timothy 4:1.

<sup>161</sup> John 7:12, 20.

<sup>162</sup> Origen, II, 44.

<sup>163</sup> Smith, *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark*, 234.

*deceivers* (γοητες και απατηλοι) might assume the same name as our religion.<sup>164</sup>

In the *Acts of Thomas* the terms μαγος, *magician*, and πλανος, *deceiver* or *fraud*, are equated: “for I heard *the magician* (ο μαγος) and *fraud* (πλανος) teaches this...”<sup>165</sup> There is little question that the overtly magical has been edited out of the gospels. The gospel of John refers to Jesus’ miracles as “signs” (σημειον) rather than “works of power” (δυναμις), likely because of the association of the latter term with magic,<sup>166</sup> and the apocalyptic content of Jesus’ preaching has nearly disappeared from the fourth gospel as well.

There is, in fact, significant evidence pointing us to an accusation of sorcery: the terminology used by the Jewish authorities, κακοποιος (*kakopoios*), *evildoer*, and πλανος (*planos*), *fraud*, are terms well attested in the vocabulary of magic and πλανος is specifically equated with μαγος (*magos*), *magician*. Outside the New Testament material, Justin concedes that Jesus was called a magician, μαγος, and Celsus calls Jesus a γοης (*goēs*), a *sorcerer*. Within the writings of Luke, the verb διαστρεφω (*diastrephō*), to *pervert*, *twist*, or *mislead*, is used of both Jesus and Bar-Jesus, the magician struck blind by Paul. Πλαναω (*planaō*), to *mislead*, *deceive*, are used both of Jesus and of contemporary prophets who established their credentials by working wonders.

And finally there is the legal situation Jesus created as an apocalyptic prophet who performed miracles and attracted enthusiastic crowds, opening himself to the charge of sorcery and deviant religious practices. “Reports of [Jesus’] miracles—even if they were only unsubstantiated rumors—would have laid him open to obvious charges, both under Jewish and Roman laws, that he was a sorcerer, necromancer, or magician (Latin, *maleficus*; Greek, *kakopoios*).”<sup>167</sup> That Jesus’ magical performances became an increasing source of embarrassment to the growing church is suggested by the editing of the gospel material: “Matthew and Luke excised Mark’s impetuous recollections of the physical means Jesus used to effect miracles (cf. parallels to Mk 7.33; 8.23), and John reduced the number to seven, and described them as ‘signs’ not ‘miracles.’”<sup>168</sup> It bears mention that the exorcisms given

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<sup>164</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* IV, 7.

<sup>165</sup> *Acts of Thomas*, 96.

<sup>166</sup> Plumer, *Biblica* 78 (1997): 350-368.

<sup>167</sup> Welch, *Jesus and Archaeology*, 258.

<sup>168</sup> Kannaday, *Apologetic Discourse and the Scribal Tradition*, 122.



pride of place in Mark have disappeared entirely from the gospel of John.

As the governor of a Roman province, Pilate's brief was to keep the peace and maintain order, ensuring that magician/prophets, such as those reported by Josephus, would be dealt with quickly and harshly. The Jewish authorities, who were in fear of the crowds drawn to John the Baptist and Jesus, knew precisely the charge that would motivate Pilate to action. Indeed, Jesus' repeated confrontations with the temple authorities could be characterized as a premeditated act of self-immolation. Grant's description of Jesus' actions, written in 1977, assumes a chilling currency: "In a country seething with frustration and discontent, martyrdom increasingly seemed to Palestinians a glorious fate."<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> Grant, *Jesus*, 140.

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