

Jesus the Magician: Charlatan or Son of God?
by Morton Smith
1978, reprinted 1998 by Seastone Press

It comes as no surprise to me that Morton Smith's Jesus the Magician was a controversial work following its publication in 1978. Dr. Smith approaches the problem of the historical Jesus from a triple vantage point: what his enemies seem to have said about him, what his adherents said about him, and then comparing the overview that we can construct from these two viewpoints to the Greco-Roman archetype of the magician. The portrait of Jesus that emerges is comparable less to the Christian view of Jesus as God incarnate, or the common secular view of Jesus as a great teacher, and closer to a picture of a poor, itinerant wonder-worker – the 1st century Palestinian equivalent of the snake-oil salesman of the late 19th century. Few people invested in a theological view of Jesus would be willing to accept a depiction of him as a magician, a bush-league hypnotist, and a purveyor of not-always-efficacious cures for what ailed the people of his time.

The methodology Smith uses to bolster his thesis seems to be relatively sound. By examining the writings of what Smith terms “outsiders” – those who did not so much admire Jesus as scoff at him posthumously – he is able to compile a list of the non-flattering events they claim that Jesus took part in. These include failures of miracles, accusations that he was possessed by a demonic power, and the shameful trial and execution that were his ultimate fate, among other accounts. When Smith's list is

compared to the stories recounted in the Gospels, we find many accounts correlating to these, indicating to Smith that these unflattering stories were circulating at the time that the evangelists were writing their biographies. The Gospels inevitably try to put a positive spin on these stories, saying for instance that, after Jesus was unable to produce any miracles, "...he could not do many deeds of power there, *because of their unbelief.*"¹ Mark places even less of the blame for this failure on Jesus, saying "and he could do no deed of power there, *except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them.*"² Smith takes this as proof that stories regarding Jesus' failure to produce miracles were circulating at the time the gospels were written; the writers would not have mentioned something as embarrassing as failure or accusations of demonic possession unless they needed to refute the naysayers and do some "damage control".³

This method seems to me to be at least a good indicator that these stories were being told in a polemic context in the time when the Gospels were being composed. We have discussed in class the theory that a more difficult reading has passed through fewer layers of redaction than a clearer one, and Smith's method seems to be an offshoot of this approach: that a more puzzling inclusion is likely to be an earlier, more authentic story. There may be other reasons for the inclusion of these stories in the Gospels, which Smith does not touch on; for instance, both instances of the "failure to produce miracles" story do include disclaimers regarding the lack of faith involved in the failure, and the Gospels show Jesus admitting the faith component of many of his healings – "Your faith has

¹ Mt 13:58, emphasis mine

² Mk 6:5

³ Smith, Morton. *Jesus the Magician: Charlatan or Son of God?* (Berkeley, CA: Seastone Press, 1978, reprinted 1998), p. 35-6

made you well.”⁴ This, for example, may show a different justification (perhaps a recurring quote in a quotes source?) in the early tradition for the inclusion of the troubling story. I would have probably preferred that Smith be a little more conservative with his insistence that these unflattering accounts proved the existence of these stories in the world surrounding the early Jesus movement, but he remains certain throughout his book that this is so, a requisite since his theory hinges on much of the evidence obtained with this method.

Smith then compares these stories, which both the detractors of Jesus as well as his followers seem to have agreed upon as actual occurrences, to the works claimed to be performed by the magicians of the time. Whether the stories are literally true is unimportant; that they were apparently believed to be true by a significant number of people in the ancient world is what makes them noteworthy for us. Looking at the events depicted in relation to the ancient Palestinian archetype of the *goes* (a word in common Greek signifying a sort of indigenous shamanism involving the interaction of the magician with spirits of the underworld), the exorcist, the healer, and other types of magician, we see a significant overlap with the man shown in the Gospels. Jesus’ function as a wandering healer and exorcist seems to be quite common in the world of ancient Palestine; Jewish practice in particular seems to have placed the blame for numerous complaints on demonic possession, with the only cure for possession being exorcism. Other contemporary writings show that the figure of a magician was a common one in the ancient world. A *goes* was a character somewhat denigrated, feared

⁴ Mt 9:22, 15:28, Lk 7:50, among others

and often operating illicitly: Roman law prohibited most acts of magic, punishing offenders with exile or, for persons of low status, death by often-brutal means.⁵

Smith's thesis about Jesus as magician is especially aided by the story wherein Jesus' detractors accuse him of performing his exorcisms by "the ruler of demons" and "Beelzebul". "He has a demon", Smith says, can mean in the original that either "he is possessed by a demon" or "he has control of a demon", and he further points out that for the magicians of antiquity who claimed to control demonic forces, the line between control and possession could be a bit blurry and there was often doubt about which force was in control, the demon or the magician.⁶ This meme of "demon control" also plays a part in the story wherein Herod fears that John the Baptist is the power behind Jesus' wonders: a common power claimed by magicians of the time was a form of necromancy, wherein a dead person's spirit could be constrained to perform works for the magician (ref. I Sam 28:8-20, wherein the Witch of Endor conjures up Samuel's spirit to advise King Saul.) Herod is depicted as fearing that Jesus has done the same with the spirit of the Baptist.⁷

Another piece of evidence used by Smith to strengthen his thesis is the use in the Gospels of the title "Son of God". "Son of (a) god" is often, according to Smith, used in ancient magical texts to imply that the person so titled is a god himself. He notes that the title "son of (a) god" is linked in the Gospels especially with the performance of signs and wonders, indicating to Smith that the title "Son of God" was meant to point up Jesus' status as a successful magician. Smith also notes that, as occasionally seen in the

⁵ p. 100-101.

⁶ p. 138.

⁷ p. 128.

Gospels, “alternation between passionate assertion of divinity and pathetic acknowledgement of humanity is characteristic of the magical papyri.”⁸

While many of the correlations that Smith finds between the Gospels and polemic writings are quite convincing, other traditions that Smith recounts show him reaching a bit farther into speculation for evidence. One particular tradition that Smith infers from the Gospels is one that says that Jesus traveled to Egypt and learned magic from the renowned magicians there. While he seems unable to furnish any primary sources which make such claims, he feels that since Matthew included an otherwise pointless flight to Egypt in his birth narrative, the best explanation is that Matthew was answering claims of Egyptian magical instruction by placing Jesus’ visit to Egypt in his infancy when he would have been too young to learn such magic.⁹ While this argument may provide an explanation for the presence of the Egypt story in Matthew, it is equally arguable that Matthew used the story, as he used much of the rest of his gospel, to link Jesus in an unsubtle parallel with the tale of the Israelite people, in this particular instance with their exodus from Egypt.

Another odd discrepancy I noticed may be attributable to incompetent editing rather than Smith being deliberately misleading; the edition of the book that I read was riddled with typographical errors. One particular passage, while discussing initiatory rites and the possibility that Jesus may have had similar rites for his close disciples, makes this reference:

...the longer text of Mark tells of a young man coming to Jesus by night, in the standard costume of an initiate, for instruction in the mystery. Canonical Mark (14.51) hints at a similar initiation by reporting that a

⁸ p. 191.

⁹ p. 63.

young man in the same scanty costume was with Jesus on the night of his arrest.¹⁰

Smith's mention of "Canonical Mark" is certainly proper in this context, for the previous account given is not from the 'longer text of Mark' at all (which would properly be designated as verses 9-20 of chapter 16, a text not found in the oldest versions of Mark), but comes in its entirety from the apocryphal Secret Gospel of Mark that Smith claims to have found in the end papers of another text in the Mar Saba monastery¹¹. Neglecting to mention the source of this account would be irresponsible on Smith's part if the fault were his own, particularly as he is quoting a document already controversial as to its authenticity, and it could be construed that he is attempting to mislead with this misattribution. A seasoned reader familiar with the canonical Gospels would readily recognize that this story does not come from Mark, but as this work is meant for a wider audience, it might be easily accepted as unquestioned fact.

As a thought-provoking work, Smith's book certainly fulfilled its mission of convincing me that many of the traits given to the Jesus of the Gospels are similar to those claimed of the magic workers of the time. I am not convinced that his thesis is the whole story. I did not notice many parallels between Jesus' public teaching and the magician archetype, for example, leading me to believe that if he were a magician in the sense of the time, he was an unusual one with new tactics. I think the parallels found between the Gospels and ancient beliefs about magicians do require us to consider the possibility that Jesus may have lived and worked in that capacity, and for that addition to our understanding of the historical Jesus, Smith's work is very valuable.

¹⁰ p. 182.

¹¹ Online: <http://www-user.uni-bremen.de/~wie/Secret/letter-engl.html>. Translation of Sec. Mk. by Morton Smith.