A Magical Messiah:

Discussing Jesus as an Ancient Magician Through the Synoptic Gospels

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Introduduction

He’s trying “to discredit Christianity,”\(^1\) outraged theologians exclaimed about Morton Smith’s book *Jesus the Magician* when it was published in 1978. In his book, he writes,

“They [all pictures of Jesus] explain the phenomena of Jesus’ life in terms of a mythological world of deities and demons that do not exist. The explanations therefore must be discarded, but what of the phenomena? Some of those reported are obviously inventions—walking on water, multiplying food, and the like are best explained not as ‘misunderstandings,’ but as fictions.”\(^2\)

Smith claimed that Jesus can and should be understood through a historical lens as a magician. One angry reviewer retorted that such a claim excludes the idea that the person of Jesus may also be interpreted through the “traditional orthodox Christian belief” as the Son of God.\(^3\) Clearly, this reviewer did not think that these two interpretations of Jesus could coexist. Magician or messiah is now the question at hand, but are these two interpretations mutually exclusive? I believe that they are not, and if we, as scholars, are seeking to understand Jesus as a human being, a historical perspective is necessary. Smith may very well be right that many ancient spectators believed that Jesus was a great magician. In order to understand him as a man (theology aside) we must look at Jesus as best we can through ancient eyes and see him for what ancient people thought he was.

In this paper, I do not intend to discuss the validity of Jesus’ healings, exorcisms and miracles or in anyway to falsify them, but rather I will explore these events in the context of ancient magical practices. I will discuss how Jesus can be interpreted as a magician by looking at him as a healer, and an exorcist, and examining the implications of those titles. Most importantly however, I will discuss how the stories concerning the miracles that Jesus performs change through the synoptic gospels as the authors become more and more skeptical of presenting Jesus

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3 Edwards 516
in anyway that resembles a magician and focus instead on the formation of the church community.

The synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) are the best tools for this research as they contain the earliest accounts of Jesus. We will see Matthew and Luke’s refusal to discuss Jesus using the same terms one would normally use for an ancient magician, while Mark has fewer reservations about describing the rituals that accompanied Jesus’ healings and his exorcisms in terms related to the vocabulary of ancient Mediterranean magic.

Jesus lived and performed his miracles in a complex cultural context. In order to fully understand his miracles one must also understand how the people around him thought and how they incorporated those thoughts into their beliefs and practices. When Jesus lived there was no Christianity, and so, we, as readers of the gospels, must remove ourselves from the Enlightenment point of view and guard against looking at these people as primitive and superstitious. The things that we may see as superstitious may have been widely accepted. The objective of this paper is to discuss how Matthew and Luke guarded against that interpretation of Jesus and what their goals in doing so were.

In order to explore Jesus as a magician, healer, and exorcist one must thoroughly understand the cultural context of healing, exorcism and demonology. I will discuss each of these things from within the cultural context of Greek religion, Judaism (including the Bible, Intertestamental period, and Rabbinic writings of the Roman imperial period) and later relate them to the gospels. All of the examples I will discuss are textual. They all come from a variety of sources, cultures, and time periods some of which are difficult to date. They all discuss certain phenomenon common to each culture at different times. The purpose of including these things is
to point out interesting overlap and discuss commonalities and differences between the magico-religious traditions of these cultures.

The first half of my paper provides background information to help understand the gospels in their own ancient cultural contexts. The second half of the paper will focus on the exegesis of passages from each of the synoptic gospels. I have chosen to exclude the Gospel of John from my research, not because it has nothing to say on this topic, but because it is not one of the synoptic gospels. I will be using a critical method known as redaction-criticism, which only applies to the three synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), therefore the Gospel of John is not an appropriate text for this purpose. This paper functions on the precedent that the four-source hypothesis including Markan priority is correct. I am aware that there have been attempts to argue for Matthean priority; however, I have chosen to work with theory that most scholars accept. I will discuss the four-source hypothesis in more detail later before I begin the discussion of the New Testament passages. I have not used all of the passages pertinent for the discussion of Jesus’ healings and exorcisms, simply to narrow the scope of my research to allow for a full treatment of select passages.

The implications of seeing Jesus as a magician are exciting and confusing at times. Mark’s inclusion of certain details, and Matthew’s and Luke’s omission are patent; and one can only speculate as to their reasons for these choices, but the facts of Jesus’ life, the culture, and time period at which the church was developing provide some of the best answers. These authors were believers trying to build a community of believers around them and preserve the life and teachings of their most prominent teacher.

**Chapter 1**

**Demons and Demonology**
The existence of demons is taken for granted in the New Testament synoptic Gospels (written between 65 and 85 CE), largely due to the various cultural traditions of the Greek world that also accepted the existence of demons and their ability to inflict harm on human beings. We must understand what a demon is and discuss how the various terms for these supernatural beings were used in different cultural contexts.

**Greek Demons**

Greek culture previous to the New Testament synoptic Gospels and after them had many different concepts of demons. “Greek popular belief postulated a class of spirit beings (possibly spirits of the dead) between men and the gods.” Bart Ehrman explains this religious worldview as a pyramidal structure that relates human beings to the divine world. Humans reside at the bottom and “the one god” at the top. In between men and “the one god” are beings called daimonia. The singular daimonion can best be translated as ‘spirit-being.’ The modern English term ‘demon’ however, does not accurately translate into the beings to which this Greek mythology referred. Ehrman explains, “The daimonia were not evil fallen angels who temporarily inhabited human bodies, forcing them to do all sorts of nasty things… some of them were dangerous, but for the most part they were indifferent to human activities.” Again, this place between human beings and “the one god” is the structural level from which these beings came, but daimonia and demons (in the modern sense) are not the same. For clarification I will refer to Greek demons as daimonia (plural) or daimonion (singular) when I am discussing them.

**Homer (Early Greek)**

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6 Reese 140
7 Ehrman 25
8 Ehrman 25
“Daimonia were thought to live in deserted places,” for example destroyed cities, graveyards, and deserts. A degraded God of an abandoned city, left to ruins, still inhabits that place, and sometimes it may be angry for being forsaken and defeated. Spirits of the dead were also part of this earthly spirit realm. They were called “ ‘the unquiet dead’—that is, those who had died before their time, met with a violent death (being murdered or killed in battle), or been deprived of proper burial.” Homer’s Odyssey (written as early as the 9th-8th century BCE) provides a good example of necromancy being used to contact this type of daimonia. The main character digs a small hole and pours libations, and the blood of sacrificed sheep into it in order to summon the spirit of a dead seer, Tiresias, to get a prophecy from him. The text goes on describing how these spirits look coming from Hades (the underworld):

From the depths of Erebus flocked the souls of the dead, the deceased: young women and adolescents, old men who had suffered a great deal, delicate maidens who never got over their first sad experience, many soldiers who had been wounded by bronze spears and still held their bloodstained weapons. They all crowded around the trench, coming from different directions and their wailing was weird.

This description brings to mind a modern conception of ghosts. It seems that these spirits were not always around, but relegated to the underworld until they were called.

Apuleius (Roman)

Much later, between 124 CE and 170 CE Lucius Apuleius, a Platonic philosopher and rhetorician of Roman Africa famous by his work The Golden Ass from Metamorphoses wrote that Socrates described his daimonion as an inner voice that warned him whenever he was

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10 Luck 165
12 Luck 177
about to do something wrong.”\textsuperscript{15} Apuleius goes on to elucidate the nature and place of these beings: “There are certain divine powers of a middle nature, situate in this interval of the air, between the highest ether and the earth below, through whom our aspirations and our desires are conveyed to the Gods.”\textsuperscript{16} These different examples from Homer and Apuleius show that Greek and Roman ideas of daimonia varied. These beings had the potential to intercede and help human beings, and they were also intermediaries between human beings and higher Gods. Apuleius goes on to describe this station between man and god:

For they are intermediate between us and the Gods, both in the place of their habitation, and in their nature; having immortality in common with the Gods of heave, and passions in common with subordinate beings. For they are capable, just as we are, of being affected by all that soothes as well as all that moves the mind… For, to embrace the nature of them in a definition, demons are as to genus animated beings, as to mind rational, as to feelings passive, as to body aerial, and as to duration eternal. Of these five characteristics which I have mentioned, the three first are the same as those which we possess, the fourth is peculiar to themselves, and the last they possess in common with the immortal Gods, from who they differ in being subject to passion.\textsuperscript{17}

The key feature of these daimonia beings is their intermediary status. They are like gods in a way, and yet like human beings in other ways, which gives these beings a unique perspective. They can understand the plights of humanity because they have so much in common with them, and then relate these plights to the gods, with whom they also share common perspectives. Certainly, there is not the propensity for evil doing that we see in the demons of the New Testament, only the potential. A possible explanation for these differences is the dualistic aspect of Hellenistic Judaism and early Christianity. Greek daimonia were not a part of the constant

\textsuperscript{15} Luck 163
\textsuperscript{16} Apuleius. \textit{The Works of Apuleius}. (London: George Bell and Sons, 1907.) 356
\textsuperscript{17} Apuleius 362
struggle between the forces of good and the forces of evil. The dualism that distinguishes angels and demons, does not exist in the context of Greek mythology, and so neither do the dualistic categories.

Greek Vocabulary Concerning Demons

Greek culture had an extensive demonology, and consequently there were many words used to describe demons and the problems they caused. R. Kotansky, author of the entry on Demons in *The Dictionary of New Testament Background*, writes, “The presence of a demon is felt to be the universal cause of the medical complaint.”\textsuperscript{18} Archeology has unearthed many amulets, which were used as protective talismans against demons. “Aramaic uses the verb to seal as a mode of protection… Greek uses ‘passive’ language of prevention [including] protection warding off, banishing, and containment.”\textsuperscript{19} Greek and Semitic cultures used magical practices including rituals and texts (read aloud) to protect against demons and also to get rid of them.\textsuperscript{20} Texts like the Magical Papyri describe Greek methods of exorcism. Aramaic and Hebrew amulets use “‘exorcistic’ verbs which mean ‘to shout’ or ‘to rebuke’ to mean ‘to drive away’/‘to expel’/‘to exorcize’.”\textsuperscript{21} Hence, the concept of exorcism was not new, nor was it unpopular among Greeks. The *daimonia* that required exorcism were malicious spiritual beings (sometimes “the unquiet dead” as I mentioned before) who entered into peoples bodies and prevented them from going about their normal lives, made them insane, or physically ill.

The Old Testament

\textsuperscript{19} Kotansky 272
\textsuperscript{20} Kotansky 272
\textsuperscript{21} Kotansky 272
The Old Testament refers to demons, however they are not a central concept. Judaism does acknowledge demons and in several instances they are used to depict the destruction of Babylon and Rome, also they can be linked to idolatry. “The Israelite conception of demons… resembled in some ways that held elsewhere [i.e. Ancient Near East].” There is evidence in Egyptian culture and Zoroastrianism that people believed in demons and sought to defend themselves against them with the use of amulets and magical incantations. 1 Kings (written as early as the reign of King Josiah and Hezekiah between the eighth and seventh century BCE), and 1 Samuel (written as early as 586 BCE during the Babylonian exile) mention demons however, these spirits are not the enemy of God nor are they in opposition to Him. These beings are the agents of God. This is the major difference between Ancient Near Eastern demons that the Israelites believed in (such as we see in the Hebrew Bible), and New Testament demons, which exist in opposition to God in the dualistic context mentioned earlier. This understanding of demons as agents of God along with angels explains the marginal position of demons in the Old Testament. God has the ability to provide blessings for men when they please Him, and also render punishment when they wrong Him. Demons are simply considered a method of delivering punishment.

_Ethiopic Enoch_

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22 Kotansky 270
24 “Demons and Demonology.” _Encyclopedia Judaica._ (1972.) 1523
25 Reese 140
27 _The New Oxford Annotated Bible_, 398
28 “Demons and Demonology.” _Encyclopedia Judaica._ 1523
29 _Jewish Study Bible_, Numbers 22:22, 329
Zoroastrianism was the dominant religion of Persia under the reign of Cyrus the great when he ended the Babylonian exile of the Jews by taking over in 538BCE. This Persian religion is characterized by a dualism between good and evil. In the Old Testament, God is one being from whom everything (good and bad) comes, whereas Persian dualism has, “two primordial uncreated Spirits, a Good Spirit (that is, God) and an Evil Spirit.” In the Persian system, the world and its people are caught between these two spirits each battling for supremacy over it. Some scholars have been struck by the similarities between this Persian religion and the later Jewish religious sect, the Essences, which produced the Dead Sea Scrolls written around the second century BCE and later. In Judaism during the last centuries BCE the concept of demons and demonology underwent radical changes as apocalypticism took root in Jewish communities, and Judaism was seeing the results of Persian influence. The Christian Ethiopic Bible includes a book called 1 Enoch, which discusses spiritual beings at length. This Jewish book as a whole dates back at least to the “first half of the second century BCE”, though parts can be dated back much earlier to “the early third century BCE.” Scholars describe this period as the Early Hellenistic Period, and the literature produced during this period as Intertestamental Literature. 1 Enoch is a work of Jewish apocalypticism, a portion of which is also found in Dead Sea Scroll manuscripts from Qumran. Enoch describes spiritual beings as Watchers. The Watchers are, “sons of Heaven”. These beings are angelic, however they are endowed with a free will, with which they sin against God. They take wives for themselves from among “the daughters of

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31 “Demons and Demonology.” Encyclopedia Judaica 1525
33 “Demons and Demonology.” Encyclopedia Judaica 1525
34 George W. E. Nickelsburg, 1 Enoch: a commentary of the book of 1 Enoch. (Fortress, 2001.) 169-170
35 Nickelsburg 174; 1 Enoch 6:1
These beings are described as descending to earth, (one must assume from above) to the top of a mountain. Mountains are a frequent symbol from earlier religious texts. Caananite gods for example dwelt atop mountains, and also God revealed himself to Moses on Mt. Siani (Exodus 24:15-18). This is an early understanding of heavenly beings who originated from God descending to earth, with their own sinful plans (taking the daughters of men as wives and procreating with them) in mind.

These beings have proper names including, Shemihazah, which is the leader and Asael, a demon acknowledged later in Judaism. They teach people to make weapons, and use magic spells. When they procreate with women they create “giants,” who cause violence and trouble. The people cry out to God, the Archangels intercede for them, and God orders the archangel Raphael to, “bind Asael [first and specifically, the rest follow]… and cast him in to the darkness. The offspring of the Watchers are killed and the world is set right again; however the spirits of the children of the Watchers become evil spirits in 1 Enoch 15:

8 But now the giants who were begotten by the spirits and flesh—they will call them evil spirits upon the earth, for their dwelling will be upon the earth. 9 The spirits that have gone forth from the body of their flesh are evil spirits, for from humans they came into being, and from the holy watchers was the origin of their creation. Evil spirits they will be on the earth, and evil spirits they will be called.

Clearly, this text is explaining evil forces that are active on earth, and yet it holds to the early Israelite understanding of demons’ origins with God with angelic beings. It also lays the groundwork for later Jewish beliefs in demons and also early Christian beliefs in demons, which I will discuss later.

36 Nickelsburg 174; 1 Enoch 6:1, see footnote 39 for Genesis 6:2 parallel reference.  
37 Nickelsburg 174; 1 Enoch 6:5  
38 Nicklesburg 188; 1 Enoch 8:1-3  
39 Nickelsburg 182, 1 Enoch 7:2; This is a reference to Genesis 6:2 which says, “the sons of God saw how beautiful the daughters of men were and took wives from among those that pleased them.” 1 Enoch is often considered an interpretation of parts of Genesis (Nickelsburg 166).  
40 Nickelsburg 215; 1 Enoch 10:4, 1 Enoch 10:11 (Michael binds the others)  
41 Nickelsburg 267; 1 Enoch 15:8-9
The Babylonian Talmud mentions demons throughout most likely due to the fact that belief in demons was wide spread in Babylonia. These demons were more like the Greco-Roman demons that will be discussed later. They had the potential to be good or bad. Berakoth 6a from the Babylonian Talmud presents a good example of rabbinic belief in spirits and demons. This text refers to how one can tell if there is a demon in the home.

It has been taught: Abba Benjamin says, If the eye had the power to see them, no creature could endure the demons. Abaye says: They are more numerous than we are and they surround us like the ridge round a field. R. Huna says: Every one among us has a thousand on his left hand and ten thousand on his right hand. Raba says: The crushing in the Kallah lectures comes from them. Fatigue in the knees comes from them. The wearing out of the clothes of the scholars is due to their rubbing against them. The bruising of the feet comes from them. If one wants to discover them, let him take sifted ashes and sprinkle around his bed, and in the morning he will see something like the footprints of a cock.

The Rabbis in this text all lived during the fourth century CE and show a distinct and real Jewish belief in spirits that has evolved from the early Israelite beliefs and has been influenced by later Jewish beliefs, which developed from the cultural intersections between Judaism and Ancient Near East and Greco-Roman demonology.

Greek New Testament Vocabulary Concerning Demons

There are a variety of words for demons in the synoptic gospels of the New Testament including, daimon, daimonion as we have seen before; (eidolon and phantasma) ghost; (pneuma) wind, breath and spirit; (pneuma akathartos) impure spirit; (pneuma poneiron) wicked spirit; (pneuma alalon) mute spirit; (pneuma astheneias) a spirit causing illness; and (pneuma puthon) a spirit of divination. Other adjectives can be applied as well such as, (kakon) bad or evil, (phaulon) evil, wrong, or vile, and (skia) shadow. All of these terms are used to denote spirits.

The word (pneuma) spirit is also used to describe the Holy Spirit in other instances, and so one

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42 “Demons and Demonology.” Encyclopedia Judaica. 1527
43 The Babylonian Talmud: Seder Zera’im. (London: The Soncino Press, 1948) 23; Berakoth 6a
45 Kittel 139 and Evans 271
must conclude that these words are complex and rely heavily on context to make their meaning clear. Demons are responsible for a number of problems. They have the ability to afflict people with “violently insane behavior, the inability to speak or to hear, blindness, characteristics of epilepsy, and apparent tendencies to self destruction.”

Jesus and eventually his disciples cast out spirits not through incantations, and magical rituals as in Greco-Roman culture. The vocabulary of the New Testament is much like that of Semitic culture. Jesus rebukes, and shouts at demons with the result that they are exorcized. Unlike the Semitic and Greco-Roman cultures, Jesus does not use any methods or rituals to protect against demons or to cast them out except speaking to them, and he does not pass on specific methods to his disciples who also cast out demons.

Satan in the Old Testament

The discussion of Greek *daimonia* from the last chapter does not indicate that they were subordinate to any specific god. Within the complex structures of Greek mythology there is no concept equal to that of the Devil or Satan that is found in Judaism, specifically in that of the Hellenistic and early imperial Roman period, which produced the Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha and New Testament. The noun *satan* from Hebrew in the Old Testament usually appears with a definite article. The use of the article suggests that the word is not being used as a proper noun or a name. *Satan* (noun) is translated roughly as “accuser, adversary, or slanderer.” It is used twenty-six times throughout the Hebrew Bible, though some references are not spirit references at all. The word is also used in the sense of human adversaries.

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46 Reese 140
47 Kotansky 272
48 Resse 141
50 Hamilton 985
51 Hamilton 986
Nineteen occurrences of the word satan refer to celestial satans, or heavenly satans that converse with God or do his bidding. Job, which was composed between the seventh and fourth century BCE, uses the word fourteen times in chapters 1-2. In Job the satan is obviously a single being conversing with God, but again it is named only by its title or function, and only mentioned with a definite article. This adversary is obviously subordinate to God and does not test Job himself without God’s express permission. He slanders Job and suggests to God that his faithfulness is grounded in selfishness and his desire to receive God’s blessings.

As a common noun, satan can be used to describe people who promote blasphemy against the king as in 2 Samuel 19:22 that says, “What have I to do with you, you sons of Zeruiah, that you should today become an adversary to me?” The 1st and 2nd books of Samuel describe the reign of King David over Israel. It was probably set to writing during the Babylonian exile, although some of the source material is much older. The word satan also refers to enemies on earth such as military threats as in 1 Kings 5:18, which says, “But now the Lord my God has given me respite all around; there is no adversary and no mischance.” 1 Kings describes an event that dates back to as early as 562 BCE, and “relates the history of Israel from the declining days of David (10th century BCE) through the beginning of the Babylonian exile (586 BCE).

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52 The other references to celestial “satans” are found in Numbers 22:22 and 32, and in Zechariah 3:1-2 where the word is used three times.
53 Hamilton 987
54 Hamilton 986
55 The New Oxford Annotated Bible: Hebrew Bible 475
56 The Jewish Study Bible. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.) 558
57 The New Oxford Annotated Bible: Hebrew Bible 398
58 The Jewish Study Bible 682, 1 Kings 5:18
59 Jewish Study Bible 668
The original composition of 1 Kings may have started as early as the eighth-seventh century BCE, with revisions at around 586 BCE.\(^\text{60}\) Seven of the twenty-six uses of the noun *satan* are references like these to earthly adversaries or slanderers.\(^\text{61}\) In Numbers 22:22 and 32, *satan* is used without an article. This *satan* is of the celestial variety, and is not in opposition to God. This *satan* is like the demons of God that I discussed in the previous chapter. He is an agent of God “sent to be a ‘*satan*’ to sinning Balaam.”\(^\text{62}\) The book of Numbers is a part of what scholars call the Holiness School\(^\text{63}\) and was written around 538 BCE.\(^\text{64}\)

In Zechariah 3:1-2 (*satan* is used three times within the two verses) the *satan* stands on the right side of the angel of God “to accuse him.”\(^\text{65}\) Here the *satan* is present to act as a prosecutor against Joshua, though he does not speak.\(^\text{66}\) Zechariah dates to around 520-518 BCE.\(^\text{67}\) Zechariah reads, “Then he showed me the high priest Joshua standing before the angel of the Lord, and the Adversary\(^\text{68}\) standing at his right hand to accuse him. And the Lord said to the Adversary, ‘The Lord rebuke you, O Adversary!’”\(^\text{69}\) Here the *satan* is clearly subordinate to God, making him like the demons that we discussed previously, though God rebukes him allowing the reader to believe that while he is subordinate he is not completely under God’s control. This use of the word *satan* shows a slight departure from the use of the word *satan* in the rest of the Hebrew Bible, which leaves room for the word to evolve into its more modern use.

\(^{60}\) Oxford Annotated Bible: Hebrew Bible 487
\(^{61}\) Hamilton 986
\(^{62}\) Hamilton 986
\(^{63}\) Oxford Annotated Bible: Hebrew Bible 184
\(^{64}\) Oxford Annotated Bible: Hebrew Bible 142
\(^{65}\) Hamilton 987
\(^{66}\) Hamilton 987
\(^{67}\) Oxford Annotated Bible: Hebrew Bible 1357
\(^{68}\) Oxford Annotated Bible: Hebrew Bible 1359-1360 (See footnote g 1359 and a 1360 for Hebrew translation to ‘the Adversary’ with definite article.)
Thus far, I have outlined the first twenty-five uses of the word satan in the Old Testament and only one (Zechariah) has remotely suggested that satan was a being acting of his own accord. All were clearly subordinate to God, and in several cases under his command. It is important to note that the celestial satans and terrestrial satans are chronologically interspersed. This shows that the use and meaning of the word satan could be understood both ways (celestially and terrestrially) during roughly the same time period. 1 Chronicles 21:1 is the only account of the Old Testament’s use of the word satan, which seems to be a proper name.\textsuperscript{70} It was this satan that convinced David to take the census of Israel, which resulted in the deaths of about 70,000 Israelites.\textsuperscript{71} Satan is used as a proper name in this passage as an enemy of Israel.\textsuperscript{72} This book was written during the Persian period (539-332 BCE) after Cyrus allowed the exiled Jews in Babylonia to return to Jerusalem.\textsuperscript{73} This is a much clearer departure from the use of the word in the Hebrew Bible and chronologically suggests that the word evolved between the Babylonian exile and the Persian period.

\textit{Satan in the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, and the Babylonian Talmud}

Persian Dualism is evident in the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha. While the Jewish texts never depart from monotheism, a conflict between the powers of good and evil does develop and becomes more prominent in the text.\textsuperscript{74} This does not mean that the Jews bought into Persian dualism completely, rather that they adopted parts. The name of the demon Asmodeus in Tobit comes directly from Persian influence. It is, “borrowed directly from the Persian ‘Aeshma Daeva, the demon of violence and wrath in the later Avesta (Iranian Text).’”\textsuperscript{75} This name also

\textsuperscript{70} Hamilton 987
\textsuperscript{71} Hamilton 987, Encyclopedia Judaica 903
\textsuperscript{72} Oxford Annotated Bible: Hebrew Bible 607, 1 Chronicles 21:1; Jewish Study Bible 1751, 1 Chronicles 21:1
\textsuperscript{73} Oxford Annotated Bible: Hebrew Bible 576
\textsuperscript{74} W.D. Davies, The Cambridge History of Judaism. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1984, 308-325) 315
bears striking resemblance to the name Ashmedai from Gittin 68a-b in the Talmud. The structural similarities in each of these names are clearly illustrated below.

\[
\text{Aes} \quad \text{h} \quad \text{m} \quad \text{a} \\
| \quad | \quad | \\
\text{Daeva}
\]

\[
\text{As} \quad \text{m} \quad \text{o} \quad \text{d} \quad \text{e} \quad \text{us}
\]

\[
\text{A} \quad \text{s} \quad \text{h} \quad \text{m} \quad \text{e} \quad \text{d} \quad \text{ai}
\]

The first letter and the consonantal structure of the name is the same in each of the names (with the exception of the “h” which remains in two of the examples.)

Some scholars believe that “the (similarities between the) name[s] in [themselves] is not enough to support the idea of a wide-ranging influence of Persian religion upon Jewish demonology,” but other evidences of borrowing between religions, though difficult to grasp, are there. While, one can never be sure of who took what, from whom, and when, scholars believe that Persian dualism influenced the Jews over the Achaemenid period, the Dynasty that began with Cyrus (550 BCE) and ended with Darius III (330 BCE). After that period there is a definitive shift from satan in the Old Testament to Satan in the Apocrypha, Pseudoepigrapha, and the Talmud.

Satan is much more prevalent as a proper name (or surrogate name) in the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha. The specific word satan is not very prominent, though the concept of a head demon in charge of others is clearly visible. In these texts though Satan is used as a proper name, “he is barely personalized but merely represents the forces of anti-god and of evil.”

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76 Davies 318
77 Barr 216
78 Yamauchi 395
79 Hamilton 988
80 “Satan.” Encyclopedia Judaica 903, Hamilton 987
81 “Satan.” Encyclopedia Judaica 903
Asmodeus is the “archdemon” of Tobit. His name may be related to the Hebrew verb to destroy and also possibly to Aeshma the Persian god of violence and wrath (as mentioned above). Satan or adversaries appear under a variety of names including Asmodeus in Tobit, as Mastema in Jubilees (written between 135 and 105 BCE). Persian dualism clearly influenced Jews in the Diaspora, and they departed from their original idea that God was the only being enacting His will upon the world. “The world was now viewed as a battleground fought over by both benevolent and malevolent deities.”

Satan as a proper name appears in Jubilees and the Assumption of Moses. Both of these books date to around 168 BCE or later, when Antiochus IV conducted pogroms against the Jews. Jubilees 23:29 says, “And all their days they shall complete and live in peace and in joy, And there shall be no Satan nor any evil destroyer; For all their days shall be days of blessing and healing.” Satan is definitively a proper name here. He is the evil destroyer presumably of peace and joy. The Assumption of Moses reads, “And then his kingdom shall appear throughout all His creation, And then Satan shall be no more, And sorrow shall depart with him.”

In the Dead Sea Scrolls Satan is mentioned three times, but is mostly known as Beliar, which is also used in New Testament literature. The Qumran texts provide the most vivid picture of Satan as we know him in a modern sense. He is described in these texts as “the spirit of darkness, who exercises control over the world. He controls evil people. Ultimately he will be

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82 Hamilton 987, *Oxford Annotated Bible: Apocrypha Tobit* 3:17, 16
83 Hamilton 987
84 *Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament in English*. (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1913) 1
85 Hamilton 988
86 Hamilton 988
87 Hamilton 987
88 Hamilton 987
89 *Apocrypha and Pseudoepigrapha* 49
90 *Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha* 412
91 Hamilton 988
chained by God’s Holy Spirit, and cast into a consuming fire.” Later in the Babylonian Talmud a more developed concept of Satan is read back onto the texts of the Old Testament. Many events are re-read with Satan as the driving force behind it for example, “the people worshiping the golden calf by telling them that moses would not return from Mount Sinai (Shab. 89a) and for David’s sin with Bath-Sheba (Sanh. 107a).”

And he walked upon the roof of the king's house: and from the roof he saw a woman washing herself; and the woman was very beautiful to look upon. Now Bath Sheba was cleansing her hair behind a screen, when Satan came to him, appearing in the shape of a bird. He shot an arrow at him, which broke the screen, thus she stood revealed, and he saw her. Immediately, And David sent and enquired after the woman. And one said, Is not this Bath Sheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite? And David sent messengers, and took her, and she came unto him, and he lay with her; for she was purified from her uncleanliness: and she returned unto her house.

In the original biblical passage Satan is not mentioned at all. In this text his presence has been read into this text where he was not before. This causes David’s role in the story to become more innocent because Satan tricked him, and instead Satan is blamed as the cause of David’s sin.

From the Old Testament through the Talmud one can see the meaning of the word *satan* evolve and change from its original meaning as adversary to the name or designation of a particular archdemon, and also to the way it is used in the New Testament. Satan is referenced fourteen times in the Synoptic Gospels. The Gospel according to Matthew refers to him as an enemy, the evil one, and as a tempter. These alternative names of Satan are reminiscent of the Old Testament Hebrew meaning of adversary, and while they maintain the same meanings, the influence of Persian dualism is also evident in the New Testament. It is also clear that Satan has limitations, and he is still under God’s command to a certain extent as mentioned in 1

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92 Hamilton 988, see entry for specific Qumran text references.
93 “Satan.” Encyclopedia Judaica 903
95 Hamilton 988
96 Hamilton 988
Corinthians 5, and 1 Timothy 1:20. It is clear that in the New Testament, Satan is very prominent and has undergone several hundreds of years of influence from Persian religion and the evolution of the Jewish concept of Satan. The Jewish concept of Satan also continued to develop through the New Testament period and later the Talmud uses a highly developed concept of Satan as an explanation for many sins in the Bible.

Chapter 2

Magic in the Ancient Mediterranean World

There are many different definitions of magic, just as there are many different definitions of religion. The answers to questions about either subject vary greatly depending on the people being asked and their background. Theorists from anthropological perspectives, sociological perspectives, and religious studies perspectives have noticed some commonalities that can distinguish religion from magic. Before I begin discussing magical practices of ancient Greek culture, and ancient Israelite culture I will briefly discuss the theoretical distinction between magic and religion from various academic perspectives and theorists.

Emile Durkheim, a well known sociological theorist from the early 20th century, defines religion in his book, *The Elementary forms of Religious Life* as “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.” This definition necessitates the role of the community. In Durkheim’s opinion, without a community of adherents organized state religions cannot exist. Magic is different.

The belief in magic is always more or less general; it is very frequently diffused in large masses of the population, and there are even peoples where it has many adherents as the

97 Hamilton 989
real religion. But it does not result in binding together those who adhere to it, nor in uniting them into a group leading a common life.\textsuperscript{99}

Graham Cunningham, in his theoretical survey of the relationship between magic and religion called \textit{Religion and Magic}, says that the central distinction between Durkheim’s definition of religion and magic is that, “religion is collective and socially integrating while magic is more individualist.”\textsuperscript{100} This theory has been developed and expanded by other scholars, but this concept has been at the heart of the study of magic, and its relationship to religion. Cunningham’s words “collective and socially integrating” suggest that these activities are done in groups in a social setting with other people. The presence of a loosely unified group is an essential part of the criteria that allows Durkheim to distinguish religion from magic. Religion and religious practices happen in a group setting, while magic and magical practices are done individually.

Daniel Pals, in his exposition of Durkheim’s theory of religion in \textit{Eight Theories of Religion} elaborates; he says, “Magic is an exclusively private matter… The magician, like a doctor, heals my sickness or puts a spell on your enemy; but this is a purely personal issue. I may not even know that my magician is also helping you, because each of us is going to him to satisfy separate and largely private needs.”\textsuperscript{101} Mischa Titiev\textsuperscript{102} modifies Durkheim’s theory. “He defines calendrical ritual as recurrent, scheduled, generally performed by priests and ‘social or communal in character.’\textsuperscript{103} In contrast, critical rituals are irregular, unscheduled and generally not performed by priests… ‘for the most part critical ceremonies are staged only when a private or

\textsuperscript{99}Durkheim 44
\textsuperscript{100}Graham Cunningham. \textit{Religion and Magic}. (New York: New York University Press, 1999) 52
\textsuperscript{102}Cited by Cunningham 52
\textsuperscript{103}Titiev 1965: 317 as cited by Cunningham 52
personal emergency has arisen.\textsuperscript{104} This means that magic is used when there is a need for it. Otherwise, religion is the scheduled type of ceremony used publicly to maintain social relationships and activities among the people, as Durkheim’s theory would have it.

There are other theories of magic, but this is the most pertinent theory to this discussion. The healings and the exorcisms that Jesus does are, in this respect, magical practices. Jesus’ healings are done in a number of settings, some with an audience, while others are performed outside of town without an audience. All of them are done only as the need arises. It is necessary to bear in mind that Christianity only formed as a church after the death of Jesus, and so as a healer and an exorcist he was not functioning within established Christian boundaries. He is however working within Judaism, although outside the boundaries of official elite religion. In the gospels, one can clearly differentiate between the regular sacrifices in the temple, Jewish holidays, and rituals performed by the Jewish priests, as opposed to the healings and exorcisms of Jesus. According to Durkheim’s theory, Jesus’ healings and exorcisms, because they are done on the basis of need without necessarily uniting adherents, fall under the category of magic.\textsuperscript{106} I will refer back to this discussion throughout the exegetical passages as a theoretical framework for distinguishing Jesus’ acts as magical in Mark, and slightly less magical in Matthew and Luke.

Ancient Near East and Early Israelite Magic

The origins of Judaism lie in the religion of the Israelite tribes of the late 2\textsuperscript{nd} millennium BCE amidst the cultures of the Ancient Near East.\textsuperscript{107} The religions of these cultures (Mesopotamian, Hittite, Canaanite, Egyptian, Aramaic, Ugaritic, etc.) from around 2000 BCE

\textsuperscript{104} Titiev 1965: 318 as cited by Cunningham 52
\textsuperscript{105} Cunningham 52
\textsuperscript{106} Please note that I am only referencing Jesus’ exorcisms and healings as magical practices, and not generalizing about all of his practices as a whole.
are separate and distinct from one another. Parts of these religions can be characterized as popular or folk religion as opposed to state religion or literary tradition. They focus on magic as opposed to mythology, and objects (like amulets) as opposed to official cults of sacrifice and texts, etc. I will survey magic in the various traditions of the Ancient Near East, Greek tradition, Jewish tradition, and their development through early Christianity and late Antiquity.

Scholars often make a distinction between black magic “mischievous and illegal magic” and white magic “afford[ing] protection against the harm of evil magic.” This discussion is primarily concerned with white magic as used for protection against demons, and illness, etc. Also, in dealing with the practices of Ancient Near Eastern religion, scholars “make a distinction between problem oriented rituals on the one hand and priestly activities such as the maintenance of the daily cult and the celebration of regularly scheduled festivals on the other.” As discussed previously, problem-oriented rituals qualify as magic. This does not apply to problem-oriented rituals performed through the official religion (for example anointing the heads of the sick), but rather those that take place in private apart from the official religion. Our discussion will focus on those types of rituals, however; it is worth mentioning that the practice of magic, and regular priestly rituals happened at the same time in the Ancient Near East without conflict between them. Practices of state religion and folk religion were both legitimate parts of the same belief system, however making the distinction now will help illustrate the separation between them later.

Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Hittite (eastern Turkey), and Ugaritic (northern Caananite) magic have a great deal in common. They all were used for means of exorcism, protection

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109 Dever 5
110 “Magic” *Encyclopedia Judaica* 703
112 Scurlock 465
against sickness, ghosts, and even for calming cranky babies.\textsuperscript{113} Exorcism, propitiation, amulets, salves, and figurines were all used to ward off spirits, protect against them, or get rid to them.\textsuperscript{114} Unlike Mesopotamian magic, some of the most legitimate practitioners of Hittite magic were old women.\textsuperscript{115} Again, Egyptian magic was similar in purpose, though the Egyptians had no distinction between good magic and evil magic.\textsuperscript{116} Egyptians were also less formal toward their gods, and they threatened them when the gods did not do as they were asked.\textsuperscript{117} Necromancy was more popular in Egypt than in other Ancient Near East religions,\textsuperscript{118} but generally magic in many forms was common through out the Ancient Near East, and while some practices were more popular in some places significant commonalities in the purpose of the magic come from all cultures.

An early material example of a magical object is a pendant (also known as an amulet designed to be worn on a person for protection) depicting a woman (the goddess Asherah in this case) standing on top of a lion. It came from in Syria from between the 13\textsuperscript{th} and 14\textsuperscript{th} century BCE.\textsuperscript{119} Ugaritic mythological texts identify her as the “mother of the Gods” and “consort of the high god El.”\textsuperscript{120} Ugaritic texts also mention the goddess Anat, who is a warrior goddess lower in status than Asherah.\textsuperscript{121} A specific use of these names in a magical inscription or even very short prayer includes a spear head which reads, “Servant of the Lion Lady, Son of the Goddess Anat” from near Bethlehem around 11\textsuperscript{th} century BCE.\textsuperscript{122} This is a form of magic that the Syro-

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item Scurlock 465-466
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\item Dever 186
\item Dever 186
\item Dever 186
\item Dever 128-129
\end{enumerate}
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Palestinian archeologist William Dever explains as, “a devout wish.”123 What the wish is one cannot tell, though in war the most likely assumptions are that the wish is for protection against the enemy or victory (common uses in both Mesopotamian magic and Hittite magic).124 These types of inscriptions or prayers, done on a personal level, according to Durkheim’s definition qualify as a magical practice and not a religious one. Prayers done in groups, in a prescribed manner at a prescribed time perhaps with a group of people would be a religious practice. A modern example of this type of prayer would be the Lord’s Prayer said in Christian churches weekly during services.

These two material anthropological examples show us a centuries old concept of a mother goddess evoked for protection or victory in war. Asherah atop her lion (though the depiction is from centuries earlier) may very well be the same “lion lady” that the “Son of Anat” from the spear head is serving. Anat as the Ugaritic texts explain is a warrior goddess. This is why the spear holder would choose to evoke her specifically.

Old Testament Magic

The Old Testament expressly forbids magic. Deuteronomy 18:9-14 says,

When you come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you, you must not learn to imitate the abhorrent practices of those nations. No one shall be found among you who makes a son or daughter pass through fire, or who practices divination, or is a soothsayer, or an augur, or a sorcerer, or one who casts spells, or who consults ghosts or spirits, or who seeks oracles from the dead. For whoever does these things is abhorrent to the Lord; it is because of such abhorrent practices that the Lord your God is driving them out of you. You must remain completely loyal to the lord your God. Although these nations that you are about to dispossess do give heed to soothsayers and diviners, as for you, the Lord your God does not permit you to do so.125

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123 Dever 129
124 Scurlock 465-466
125 The New Oxford Annotated Bible: Hebrew Bible, Deuteronomy 18:9-14, 274
This passage, while expressly forbidding the use of such magic among the Israelites, acknowledges the use of such things by the other religious traditions of the Ancient Near East. The first edition of this book dates to the seventh century BCE. There are similarities between Deuteronomy and the reforms of King Josiah from 2 Kings, which leads scholars to believe “the book of the Law” (2 Kings 22:8) was part of a religious reform movement. Dever pointedly notes, “There would be no point to condemning magic if it had not been widespread in folk religion.” As discussed previously early Israelites were among the cultures of the Ancient Near east and hence they likely practiced these folk religions.

The practice of folk religion does not simply end when Deuteronomy forbids it. It still existed in the communities surrounding the Israelites, and potentially privately among the Israelites themselves. An amulet (good luck or protective charm usually worn around the neck) found in a tomb in Jerusalem at Ketef Hinnom provides a particularly interesting example of folk religion and state religion together. The amulet inscribed in Hebrew says, “May Yahweh bless you and watch over you. May Yahweh make his face shine upon you and grant you peace.” That passage bears a striking resemblance to Numbers 6:24-26 which says, “The Lord bless you and keep you; The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.” Dever notes, “here we do have a ‘folk’ version of what was obviously a widely used blessing, one that eventually found its way into the canonical texts in an ‘official’ version.”

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126 *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*: Hebrew Bible 240
128 Dever 126
129 Dever 130
131 Dever 131
In 1 Samuel we have an exorcism story relating to the troubles of King Saul (10th century CE). As discussed above, magic was commonly used as a means of exorcism. 1 Samuel (written late 7th century) 16:14-16 says,

Now the spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord tormented him. And Saul’s servants said to him, “See now, an evil spirit from God is tormenting you. Let our lord now command the servants who attend you to look for someone who is skillful in playing the lyre; and when the evil spirit from God is upon you, he will play it, and you will feel better.”

The servants find David, the suggested remedy works, and the evil spirit departs form Saul. This is a confusing and strange exorcism. The evil spirit is consistent with the evil spirits from God discussed in the previous chapters, but the means of removing the evil spirit are strange and lack an obvious reason. Why do his servants suggest the music of a lyre? The scholar’s annotation points out that, “Musicians were thought to ward off evil spirits.” 2 Kings 3:15 provides another relevant parallel. The prophet Elisha uses music to summon the spirit of God: “The musician helps produce the atmosphere conducive for a divine visitation.” This is a type of magic, performed only when necessary. The removal of the evil spirit from Saul is not God’s work, since He was the one that sent the evil spirit to afflict him in the first place. The best explanation for this practice is magic.

Greek and Roman Magic

Ehrman refers to an old theological understanding of magic in Greek religion as “the superstitious manipulation of divine powers, that is, the performance of incantations and ritual acts in such a way as to compel supernatural forces to grant a person’s desires.” It is these definitions infused with the prejudices against magic that modern scholars are trying to

133 The New Oxford Annotated Bible: Hebrew Bible 425, 1 Samuel 16:17-23
135 The Jewish Study Bible, 2 Kings 3:15, 731
136 Ehrman 31
already we have seen a Homeric version of magical necromancy to obtain advice from a dead spirit. It is clear that the Greeks believed in magic and used it when they felt that it might work to their advantage. A spell used for exorcism from the Great Magical Papyri is particularly interesting because it includes figures from Jewish culture, Christian culture, and concepts from Greek culture, though it was probably only used by the Greeks. It says,

The formula of exorcism is the following: “I conjure you by the god of the Hebrews, Jesus [magic words], you who appear in fire, you who are in the midst of land and snow and fog, Tannetis, let your angel descend, the pitiless one, and let him arrest the daemon that flies around this creature shaped by God in his holy paradise, for I pray to the holy god through Ammon [magic words]. I conjure you [magic words]. I conjure you by him who appeared to Osrael [=Israel] in a pillar of light and a cloud by night and who has saved his people from Pharaoh and has brought upon Pharaoh the ten plagues because he would not listen."

“An exorcist of this type probably did not belong to any of the great religions of the time, one would assume; but this did not prevent him from borrowing from them in order to reinforce his magic.” This text must have come after the establishment of Christianity because it evokes Jesus. This incantation was most likely performed for anyone who was willing to pay for the service. It is interesting though that an exorcist might use the names of other Gods in their exorcism. It tells us that this particular writer acknowledged the power of the God of Israel and Jesus, as well as Greek gods, and Egyptian gods (mentioned in other spells).

Magic in Rabbinic Texts

Jewish Rabbinic texts from the Roman imperial period surprisingly (because Deuteronomy forbids it) discuss magic openly and in detail. Amulets are a prominent figure in their discussion. They discuss which amulets are approved for use and which are not, and where to obtain them. Palestinian Jewish Amulets name demons including, “evil spirit,

137 Luck 190, an example of these magic words are, “ioel, hari, phtha.” We do not know what they mean or what they are referring to.
138 Luck 191
139 Luck 190
demon/demoness, shadow demon, harmer, destroyer, blast demon, and evil assailant among others. Berakoth 5a from the Babylonian Talmud describes a prayer being used the same way a spell or amulet would be used to keep evil spirits away. It says,

Let the high praises of God be in their mouth, and a two-edged sword in their hand. R. Isaac says further: If] one recites the Shema upon his bed, the demons keep away from him. For it is said: And the sons of reshef fly [u]f upward. The word 'uf refers only to the Torah, as it is written: Wilt thou cause thine eyes to close [hata'if] upon it? It is gone. And 'reshef' refers only to the demons, as it is said: The wasting of hunger, and the devouring of the reshef [fiery bolt] and bitter destruction. R. Simeon b. Lakish says: If one studies the Torah, painful sufferings are kept away from him.

This portion in its last line also mentions Torah study as a means of preventing painful sufferings. Again, we see a belief in demons, but the prayer is used in the same manner as an incantation would be used. It is possible that they were using prayers in the same way that spells would be used, but that since they were prayers the rabbis did not think of them as magical. Instead of spells, they might have considered them to be blessings.

In another text from the Babylonian Talmud the rabbis talk unmistakably about incantations, charms, and the spirits of inanimate objects: “Our Rabbis taught: It is permitted to consult by a charm the spirits of oil or eggs, but that they give false answers. Incantations are made over oil contained in a vessel, but not in the hand; therefore one may anoint with the latter, but not with the former.” It is clear through this text, though I do not know what it means, that the rabbis are able to use and discuss magic, incantations, and charms. The statement that these spirits whom they are consulting give false answers however maintains a feeling of skepticism and distance from the practices.

The last Rabbinic text from the Babylonian Talmud discusses amulets. It says,

Our Rabbis taught: What is an approved amulet? One that has healed [once], a second time.

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141 Babylonian Talmud, Berakoth 5a, 17
and a third time; whether it is an amulet in writing or an amulet of roots, whether it is for an invalid whose life is endangered or for an invalid whose life is not endangered. [It is permitted] not [only] for a person who has [already] had an epileptic fit, but even [merely] to ward it off. And one may tie and untie it even in the street, providing that he does not secure it with a ring or a bracelet and go out therewith into the street, for appearances sake.  

This text shows that not only were amulets used, but that there was a method and laws concerning their use. There are approved amulets and unapproved amulets, and they can be used for prevention and healing. The last sentence suggests that one may even use such magical devices publicly for protection, but not for appearances. The same text later discusses the sanctity of amulets. This is particularly interesting because it seems to say that they are not sanctified. It says,

Have amulets sanctity or not? In respect of what law? Shall we say, in respect of saving them from a fire? Then come and hear: Benedictions and amulets, though they contain the [divine] letters and many passages from the Torah, may not be saved from a fire, but are burnt where they are.

In Jewish Tradition anything containing a divine name is not to be burned or destroyed. It is to be buried or disposed of in some other way respectfully. This text however says that these objects even if they contain divine letters can be burned. This tells us that even though amulets were accepted, they were not deemed religiously important.

These passages all concerning magic of some sort are double-sided. On one side they are allowed, tolerated, and sometimes suggested, but on the other they are not trust worthy and not sanctified. What one can conclude from this is that magic in Greco-Roman Antiquity was not limited only to pagans. It was a pervasive part of every day life that we can see in the texts, and in artifacts. It can be traced from its roots in Ancient Near Eastern Religions to Early Judaism, through the New Testament and also to later Rabbinic Judaism and Greek Literature.

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Chapter 3

Demons, Exorcism, and Magic in the Synoptic Gospels

The synoptic gospels consist of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Scholars believe that Mark was written first between 65 and 70 CE. Matthew and Luke followed shortly thereafter between 80 and 85 CE. The gospel of John is not one of the synoptic gospels but has separate and distinctive traditions about Jesus. It was the last of the four canonical gospels to be written, probably between 90 and 95 CE. I will not discuss the gospel of John in this paper in order to limit the scope of my research and focus on the gospels that have the most in common with one another. (It is worth mentioning that the Gospel of John does endorse miraculous signs as a positive tool for proving that Jesus is the Messiah (John 20:30-31), but yet the gospel of John lacks exorcisms.)

The gospels are very much like Greco-Roman biographies. “The Greco-Roman biography does not generally deal with inner life, and especially does not do so in the sense of what we would call character formation.” This is why the character of Jesus in the gospels is so thin. This genre focuses mostly on events. The gospels are accounts of the life of Jesus and like modern biographies their authors used sources to supplement their works. The four-source hypothesis examines and explains what sources each author had and used in his work.

It is necessary to discuss the four-source hypothesis of the synoptic gospels before moving into the written material. The four-source hypothesis establishes the priority of Mark

144 Ehrman 84
145 Ehrman xxxii
146 Ehrman xxxii
147 Ehrman 83
148 Ehrman 64
149 There are discrepancies and theories against the four-source hypothesis, however this is the theory I have chosen to use and I will not describe its limitations or its opposing theories in this paper. The theory is secondary to my research and is meant to be used as a framework to help to explain and categorize the materials I focus on from the Gospels.
(Mk.) (i.e. Mark was written first) through comparison with Matthew and Luke. According to this theory, the authors of Matthew and Luke had Mark and used his account of the life of Jesus in addition to their other common source Q, which comes from the German word *Quelle* meaning source. The Q source provides material for both Matthew and Luke that is not found in Mark. Special Matthew (M) and Special Luke (L) are sources unique to the respective gospels. Stories that are found only in Matthew or only in Luke came from these sources.

Streeter’s work *The Four Gospels* 1951 succinctly states,

> That in regards to *(a)* items of subject matter, *(b)* actual words used, *(c)* relative order of sections, Mark is in general supported by both Matthew and Luke, and in most cases where they do not both support him they do so alternately, and they practically never agree together against Mark. This is only explicable if they followed an authority which in content, in wording, and in arrangement was all but identical with Mark.

Matthew’s account of Jesus’ life “reproduces the substance of over 600 [of the 661 verses in Mark].” This means that in the case of subject matter, Matthew maintains almost all of the same material. This does not mean that Matthew includes Mark’s material verbatim. Matthew condenses the stories he finds in Mark and consequently less than half of all Matthew’s material comes from Mark, but of that portion Matthew preserves about 51% of Mark’s actual words.

Luke’s use of Markan subject matter is more difficult to discuss because the author of Luke stylistically mixes Mark with another source, hence it is very difficult to separate them from one another. Luke has a slightly higher proportion of Mark’s actual words as opposed to Matthew, 53% and 51% respectively, but Luke omits over 45% of Markan subject matter, and uses similar subject matter from his other sources. These instances where the actual words of

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150 Ehrman 84  
152 Streeter 159  
153 Streeter 159  
154 Streeter 159  
155 Streeter 160
Mark are preserved and his general subject matter is left intact or augmented from another source suggests that the authors of Matthew and Luke referenced Mark when they were writing their accounts of Jesus’ life.

An analysis of Matthew and Luke also supports the argument for Markan priority through the sequence of events. “Matthew adheres strictly to the order of Mark (Mark 6:14 to end), he makes considerable rearrangements in the first half. Luke, however, though he omits far more of Mark than does Matthew, hardly ever departs from Mark’s order, and mostly in trifling ways.”156 This means that even with the augmentation of Mark from Luke’s other sources the sequence of events remains very much the same. Matthew’s gospel also maintains the same sequence of events that Mark uses after a certain point (Mt. 6:14). This supports the idea that the authors of Matthew and Luke had Mark and used his work as a sort of time line for the sequence of events in Jesus’ life and augmented it with their other sources.

This hypothesis explains the overlap between the synoptic gospels and explains how portions of one gospel might be repeated verbatim or nearly verbatim in another. The use of this hypothesis also allows readers to use a critical method called “‘redaction-criticism,’ [which] stud[ies] how authors have created a literary work by modifying or editing their sources of information.”157 This type of criticism accounts for slight deviations from Markan material in Matthew and Luke. This type of criticism will be used throughout the remainder of this paper to compare gospel materials against one another.

There is no doubt according to the gospels that Jesus was a healer and that he was capable of casting out demons. The gospels call him Christ (christos, a literal Greek translation of the Hebrew word for messiah, meaning anointed one), Son of God, and Son of Man, but one

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156 Streeter 161-162
157 Ehrman 83-84
obvious thing that the gospels do not call him is a magician, though he provides the same services and uses similar techniques as Greek and Jewish magicians and healers. Certainly the authors of the gospels were believers and their objective was not to show Jesus as merely a man who could do miracles, but rather the Son of God preaching a message of salvation to the Jews. If that is the case, why are his miracles, exorcisms and healings so prominent? In this portion of my paper I will discuss how the authors of the synoptic Gospels portray Jesus and his miracles. I will show the strongest similarities between Greek healers and magicians in the Gospel of Mark and contrast how Matthew and Luke down play the miracles and refocus the same stories away from the miracle on to the message or moral meaning behind the miracle. I will also speculate that the reasons behind Matthew and Luke’s changes are a level of discomfort with Jesus as the messiah using magical practices, and also a shift from these magical interpretations towards a religion focused on communal practice.

Ehrman explains that miracles were accepted in the ancient world, “These occurrences did not involve an intrusion from outside of the natural world into an established nexus of cause and effect that governed the way things work.” Ancient people considered magic as a part of life. Magic was not outside the reasonable concept of cause and effect, rather it was an integral part of it. As I discussed previously demons, exorcism, and magic were all common place. They were real causes outside the realm of normal human control (except for specific magical practices). A miracle worker was someone who could control demons and other forces with magic. “When spectacular events occurred, the only question for most ancient persons (a) who was able to perform these deeds and (b) what was the source of their power?” Jesus as a miracle worker and healer was subjected to the same questions.

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158 Ehrman 226
159 Ehrman 226
The Beelzebul Controversy appears in each of the synoptic gospels (Mt. 12:22-23, Mk. 3:19-24, and Lk. 11:14-23) and it addresses the question of where Jesus’ authority to cast out evil spirits came from. Directly after Jesus appoints the twelve apostles, Mark’s version says,

19 Then he went home; 20 and the crowds came together again, so that they could not even eat. 21 When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, “He has gone out of his mind.” 22 And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, “He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.” 23 And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, “How can Satan cast out Satan? 24 If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. Morton Smith explains the first portion of the passage where Jesus’ family tries to restrain him:

“it seems that Jesus’ exorcisms were accompanied by abnormal behavior on his part. Magicians who want to make demons obey often scream their spells, gesticulate, and match the mad in fury.” If Jesus was doing those things it is clear that his family might need to restrain him and also the scribes might conclude that Jesus was possessed. If, as Smith says, Jesus was acting strangely out of character, like other magicians claiming authority over demons, it is not surprising that we do not find accounts of Jesus’ family restraining him or the scribes concluding that he is possessed in either Matthew or Luke’s version of the story. Also Smith notes, “It was thought that demons, like dogs, would obey if you called them by their names. In this case, the scribes from Jerusalem say the name is Beelzebul, “the ruler of the demons.” This episode could be taken as the scribes attempt to control the demon that they thought possessed Jesus, though more likely, “They [the scribes] had probably come on purpose to watch Him [Jesus] and oppose Him [Jesus].” This means that instead of an attempt to help Jesus if he was possessed,
by saying that Beelzebul was at work in him was meant more as an insult.

If the scribes are trying to discredit Jesus, they do so by saying that “He has Beelzebul” (Mk 3:22), meaning that he is possessed, or that in some sense that the power of Beelzebul is working through him. The underlying point is that from this demon he derives his power, and not from God. “The particular form of this charge, that he is possessed, not with an ordinary demon, but with the Satan himself, is in order to account for his power over demons, as representing their prince… The charge is, that Jesus cast out demons by virtue of this connection with their prince.” The scribes are essentially saying that he is using black magic or evil magic, and in order for him to do so he must be in contact with or controlled by the prince of demons himself. Beelzebul is an alternative name for Satan commonly used throughout the New Testament. It may be derived from “‘Baal, the price,’ originally a title of the Canaanite storm and fertility god, later demonized into the chief power of evil. One can easily see the cultural overlap and appropriation of the gods from the Canaanite context of early Israelite culture.

Matthew’s version of the Beelzebul controversy leaves out the episode where Jesus’ family restrains him and Matthew does not say that Jesus is possessed as distinctly as Mark.

Also, this time Jesus’ accusers are the Pharisees. Matthew 12:22-24 says,

22 Then they brought to him a demoniac who was blind and mute; and he cured him, so that the one who had been mute could speak and see. 23 All the crowds were amazed and said, “Can this be the Son of David?” 24 But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, “It is only by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons, that this fellow casts out demons.”

The context of this controversy is different than the Markan version. Here Jesus has physically removed a spirit from a man, and only after that is he accused of casting out spirits through Beelzebul. Instead of being accusatory like the scribes in Mark the Pharisees in Matthew are

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165 The New Oxford Study Bible: New Testament 63 (Footnote 22)
Felder 38

dismissive. In Matthew’s version the crowd recognizes him as “Son of David” or the messiah whereas Mark’s scribes do not even raise the question. This is an example of Matthew removing the focus from Jesus’ miracle healing and turning it toward what the miracle means. “And he [Matthew] has probably felt objection to Mk. 3:21 especially, elegon gar hoti eksestee (elegon gar oti ejesth… meaning “for they were saying, ‘He has gone out of his mind.'”) But a reminiscence of this verse betrays itself in the eksistanto (ejistanto meaning “they were amazed”) of Mt. 12:23.”

Mark and Matthew both used the Greek verb eksistami (ejisthmi) meaning to be amazed, surprised, or be out of one’s mind, but in Mark is the verb is in third person singular aorist (meaning simple past tense) active voice and it is referencing Jesus as the subject. In Matthew, it appears in the third person plural imperfect middle/passive voice referencing the crowd hoi ochloi (oi oxloi). The use of the same verb, attributed to different subjects is a strong connection that should not be ignored. The NRSV translation contextually understands the verb to mean out of his mind. Mark’s version says, “For they were saying that he was out of his mind.” Matthew’s version uses the same verb to mean were amazed in reference to the crowd. “And all the crowds were amazed and they were saying…” Matthew is very clearly hesitant to say that Jesus was out of his mind, but he uses the same word as Mark attributed to a different subject with a different meaning. The use of this same verb in Matthew tells us that he had knowledge of the Markan passage. In order to remove Jesus from this context as a magician

170 Greek New Testament 43
171 Greek New Testament 129, Oxford Annotated Bible 62, “For people were saying, “He has gone out of his mind.”
172 Greek New Testament 43, Oxford Annotated Bible 25, “All the crowds were amazed and said…”
performing magic, he took it upon himself to make this specific change so that Jesus would not appear in an ecstatic state as many other magicians did.

Luke’s version of the Beelzebul controversy condenses the story further and leaving out the episode with Jesus’ family, the actual identity of the accuser, and any mention of Jesus as the possible messiah.

14 Now he was casting out a demon that was mute; when the demon had gone out, the one who had been mute spoke, and the crowds were amazed. 15 But some of them said, “He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons.” 16 Others, to test him, kept demanding from him a sign from heaven.\(^{173}\)

Luke’s version is straightforward. The author leaves out superfluous details and gets directly to Jesus’ teaching leaving the reader with a one-sentence exorcism and a seven-verse explanation and refutation of his anonymous accusers. Luke’s version is very much like Matthew’s but does not leave any remnant of the idea that Jesus was possessed by Beelzebul, but simply says that he was using the power of Satan to cast out the demons. Luke most likely had the same qualms as Matthew about saying that Jesus was out of his mind, and consequently either shortened the story himself or used a different version.

*Jesus and Necromancy*

Another answer to the question concerning the origin of Jesus’ power comes from the perspective of Herod Antipas and his cohorts. He clearly believes that there is a possibility that John the Baptist (whom he beheaded) had been raised from the dead and that it was John’s power working within Jesus. Again, Mark 6 gives us the clearest example of this accusation.

14 King Herod had heard of it, for his Jesus’ name had become known. Some were saying, “John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him.” 15 But others said, “It is Elijah.” And others said, “It is a prophet like one of the prophets of old.” 16 But when Herod heard of it, he said, “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.”\(^{174}\)

\(^{173}\) *Oxford Annotated Bible, New Testament* 119

This tells the modern reader that the practice of necromancy was still very much alive in the times of Jesus. Smith points out, “It was generally believed that the spirit of any human being who had come to an unjust, violent, or otherwise untimely end was of enormous power. If a magician could call up and get control of, or identify himself with such a spirit, he could then control inferior spirits or powers.”¹⁷⁵ This is an example of “the unquiet dead” from Greek mythology. Herod interpreted Jesus’ power as that of John the Baptist who he wrongfully killed. Herod wants to understand how Jesus could have these powers, and so he applies the concepts of magic as he knows them.

Thus Herod interprets the powers of Jesus through his Greco-Jewish cultural lens as magic. Josephus a Jewish priest, scholar, and historian¹⁷⁶ wrote in his work Antiquities (93 CE¹⁷⁷) about the type of consequences Herod was expecting after he wrongfully killed John the Baptist.

But to some of the Jews the destruction of Herod’s army seemed to be divine vengeance, and certainly a just vengeance, for his treatment of John, surnamed the Baptist. For Herod had put him to death, though he was a good man and had exhorted the Jews to lead righteous lives, to practice justice toward their fellows and piety toward God, and so doing to join in baptism… When others too joined the crowds about him, because they were aroused to the highest degree by his sermons, Herod became alarmed. Eloquence that had so great an effect on man kind might lead to some form of sedition, for it looked that it would be much better to strike first and be rid of him before his work lead to an uprising, than to wait for an upheaval, get involved in a difficult situation, and see the stronghold that we have previously mentioned, and there put to death, yet the verdict of the Jews was that the destruction visited upon Herod’s army was a vindication of John, since God saw fit to inflict such a blow on Herod.¹⁷⁸

This passage shows us that Jews believed that the destruction of Herod’s army by the Nabatean forces was an act of vengeance against him for killing a righteous man. More importantly Herod was afraid of the power that John was gaining through his followers. He was worried about an

¹⁷⁵ Smith 34
¹⁷⁸ Boring 96-97
uprising and so he killed him preemptively. Jesus, who was baptized by John the Baptist, was also gaining followers, and so he was also a problem for Herod.

Luke’s gospel maintains the passage, but he is uncomfortable with the idea that Jesus would use necromancy as a source of his power. Luke 9:7-9 says,

7 Now Herod the ruler heard about all that had taken place, and he was perplexed, because it was said by some that John had been raised from the dead, 8 by some that Elijah had appeared, and by others that one of the ancient prophets had arisen. 9 Herod said, “John I beheaded; but who is this about whom I hears such things?” And he tried to see him.\(^{179}\)

In this passage Herod doesn’t say that Jesus’ power comes John the Baptist. The use of the passive voice in verse seven deemphasizes the subject (the people that are saying these things) of the sentence. In Matthew and Mark the authors both used active voice. The change in Luke is interesting because deemphasizes the people who are saying these things thereby deemphasizing what they say. The undefined “some” has several ideas about where the power of Jesus is coming from, and all of them are stated passively, which makes them sound weak and feeble. Herod’s quotation is set off by the active voice, as it is in Matthew and Mark. Luke follows Mark’s version of the story up until Herod acknowledges that he believes Jesus’ power comes from John the Baptist. Mark says, “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.”\(^{180}\) Luke says the same thing, but changes the last few words dramatically. “John I beheaded; but who is this about whom I hears such things?”\(^{181}\)

Herod’s words in this passage are of interest because they do not agree with Mark or Matthew which, “represent Herod as saying of Christ, “This is John the Baptist; he is risen from the dead,”\(^{182}\) Luke’s version means, “I thought that I had got rid of this kind of trouble when I

\(^{180}\) The New Oxford Study Bible, New Testament 67, Mark 6:14-16
\(^{182}\) International Critical Commentary, Luke 241
beheaded John; and here I am having it all over again.” It is more a statement of disbelief, and lack of understanding. In Luke’s version Herod denies the possibility that Jesus could be using powers of John the Baptist. He says that he killed John the Baptist after the undefined “some” raise that as a concern, which draws the reader to conclude that this was a response to that concern. It is as though the some asked if it could be John the Baptist, and Herod responds forcefully, that it cannot be John, because I Herod beheaded him myself. The fact that Herod’s opinion about the possibility changed in Luke tells us that the author of Luke was particularly uncomfortable discussing the fact that some people may have believed that Jesus was a necromancer and so he does not allow it in his work.

On the question concerning the source of Jesus’ power we have seen in Mark that outsiders answer this question with accusations of possession and necromancy. Matthew and Luke choose not to mention that some thought Jesus was possessed by Satan, and that Satan was making it possible for him to cast out spirits. Matthew says that he evokes Satan in his exorcisms, not that that he is Satan as in Mark. Luke does the same thing as Matthew and says that he evokes the spirit of Satan. Clearly Mark is less reserved than Matthew and Luke when he is talking about the magical events surrounding Jesus’ life and how they were interpreted by the people around him. Matthew and Luke do not put forth these magical interpretations. In the stark contrast between Mark 6:14 and Luke 9:7-9 we can see Luke’s refusal to include the idea that Jesus used necromancy and all that such an idea implies. Matthew and Luke are not focused on the magic that Jesus performs or is accused of performing. They do concern themselves with the image of Jesus and desperately try not to tarnish it with accusations of the use of magic.

183 *International Critical Commentary*, Luke 241
Jesus performs a number of healings and exorcisms in the synoptic gospels. He can do so without meaning to, as in Mark 5:28-30 when a woman touches his cloak and she is miraculously healed.\textsuperscript{184} He lays his hands on people and they are healed as is Mark 6:5 and Luke 4:40, and he rebukes demons and they obey as in Matthew 17:18 and Mark 9:25.\textsuperscript{185} The gospels do not for the most part illustrate a specific method to his exorcisms or his healings. Sometimes Jesus just speaks and his will is done, other times he physically does something like laying his hands on the victim for example. Some of Jesus' healings have distinct procedures while others do not. Magicians as we discussed previously were often ritual based including magic words, and/or magical objects to properly evoke the help of one or more Gods. In Mark, Jesus does perform ritually based miracles, which Matthew and Luke also describe, but without the ritual actions. Again, as we saw previously in the passages relating to the Beelzebul Controversy and accusations of necromancy we will see Matthew and Luke carefully using Markan material and deemphasizing the procedure while highlighting the outcome or message.

\textit{Jesus and Healing}

Mark has two distinct healings that involve a specific procedure. In the first example Jesus heals a deaf and mute man. It says,

\begin{quote}
31 On his journey back from Tyrian territory he went by way of Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, well within the territory of the Decapolis. 32 They brought him a man who was deaf and had an impediment in his speech, and begged Jesus to lay his hand on him. 33 He took him aside, away from the crowd; then he put his fingers in the man’s ears, and touched his tongue with spittle. 34 Looking up to heaven, he sighed, and said to him, ‘Ephphatha,’ which means ‘Be opened.’ 35 With that his hearing was restored, and at the same time the impediment was removed and he spoke clearly. 36 Jesus forbade them to tell anyone; but the more he forbade them, the more they spread it abroad. 37 Their astonishment knew no bounds; ‘All that he does, he does well,’ they said; “he even makes the deaf hear and the dumb speak.”\textsuperscript{186}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{185} These are not all the examples of Jesus performing healings and exorcisms in the New Testament. These are a few examples of to illustrate his methods.
\textsuperscript{186} \textit{The New Oxford Annotated Bible}, New Testament 71-72, Mark 7:31-37
There is a well outlined procedure in this passage. The onlookers expected Jesus to simply lay hands on this man, but instead he does an elaborate ritual out of view. He places his fingers in the man’s ears, and says “Ephphatha,” which is Aramaic for “Be opened,” as translated by the author. The use of the Aramaic word is not like using magic words. He probably spoke only Aramaic and hence it would be common for him to use Aramaic commands. The most interesting part of this passage is the use of his own spittle to cure the man’s speech impediment.

Matthew’s version of this story omits the details of the miracle. He does not mention the Aramaic word, the fingers in the ears, or the spittle on his tongue. Matthew 15 says,

29 After leaving that region Jesus took the road by the sea of Galilee, where he climbed a hill and sat down. 30 Crowds flocked to him, bringing with them the lame, blind, dumb, and crippled, and many other sufferers; they put them down at his feet, and he healed them. 31 Great was the amazement of the people when they saw the dumb speaking, the crippled made strong, the lame walking, and the blind with their sight restored; and they gave praise to the God of Israel.\[187\]

It is the same story located in the same sequence in the story, but there are absolutely no details. Matthew does tend to condense Mark’s work, but these seem to be important details to Mark.

Another miracle in the gospel of Mark uses roughly the same procedure, but to cure a blind man. He says,

22 They arrived at Bethsaida. There the people brought a blind man to Jesus and begged him to touch him. 23 He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village. Then he spat on his eyes, laid his hands upon him, and asked whether he could see anything. 24 The man’s sight began to come back, and he said, ‘I see people—they

look like tress, but they are walking about.’ 25 Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; he looked hard, and now he was cured and could see everything clearly. 26 Then Jesus sent him home, saying, ‘Do not even go into the village.’

Again Jesus uses his spittle to heal the man’s eyes. According to a commentary on Matthew, “Mt. omits both miracles, probably intentionally for it can hardly be accidental that they are both characterized by features which Mt. elsewhere avoids… in both the healing is performed in private… [and] in both physical contact and material means are employed.”

“Privacy, spittle and laying on of hands are features of the rituals found in the magical papyri,” so in this story Jesus himself and his methods resemble that of Greek magicians and Mark has no trouble including them in his gospel, yet Matthew and Luke omit the accounts partially (Mt. 15:29) or completely as is the case with Jesus’ healing at Bethsaida (Mk. 8:22). Tacitus (Histories) relates a similar story about the Emperor Vespasian in Alexandria. It says,

One of the common people of Alexandria well known for his loss of sight, threw himself before Vespasian’s knees, praying him with groans to cure his blindness, being so directed by the god Serapis, whom the most superstitious of nations worships before all others; and he besought the emperor to deign to moisten his cheeks and eyes with his spittle.

The gospel authors clearly believed that Jesus’ power came from some element of divinity in him. The emperor also had some element of divinity for some people. Romans worshiped their emperors among the gods as a liaison between God and humanity. Jesus was called ‘son of God’ giving him that same divine status. Smith remarks that one of the marks of a magician is divine origin. He writes, “Thus, in popular thought “son of god” and “magician” are alternative titles for the miracle man. This is why in the synoptic gospels, the title “Son of God” is almost always

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188 The New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Testament 72-73, Mark 8:22-26
189 International Critical Commentary, Matthew 170
191 Boring 175
used in connection with miracles.”192 It is this partial divinity that makes his healings work and his bodily fluids powerful means of producing them.

Both Matthew and Luke avoid the story about the healing at Bethsaida. They would not have been able to deemphasize the magical practice because there is no moral teaching or outcome besides the healing for them to emphasize in its place. The fact that there is at least one Hellenistic story about the same sort of magical use of divine substances makes it unlikely that they would have picked up the story if the other were widely known because the strong parallel juxtaposes Jesus and the Roman emperor and shows their powers to be almost equal.

The Epileptic Boy

The condensing and refocusing techniques that Matthew and Luke both use can be seen also in stories of exorcism. The story about the epileptic boy is found in all three synoptic gospels. The episode is known as the epileptic boy, but it is not meant to be understood as a medical condition by the ancient author. This title is a modern one that scholars gave to this episode due to the fact that the symptoms of the boy are very similar to the symptoms of an epileptic seizure. Epilepsy was an unknown medical condition, and so the boy would either be considered, sick (mentally or physically) and or demon possessed. Mark has the longest version with the most detailed description of what happened, while Matthew and Luke deemphasize the details while the authors refocus the reader towards their intended point. The exorcism of the epileptic boy is the only exorcism in the second half of Mark’s gospel and also one of the most dramatically narrated exorcisms.193 Thus Mark’s version:

14 When they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them. 15 When the whole crowd saw him, they were immediately overcome with awe, and they ran forward to greet him. 16 He asked them, “What are you arguing about with them?” 17 Someone from the crowd answered him, “Teacher, I

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192 Smith 81
brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; 18 and whenever it
seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and
I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so.” 19 He answered them,
“You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer
must I put up with you? Bring him to me.” 20 And they brought the boy to you. When the
spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy and he fell on the ground and rolled
about, foaming at the mouth. 21 Jesus asked the father, “How long has this been
happening to him?” And he said, “From childhood. 22 It has often cast him into the fire
and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and
help us.” 23 Jesus said to him, “If you are able!— All things can be done for the one who
believes. 24 Immediately the father of the child cried out, “I believe; help my unbelief!”
25 When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit
saying to it, “You spirit that keeps this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you,
come out of him and never enter him again!” 26 After crying out and convulsing him
terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, “He is
dead.” 27 But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand.194

The interesting parts of the Markan exorcism are Jesus’ angry outbursts, and the specific details
that Matthew and Luke choose to omit. In this story, it is the unbelief of the crowd that causes
Jesus’ anger.195 The exorcism itself is typical and characteristic of exorcisms described
previously. The root of the problem is identified as “a spirit” (Mk 9:17), and his symptoms are
violent and frightening (Mk 9:18). Jesus does a typical exorcism rebuking the spirit and
demanding that it come out of the boy (Mk 9:25). An interesting point is the problem that the
unbelief of the crowd causes for Jesus. Jesus performs this exorcism to strengthen faith, not to
impress the crowd, marking a shift in the second half of Mark’s gospel that focuses on faith, and
not miracles.196 The focus and underlying theme of this story seems as though it would be
something that Matthew and Luke would appreciate and include, but they do not.

Matthew’s gospel shortens the passage considerably (as is typical) and omits the details
concerning the symptoms of the boy’s possession. Matthew 17:14-18 says,

195 “Matthew and Mark.” New Interpreter’s Bible. 634
196 “Matthew and Mark.” New Interpreter’s Bible. 634
14 When they came to the crowd, a man came to him, knelt before him, 15 and said, “Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is moonstruck\(^{197}\) and he suffers terribly; he often falls into the fire and often into the water. 16 And I brought him to your disciples, but they could not cure him.” 17 Jesus answered, “You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him here to me.” 18 And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him, and the boy was cured instantly. 19 Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, “Why could we not cast it out?” 20 He said to them, “Because of your little faith. For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.”\(^ {198}\)

The word moonstruck comes “from the belief that epilepsy was caused by the moon or the moon goddess.”\(^ {199}\) Matthew continually “omits the references to demonic possession”\(^ {200}\) The reader is not given the impression that the root of the problem is possession until Jesus actually rebukes the demon and casts it out of the boy.\(^ {201}\) This is because the demon is not an essential part of the story. “In terms of form and function, it [this story] is no longer a miracle/exorcism story expressing Christology, but a pronouncement story that builds to Jesus’ final declaration on the power of faith in 17:19-20.”\(^ {202}\) Matthew, as we have seen before, “has no interest in the exorcism as such, but used the healing story to set the stage for the saying on the power of faith.”\(^ {203}\) Just as in the healing at Bethsaida (Mk 6:22) Mathew omits the gradual process of the healing and substitutes in it’s place a single command or action, “he therefore substituted the simple statement that Christ rebuked the demon and the boy was healed; but curiously enough retains the clause that the demon came out, although he has elsewhere in the narrative except in the next two verses\(^ {204}\), suppressed the references to feathers of demoniac possession.” Although Mark makes roughly the same point as Matthew, Matthew’s point is much stronger due to a lack of

\(^{197}\) The Greek word *seleaniazetai* (seleiniazetai), used in Matthew 17:15 means moonstruck, but is commonly translated to mean epileptic. *Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament*. 162.

\(^{198}\) *The Oxford Annotated Bible*; New Testament, Matthew 17:14-18

\(^{199}\) “Matthew and Mark.” *New Interpreter’s Bible* 368

\(^{200}\) *International Critical Commentary*, Matthew; M 15, and M16, 188

\(^{201}\) “Matthew and Mark.” *New Interpreter’s Bible* 368, *International Critical Commentary*, Matthew 189

\(^{202}\) “Matthew and Mark.” *New Interpreter’s Bible* 367-8

\(^{203}\) “Matthew and Mark.” *New Interpreter’s Bible* 368
detail and disinterest in the exorcism itself and the sickness of the boy. Mark’s version has intrinsic entertainment value in its vivid description, but the point is obscured. Matthew essentially cleans up the passage to bring the focus from the exorcism to the power of faith.

A parallel story from the Life of Apollonius of Tyana (beginning of the 3rd century CE)\textsuperscript{205} is much closer to the Markan version of the text, however there is not underlying theme of faith. This story like exorcistic narratives are to establish the power or the authority of the exorcist.

The story says,

And he brought forward a poor woman who interceded in behalf of her child, who was, she said, a boy of sixteen years of age, but had been for two years possessed by a devil. Now the character of the devil was that of a mocker and a liar. Here one of the sages asked, why she said this, and she replied: This child of mine is extremely good-looking, and therefore the devil is amorous of him and will not allow him to retain his reason, nor will he permit him to go to school, or to learn archery, nor even to remain at home, but drives him out into desert places. And the boy does not even retain his own voice, but speaks in a deep hollow tone as men do; and he looks at you with other eyes rather than his own… he does not know me.\textsuperscript{206}

This story like Mark identifies the demon possession at the very beginning of the story, and then lists his symptoms, though these symptoms seem less severe than the epileptic boy in Mark.

Apollonius casts out the demon in different manner since the boy cannot be produced in his presence. The story continues and identifies the demon as a deceased man who died in battle and shortly after his death (3 days) his wife remarried, and in his anger he possessed the boy.

Here the sage asked afresh, if the boy was at hand; and she said not, for, although she had done all she could to get him to come with her, the demon had threatened her with steep places and precipices and declared that he would kill her son, “in case,” she added, “I hailed him hither for trail.” “Take courage,” said the sage, “for he will not slay him when he has read this.” And so saying he drew a letter out of his bosom and gave it to the woman; and the letter, it appears, was addressed to the ghost and contained threats of an alarming kind.\textsuperscript{207}

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This exorcism seems considerably different from those that we have seen, but it is really quite the same except that the exorcist is not present at the time of the exorcism. Apollonius (mentioned as the sage) rebukes the demon in a letter and threatens him much in the same way that Jesus would rebuke a demon and command him to leave.

The characteristics of the Markan exorcism resemble the Greek exorcism from Apollonius of Tyana more strongly than Matthew does. Mark’s structure is much more focused on the exorcism as is the Greek narrative, Matthew focuses his story on his agenda. Luke doesn’t have any agenda like Matthew, but he still shortens the story considerably. Luke says,

37 On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. 38 Just then a man from the crowd shouted, “Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. 39 Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It convulses him until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. 40 I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not.” 41 Jesus answered, “You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here.” 42 While he was coming, the demon dashed him to the ground in convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. 43 And all were astounded at the greatness of God.

As the modern commentator notes, “Luke omits whole sections of Mark’s account: Jesus’ initial conversation with the crowd, Mark’s extended description of the boy’s symptoms, Jesus’ second conversation with the father, details of the exorcism, and Jesus’ private conversation with the disciples.” Luke’s version seems to be interested (like the Apollonius parallel) in establishing the power of Jesus. The exorcism happens in one sentence, and hardly any details are given. Jesus again gets annoyed at the crowd as he does in Mark and Matthew. He calls them faithless and perverse, but the reason here is unclear. It is difficult to tell weather Jesus’ anger is directed at the crowd or his disciples for failing to help the boy.

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Emphasis and lamentation over “this generation” (7:31; 11:29-32, 50-51; 16:8; 17:25; 21:32) is more pronounced in Luke than in any other gospel. This repetition “keeps reminding the reader that Jesus will soon be rejected [by this generation] and killed.” He highlights the failures of the disciples in order to “set the stage for the teachings of Jesus, which will fill the next section of the Gospel.” Luke’s version highlights the idea in the last verse that people recognized that God was working through him, and that God should take the credit for these mighty acts.

This type of analysis helps readers understand the changes in the narrative and how they still relate to one another. The most stark contrast is between Mark and Matthew, and the clearest similarities come from a Greek source outside the Gospels that may have been an attempt to create their own hero similar to Jesus who could work the same kinds of miracles. Matthew and Luke again de-emphasize the actual act of the exorcism in favor of different points and conclusions to the story. Matthew turns the story into a declaration on the necessity of faith, while Luke maintains it as a testament to the power of Jesus and foreshadowing of his death.

Chapter 4
Conclusion

Jesus lived in a world where magic and magical practices were commonplace. Miracles and signs were accepted and at times expected from people claiming to be great men. Jesus, who spoke with authority and claimed to teach, was required to explain where his authority came from. His miracles allowed him to physically show people that he did have the authority he claimed and that everyone should heed his word.

Questions concerning the origin of Jesus’ authority were bound to arise. The Beelzebul Controversy brought forth charges of black magic, ideas that Jesus was possessed, and accusations that Satan was working through Jesus. This is the first place that we see a divergence between the stories from Mark and those from Matthew and Luke. Each version of the story portrays Jesus and the event differently. Mark suggests that like many other magicians of the time Jesus was prone to ecstatic fits and that some people (his family included) thought that he was possessed. Matthew’s version shies away from saying that Jesus is possessed, and places the Pharisees (Matthew’s favorite enemy) in opposition to Jesus accusing him of black magic. Luke follows Matthew and leaves out details, inserts a more vague enemy and refuses to include the idea that some people thought Jesus was possessed as Mark said.

Matthew and Luke were uncomfortable with the idea that Jesus could have been in some way possessed or crazy, and chose not to include it in their account of Jesus’ life and work. Regardless of the accusation of possession, each gospel tacitly acknowledges Jesus’ practices as magical when Jesus’ accusers attribute his powers to Beelzebul making his magic black magic. More importantly, however is Matthew and Luke’s attempt to remove the accusations against Jesus concerning his sanity. Ancient magicians often exhibited strange behavior, and it was this sort of behavior attributed to Jesus that the authors of Matthew and Luke excluded.

Herod’s concerns about Jesus in Mark’s gospel can only be understood when they are examined closely with a deep understanding of ancient magical practices. Herod is actually making a guilty speculation that Jesus practices necromancy, and raising the spirit of John the Baptist to work through him, but Luke refuses even to allow Herod to make those accusations, and instead undefined people suggest it, and Herod promptly rejects it. Jesus’ rituals are also distinctly magical. The Bethsaida healing in Mark is definitely a magical practice according to
Durkheim’s theory. The healing ritual is done on the basis of need, and is also done privately, away from the crowd. Matthew transforms the miracle into a group exhibition, but since it is done on the basis of need it is still semi-magical.

The healings and the exorcisms of Jesus are not religious by nature. These specific activities were interpreted as part of the magical worldview of the time, but more importantly for the authors of the synoptic gospels, they fed people’s belief that Jesus could be the messiah. The healings and exorcisms are never calendrical, and always done on the basis of need. Sometimes, they are done in front of a crowd, but in Mark we also see examples of Jesus performing these miracles apart from the crowd. Jesus as an ancient magician performed miracles to emphasize his authority, but also to help those in need. Other ancient magicians and their practices resemble Jesus in Mark’s gospel. Jesus’ techniques were firmly rooted in well known magical practices including the use of bodily fluid in healing, and the laying on of hands. Matthew and Luke both reject these attributes of Jesus. The two healings where Jesus uses his own spittle to restore a man’s speech and sight do not appear in their gospels. Matthew and Luke condense stories and remove details in order to move quickly from the action to the moral or teaching behind it.

This study looks at Jesus as a historical figure. Theologically, Jesus can be interpreted as in other ways, but as a historical figure like many others Jesus can be identified as a magician. The most evidence for Jesus’ identity as a magician is found in Mark’s gospel, which shows an early shift in Christianity away from magical practices and towards the structural system based around weekly worship and scheduled holidays that many people are familiar with today. Without a deep understanding of what an ancient magician was and sought to do, one might find the title of magician as applied to Jesus dismissive and insulting. It is not, however; and Matthew and Luke are not part of a conspiracy to cover up the magical practices of Jesus. What these
examples show is a very subtle shift from the origins of a religious movement to the beginnings of a religion focused on the community and its concerns.
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