

“Jesus the Magician”

The discussion in this paper has been several times presented, firstly in a discussion shortly after the publication of the work, and later in a seminar which met for a short while in Birmingham around 1980. It has lain in my files since then, and was reactivated when the prospective programme of this seminar for the Easter term 1996 was announced. On the cancellation of that, it went back into cold storage, until Professor Dunn invited me to consider giving it here today. But in the intervening year, no revision has been possible, through problems of health, firstly my own, and latterly of my wife. My conclusions were never in full agreement with Smith, and I have seen more and more reasons for criticism over the years. But I thought on reviewing the script that the paper would still serve as a guide to the main areas of debate which the work may arouse. In the few spare hours which I have had, I have looked over my former notes, and made a few detailed investigations.

I had welcomed the book when it was first published, since it seemed to me to provide additional evidence in elucidation of the pericope of the cleansing of the Leper in Mark 1.39-45. Every first course in Greek in the days when I began my academic career prescribed the gospel of Mark as a set book, so that one had studied that book in detail in one's student days and now as an infant lecturer faced the duty of explaining its text to a class. When I began to lecture on that gospel my investigations in the lexica and elsewhere appeared to me to led to the interpretation of the variant reading ὀργισθεῖς in verse 41 and the use of the verbal form ἐμβριμησάμενος in verse 43 as part of a presentation of Jesus practising exorcism with some of the noises and gestures which the records of other exorcistic practices of his age ascribe to their practitioners.

When I was to give the paper in this seminar a year ago, I was asked to say something if I could about Morton Smith's biography. All that I have been able to do is to put together some reminiscences and reflections. I knew him only in the context of Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas, where we would generally encounter one another in bookshops. During the annual congress held in Toronto in 1980 he registered in the diatessaron Seminar of which I was leader at that time, and shared in a three day discussion of a paper on the gospel of Thomas. I will not now digress to describe an incident from that discussion, but at a specific point, through an intervention of Smith, I gained a strong impression that in him there was a streak of the gamin, using his learning and dialectic skill to tease his colleagues, rather than to elucidate the topic under consideration. (, in different locations, I might encounter him in local bookshops. His interests were wide and very similkar to my own. I always recall as a sign of friendly kindness, that if he chanced across something which he thought was “my pigeon”, he would give me first refusal. I remember him in Toronto taking at length books on Ephrem the Syrian which at that time I did not have amongst my priorities. In that same year, 1980, he registered himself as a member of the Diatessaron Seminar (as it then was) of which I was then Chairman. The paper that year was by Bruce Chilton, on the gospel of Thomas. There was not so rigid a programme as nowadays, and so meaty was the offering that it occupied us for the three days of the congress. What came

across to me, germane to our study today, was a streak of the gamin in Smith. In one session, he took some perfectly valid point - a palaeographical one, if I remember aright - but then teased the speaker by a cross examination harping on that single crucial point, like Maxwell-Fyfe cross-examining Ribbentrop. But when at length challenged by from the chair - "come off it, Morton", I said - he smiled, like a child found out in a prank, and let the discussion go on by other routes.)

Of his biography I learned nothing directly from him, but am dependent on hearsay, and I have forgotten who was my informant. He was a Harvard graduate, but had proceeded for his Ph.D. work to the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. This would have been, I think, in the years of the British mandate over Palestine. I make the guess that he was about fifteen years my senior, and could well therefore have graduated in the mid-thirties. I do not know his supervisor nor his topic for that doctoral work, but my impression from the titles of his work known to me that it would have been Jewish history in the Second Temple period. This seems to have some confirmation from a fact uncovered in my recent researches. I have learned that his Harvard Th.D., awarded in 1957, found published form in 1971 as "Palestinian Parties and Politics that shaped the Old Testament". Certainly, when first I was a member of international gatherings of scholars, his exploit in studying at the Hebrew University was spoken of with awe and admiration, as something, it seemed, unparalleled. In that context, I heard that he had submitted his thesis in modern Hebrew.

If younger members of this seminar have read for the first time the work chosen as this afternoon's topic, I think that they will have found themselves transported into another and older thought world in respect of his methodology. Firstly, Smith remains a historical positivist, firmly wedded to an historical quest. As an excursus on pg. 17f. shows, he was wholly antagonistic to form criticism and particularly to attempts to fix the Sitz im Leben of pericopae in the context of early Christianity. Philological study appears to be the basis of his approach, the presumption being that the text once established and accurately expounded will reveal historical facts. If I am correct in my dating of his years as a student, he will probably have studied with Lake at Harvard. But secondly, he pursues this quest with a heuristic tool which distinguishes him say, from Lake or Burkitt or Schweitzer, whom in other ways he recalls. All interpretation is dominated by a conspiracy theory, whether the object under consideration be Jewish documents and canon (as in the book I have mentioned), or Christian. The effect of this, offsetting the apparent intention of the basis historical approach, is that one rarely if ever encounters an original document, but rather perceives it as something behind the deceptive transformations which the author plots, and for which he gives the origin as the self-interest of various groups.

I do not think that there can be any doubt that in some way this must be linked with personal aspects of his life, of which I know only the shell. He was in priest's orders in the Protestant Episcopal Church, but from some private reasons of conviction or conscience did not exercise the duties of his office. Yet he remained, as I was given to understand, "on the books". I know nothing with certainty of any events in his life, or the development of his theology, which might

lie behind this. But it would seem to me that his iconoclastic approach to the whole question of the origins of Christianity, and indeed of Judaism before and after the destruction of the second Temple, was a covert apologia for these characteristics of his life. // Was he showing the falsity of a faith which had failed for him, or seeking to unmask the shaky foundations of an institution which he believed to have done him wrong? (for the methodological features which I have sketched.) // He was, as the current cliché has it, “a private man”. He appeared friendly and sympathetic towards the philological approach to the study of early Christianity. (but for my part I valued the friendly exchanges and conversation which I had with him on some few occasions. My last contact was by letter when I took early retirement. His reply clearly intimated the high value and importance of teaching, as the passing on of a tradition in method, and his regret that I was withdrawing myself from the practice of this. He implied that we had a method in common, although he must have been well aware of the very different theological programme of which I saw my work a part. Thus, consciously at any rate, it was a method and not an apologetic which he was essentially seeking to convey.) I know that he thought the teaching office of primary importance, and expressed regret when I withdrew from it early. His seminar in Columbia University, which I attended once in the mid-70s, had a membership widely diverse in theological and confessional allegiance. Clearly colleagues in the vicinity valued him in the role of seminar leader.

Morton Smith's book, “Jesus the Magician” appeared in 1978. Its antenatal period is exemplified in his even better known “Clement of Alexandria and a secret gospel of Mark”, published in 1973. The main theses of “Jesus the Magician” are found in it between pages 201 and 266. Its characteristics had not developed much during the rest of its gestation. “Jesus the Magician” met with an enthusiastic welcome from Hugh Trevor-Roper, Regius Professor of History at Oxford, who, in 1974, had likewise greeted the popular version of that earlier book, entitled “The Secret Gospel”. Smith's main thesis is that there has been neglect of those aspects of the gospels which show elements in Jesus's practice and thought readily to be paralleled from the world of ancient magic. Smith for his part considers that in these very aspects lies the key to the “historical Jesus”. He claims that we may make a reconstruction based on such aspects, and this will provide a means of understanding the origin of the two divergent pictures of Jesus which confront us on the one hand, in the nascent church's presentation of him, and on the other, in the words of his detractors both Jewish and Hellenistic.

His method is to present, first of all, evidence from the gospels which suggests that Jesus was a practitioner of magic. He then seeks to reconstruct from various sources the picture of Jesus (or of the early church as his followers) which the enemies of the church gave. This he finds first in Josephus whose text, that is, the Testimonium Flavianum (Ant. 18. 63 & 64), he emends. Thence to Rabbinical stories about Jesus, gathered by Travers Herford in 1903, apparently still an exhaustive collection. Lastly he turns to various Roman historians and other authors, Suetonius, Tacitus, Lucan and Pliny the Younger. Amongst examples of the discussion are, firstly, his acceptance of the story in Rabbi Eliezer (a rabbi of the end of the first century) that Jesus received tattoo marks in magical initiation in Egypt. This story was countered by the gospel account of the flight into Egypt, and

is the fact from which Paul derived the imagery of the marks of Jesus he claimed to bear. Secondly, from the Roman materials, the phrase odium humani generis used in Tacitus's account of the early Christians is said to mean "maleficent magical practices". I have tried to find confirmation of this interpretation, but have not yet succeeded. Other sources of information about the views held by the opponents of the Christians are the references by Justin Martyr to Jewish counter-missions, the excerpts of Celsus which have been preserved, and other sources such as the satires of Lucian. In the Life of Apollonius of Tyana by Philostratus we have a control for these researches. (I regret that absence of time has prevented me giving a résumé if this latter).

Smith arrives at a picture whose details are as follows. Jesus is an illegitimate child who in his youth went to Egypt and learned magical arts. His activity took place in his native Galilee. There he was fully initiated in baptism in which he was possessed by a spirit in the form of a bird, and believed himself thereafter to be divine, a claim common amongst magicians. In his practice, he used not only many methods of cure known from magical sources, but also showed signs of hysteria similar to shamanism. It is implied that thaumaturgy was not the only aspect of his magical practice, although it was a means of livelihood. (The link which follows seems to me artificial, even if what precedes were correct and the "secret gospel of Mark" an authentic early document). At a deeper level, his practice of Jesus was the initiation of his followers into "the mystery of the kingdom of God", which set them free from the constraints of the Jewish Law. This came about in baptism in which they were united with Jesus, and in the eucharist which was a magical meal with the same effect. (In Jesus's lifetime?) The transfiguration story is the record of a vision given by Jesus to his followers, but broken by the inauspicious cry of Peter. Accounts of the resurrection are of the memory of this type of experience projected as reality in the apostles, explicable by psychopathology. (Upon examination, much of this can be shown to be taken from the restored text, or sequence of thought, of Celsus).

Jesus admittedly was put to death as a messianic pretender, Although charges of magical practice also figured in his accusation, how this came about is never quite explained by Smith, but frequent references to Brandon seem to suggest approval of the latter's theories.(QV if poss.)

The apostles continued to spread this libertine gospel. A legalistic counterpart was erected by the family of Jesus, amongst others. Pauline Christianity is a synthesis of these. The legalistic party blotted out the writings of Jesus's original followers, but much in Paul's teaching and practice ensured that the original message and experience did not die. It survived amongst the Carpocratians, and the "secret gospel of Mark" is a remote survival of the authentic story.

As I have intimated, on first looking at the book I thought it valuable for the way in which it draws attention to neglected aspects of the miracle stories of the gospels and their vocabulary. It does perform that function and its references need study. What my work of nearly twenty years ago revealed was that almost



everything of value here is derived from earlier works of Bonner, Eitrem and others. John Hull's work made a useful contribution to the discussion in terms of redaction criticism by his book "Hellenistic Magic and the synoptic gospels". (He had been supervised by Christopher Evans in London and then by me in Birmingham. To supervise his transformation of his researches into its published form was a challenging and fascinating task, but the basic approach was entirely his own.)

Smith also performs the useful task of drawing our attention to the deeply embedded stratum of gospel material in which the thaumaturgic element is found. It seems to me to corroborate my impression that the supernatural is an original part of the story and the gospel of Jesus, and not a later accretion or development. His work also has the merit of bringing the materials from early Christian history into the discussion, combining this with the gospel material into one body of data in a way which I have not encountered elsewhere.

Nevertheless, two more readings of the book, with a long interval between, lead me to the conclusion that its faults far outweigh any virtues which it may have to individuals or in general. First of all, it is lamentably obvious from the start that the author is determined to make everything fit into the framework of Jesus perceived as a magician practising initiation. (These two features do not, as I have already intimated, necessarily belong together). Chapter seven, the evidence for magical practices, is perhaps the most flagrant example of this. To give some instances : that Jesus was thought to be John the Baptist redivivus is brought into the picture by comparison with the necromantic conjuration of the spirit of a condemned criminal. Flying through the air and turning stones into bread, which Jesus in the temptation story refuses to do, are the marks of a magician. The story in the gospels is the evidence that the early preachers had had to refute the allegation of such feats levelled at Jesus. (Dating the gospels, in comparison with Celsus and the Jewish reports, is clearly of paramount importance for the debate at this point)

Even the Lord's prayer proves the point (QV), although the later petitions (i.e. on forgiveness) have to be neglected by the exegete, who attempts to cover his tracks by the comic depiction of a magician, namely Jesus, living off his dupes. The baptism of Jesus is defined as an initiatory rite by comparison with a long passage from a magical papyrus, in which the god invoked (conjured ?) appears as a hawk, and power is given to the magician in a spirit who do his bidding. The discrepancy of the relative brevity of the gospel story and the prolixity of the prescribed ceremonials are elsewhere explained as due to the editing of the story before it reached the evangelist.

It is a massive and learned work. It is also annoyingly and tantalizingly without index, and even within the lengthy notes which follow the text, the references are not of the most helpful. Evidence is never set out, but is only alluded to, as if an entry in some book or encyclopedia proved the points. The books are all too often hard to find and rarely owned even by those who build large private libraries. Not many of us have on our shelves guides to the antiquities of the city of Rome (pg.182 for pg.62) or German commentaries of 1968 on the Annals of

Tacitus (pg.180 for pg.51) , nor will many a university library. (I concede that this might be due to publishers constraints, but surely a writer who was going to sell as well as Smith could have demanded more space had he wished). I have done no more than alert us to points which have struck me as demanding debate and perhaps refutation. If I were able to make a full study, I should raise amongst others the following points .

Firstly, the papyri edted by Preisendanz are all dated in the Christian era.It might then be the case that the occurrences of phrases such as "finger of God" in one of them, on which Smith places some weight, is a gospel derivative. The same might be true, for example, of the sayings of the form "I am...". This form of aretalogy was studied by Eduard Schweizer. He found many analogies over a very wide area, and concluded that the nearest parallel to the Johannine sayings of this type was in Mandaean sources. Any judgement on the relation of the term in the gospels and the magical papyri would need to take such collections of data into account. In any case, there need not be dependence on either hand.

Secondly, I think it very questionable whether Smith can justify his treatment of Celsus or of the materials referring to Jesus in Jewish sources. He assumes that the form of the gospels may be treated as contemporary with a second century writer, or with the Jewish materials (which are of diverse and in some cases of dubious date). For anyone this would have been an indefensible position, much more for one who professed an admiration for and interest in textual criticism. We have enough second century gospel materials to be assured of the first century origins of the gospels, and data enough to give us ample ground for the consideration of the few remaining areas of debatable alternative readings and the limited range of possible conjecture. I have not had the opportunity to work through all the places where Smith's discussion would have to be tested by this judgement. I do not think however that any will be found where the preference he often gives to ostensible readings known to Celsus or latent within Jewish material can be justified by normal critical procedures. Celsus is paraphrasing the gospels, sometimes combining details from widely separate passages.(Examples if time permits, etc.) Differences of vocabulary, I believe, will prove to be due to stylistic reasons or to his polemical objectives. Mutatis mutandis , this could be applied to the Jewish materials too, although here we should need the help of experts in late Hebrew and contemorary Aramaic, areas in which I am not competent.

Thirdly, we come to a matter which leads us on to a yet more controversial publication of Smith. Several not unimportant points are taken from the longer version of the "secret gospel of Mark", which Smith's book on a newly discovered and fragmentary letter of Clement of Alexandria brought to to our attention in 1973. I think that I should say a little about my reflections on it. For some radicals, as for Smith himself, it can be and has become a corner-stone (e.g. Koester, Crossan). It is a massive work, and after some initial arguments and hesitations, has been tacitly accepted as part of the early Christian patrimony by a large number of scholars. In fact, Smith indeed can write (in a survey of the book's reception published in 1982) " the recent 'provisional' inclusion of the letter in the Berlin edition of Clement's works adequately indicates its actual status". It may therefore

surprize some to hear a dissentient voice but this statement seems to me to be more than somewhat hybristic. It reminds me, In fact, that in Harvey's edition of Irenaeus in 1857, there are to published fragments allegedly found by Pfaff (1715). Yet these were, in 1900, clearly demonstrated by Harnack to be forgeries.

The possibility of this for Smith's publication seems to me still to require a thorough investigation. He makes much in the original and in the review I have mentioned of the fact that amongst the many scholars whom he circularized all but Nock, Munck and Völker thought that Clement's authorship could be accepted. Two, at least, of these, (conveniently enough for Smith) died before the publication and subsequent debate. But that is massive opposition. (should note other names accepting). Munck and Völker both wrote standard works on Clement and must have known him "inside out". Although Nock did not, so far as I can trace, ever write on Clement, he was easily one of the most erudite scholars of his - or any - generation. His classical training and long practice would have been a sound basis for the "instinct" on which he is said to have relied in his refusal to allow the new work to the Alexandrian. It is a further misfortune for us that Munck's archive is tied up at Aarhus till some time thirty years after his death, while I know nothing of the Nachlass of the other two scholars. I know that Eric Osborn, one of the present generation's Clementine experts, is passionately opposed to the authenticity of the work. I myself am not a Clementine expert. I am a textual critic interested in the Western text, and the influence of Alexandrian scholarship on the preservation or corruption of the New Testament text. Other of my wider interests are the transmission of the text of Greek lyric poetry and pre-Socratic philosophy. In these contexts, I have had to read a great deal of Clement. My reaction on grounds of style (as instinctive as Nock's, though on no such a foundation, I fear) is to doubt that this fragment of a letter can be ascribed to him. Again, when, within the letter, we examine the "secret Mark" passages with a text-critical eye, we find that both Marcan and Johannine echoes are close to our modern critical texts. By contrast, one of the striking things about the texts which Clement knew and used (which are easily accessible in careful presentations) is that they are divergent from our modern reconstructions or preferences. It would be something unwonted and unexpected in a Clementine text to find so close a correlation as we find in the "secret gospel". These excerpts are a mosaic of texts previously known to every contemporary scholar.

If the text be a forgery, does it date from the period of the printed book in which it was discovered ? I learn from Smith's own survey of the debate around the "secret gospel" that Musurillo has discussed reasons for forgery in the seventeenth century. (In that survey, published in 1982, Smith reported that the endpapers on which the "letter of Clement" had been inscribed had been removed, and were not available for examination. In the past few months, I have heard a further rumour, that the book itself has now disappeared from the library, but I cannot recall my informant, perhaps David Parker). Only one critic has accused Smith of forgery and he apparently marred his criticism by personal attack. Smith turned the suggestion away with a disclaimer of the classical learning necessary for such a successful achievement. But as I have said, from a personal observation, I know him to have had the capacity to "rag" a colleague, using all his powers of dialectic

and learning in so doing, and seemingly without any malice. I do not put it past him to have thought it a great jape to have hoodwinked the learned world. Whether there was additionally, behind either of his latest works, any ideology or other ulterior motive such as I have discussed, I find it hard to surmise in the absence of further biographical details than I possess. Perhaps one would need psycho-analytical skills as well, fully to probe such an enigma.

We return to "Jesus the Magician", although the two can scarcely be separated. Unlike some other extreme scholars of this approach to history, Smith is not seeking to say that Jesus is what he believes the covert evidence depicts him to be, at least not in any obvious sense. For Eisler and Brandon, Jesus was a freedom fighter, leader of the Stern Gang of his day. For Robert Graves, if he meant us to take his reconstructions in "King Jesus" seriously, Jesus was a political danger because of his Hasmonean ancestry. But for Smith, such a simple conclusion is not possible. We might easily accept the notion of the scion of an ancient royal house maintaining the validity of his rightful claim to a throne, or a liberation leader plotting the overthrow of invaders and oppressors. But Smith does not believe in magic. For him then, Jesus was a clever charlatan duping and milking those who followed him. Perhaps the initiation was in Smith's view, actually practised by Jesus and in the way he intimates, but this was to bind his followers to him. This Jesus was adept at the bamboozlement of the gullible, setting himself up as an oracle. But the methods of Smith's proof prove suspect, a misuse of his erudition, clever sophistry springing from unknown motivations which might range in definition from simple fun to a serious attempt to destroy once and for all the acceptability of the gospels' figure of Jesus.

He drew attention to an important aspect of the gospels, as I have acknowledged, but his ultimate reconstruction does nothing to explain the finale of the story, the execution of Jesus. Eisler and Brandon have done a far better job there. Smith has not, I think, solved this last theorem remaining unsolved. If we follow up his references to the fathers, we find that they were well aware that parallels could be drawn between the wondrous works of Jesus and the thaumaturgy of the necromancers of their day. They made a distinction by an appeal to the kerygmatic framework drawn from prophecy. Hermeneutics, ancient and modern, are frequently the object of Smith's scorn. He may have been seeking to demonstrate that an historical method can reduce the supernatural content and theological assertions of the gospels to the product of deliberately gargled report. In spite of the legerdemain with which he has marshalled his evidence, he has not done this. If we investigate beyond the superficial, we find that the conjurer has worked with misrepresentation and over-simplified analysis, within a fog of references which seem designed to obscure rather than to underpin.

It is a perplexing problem, all in all, and exacerbated by the personal overtones of criticism and accusation which for me inevitably begin to enter in. The philological ramifications are far more than I have set out, and the hermeneutical problems still remain the same as we were wrestling with before the books were published. I hope that whatever our bierews, this paper may lead some of us to more lasting conclusions.