

DISCLAIMER: This paper, while mostly complete, requires some further expansions and more detailed footnotes. I have identified those sections I am not satisfied with, and I look forward to feedback from the seminar on where else I may modify my thinking or provide further explanation and justification for my thoughts.

Magical Mystery Messiah: Heresiology and Rationalism in the Study of Early Christianity

In his 1982 article “Magic or Miracle” Harold Remus challenged scholars to think about the categories created by polemical arguments in the second century. As Remus shows, these categories are permeable and mutable, their meaning dependent on context and the position of the author. The acts undertaken by practitioners of both magic and miracles are functionally the same, and the distinction rests on the practitioners themselves, and the power that they access in order to perform their acts. Miracles are performed by religious¹ practitioners with access to divine power, and magic is performed by sorcerers and charlatans accessing either demonic power, or the power of their own ritual technologies. This categorical distinction in modern scholarship is a perpetuation of the dogma of “rationalism” as created by the heresiologists. In this understanding, divine power is “rational” and true, and therefore magic performed without divine power is “irrational” and false. While this presentation of true and false miracle and magic is present in the *Gospel of Matthew*², it is mutated somewhat by the presence of the *magi* from the east, showing that the author of *Matthew* valued the “magical” practices represented by these types of experts.

¹ In my use of “religion” and “religious,” and its other derivative terms, I am following an ancient Mediterranean understanding of the term, best articulated by Brent Nongbri, who points out that the earliest uses of terms such as “Judaism” or “Christianity” are best understood as “verbal activities rather than conceptual identities.” Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 2.

² Throughout I use the italicised *Matthew* to refer to the text traditionally identified as the *Gospel According to Matthew*, and the non-italicised Matthew to refer to the author of the same text. I am here following the conventions introduced by Markus Vinzent. Markus Vinzent, *Marcion and the Dating of the Synoptic Gospels* (Peeters, 2014).

The practice of naming one ritual or religious tradition “rational” and another “superstitious” is a common polemic practice of the ancient world.³ The argument is most commonly deployed as a means of de-authorising one system of thought and authorizing another. It is employed by Christians to both deauthorize other religious experts and to counter those seeking to discredit the acts of Christians themselves.⁴ The argument is discursive; it is through the act of defining and polemicizing that one practitioner becomes rational and valid and the other becomes irrational and false. Each instance of production of validity is a narrative construction, whereby an author identifies themselves as an expert able to distinguish between magics and miracles. This expert is necessary because mere observance of the acts themselves, or the person performing the acts, is not enough to identify which is valid and which is not. To the casual observer, performance of magics and miracles appear to be the same thing. The results are likewise indistinguishable; when Jesus heals a mute demoniac in *Matthew* 9:32-34, the Pharisees are able to say that he did this act through the power of demons, not through the power of God. The demon was cast out, and the possessed person spoke. It is not unreasonable for the supporters of Jesus to say this was done by the power of God and his detractors to say the opposite, that it was the power of demons. From this we can surmise that actions done by one power looked much the same, to much the same results as actions done by the other. Identifying which is which was the task of specialist experts, such as the authors of *Acts* and *Matthew* and Justin Martyr. These authors, through their narrative presentations of persons and activities, locate themselves as experts in magic and miracle. They tell their readers and hearers that while

³ Pliny, Cicero, Juvenal FOOTNOTE NEEDED

⁴ “In non-canonical acts literature the apostles’ miracles provoke the charge from their pagan opponents, thus providing a dramatic backdrop for the divine authentication of the apostles and the eventual discomfiture or conversion of the opponents.” Harold Remus, “‘Magic or Miracle’? Some Second Century Instances,” *The Second Century: A Journal of Early Christian Studies* 2, no. 3 (1982): 133.

the ordinary layman might be fooled, the experts are not. One should trust the expert over their own observations.

The division of magic from miracle by as distinguished by experts continues into modern scholarship. This is illustrated in Remus's discussion of the d'Anastasi papyri, and the lack of interest in translating and publishing these so-called magical papyri that Remus identifies. These papyri, and the accompanying amulets and tablets, were not afforded the honours of other Greek and Roman materials, were not given the same pride of place as the other literature of the two civilizations so often imagined to be the birthplaces of modern Western civilization.⁵ This trend, beginning in the nineteenth century, extended well into the twentieth. Scholars referred to the contents of the papyri and amulets as the "underworld of religion", "byways of the human mind", and most clearly illustrating the idea of magic as rubbish, "the hocus-pocus of magic and witchcraft" which "we know ... to be silly and harmless nonsense."⁶ With Remus I question the usefulness of terminology such as "magic" or "miracle" when used without clear definitions and in generalized ways. As such, I identify the actions and the functions of characters from the texts I examine, and explore these actions and functions within their narratological purview.⁷

Extraordinary Acts and Mighty Works

Performing extraordinary acts or works of power was, for some freelance religious experts, an essential part of their practices in the second century.⁸ I am interested here in the

⁵ Harold Remus, "'Magic', Method, Madness," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 11, no. 3 (1999): 260.

⁶ Neill 1988, Nock 1972, and Alfoldi 1952, in Remus, 260.

⁷ EXPANSION NEEDED

⁸ I favour the term coined by Wendt to describe the functions and self-presentation of religious experts. Wendt reminds us that this term is analytical: its function is to provide us a framework within which to think about our subjects of study. These experts were not members of civic religious organizations or colleges, but were rather the street-corner purveyors of wisdom and miracle so disparaged by Dio Chrysostom. Wendt locates Paul in this category. Her study focusses on the Paul of the letters, I add to that the Paul of Acts, and the other Christ-following freelance experts of that text, as well as Matthew's Jesus. Heidi Wendt, *At the Temple Gates: The Religion of Freelance Experts in the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

narrative presentation of these “mighty works” and the language used to describe them in the texts of the second century. I take as my case study Simon the Samaritan, also identified as Simon Magus, and his practices as described in *Acts of the Apostles* and the writings of Justin Martyr. In both of these texts Simon serves as the universal heretic, acting as a foil whose primary purpose is to illustrate the validity of Jesus as the Christ.⁹

In Acts 8:9-13 Simon is presented as an effective foil for Philip; Simon performs magics (μαγειαίς) that amaze the crowds in the city of Samaria, but when Philip – a true follower of Christ – arrives and starts to preach, Simon sees the truth in Philip’s words, is persuaded and baptized. He is then himself amazed at the signs (σημεία) and things of great power (δυναμείς μεγάλας) that he saw taking place around Philip. Seen in isolation, this episode provides two helpful contrasts for thinking about how miracles and magics are constructed in the narratives. The first is, of course, the language used. Simon performs magics, which set up against the signs and things of great power. Another contrast of note is that when discussing Simon, the acts are *acts*, they are things that he actively performs; whereas with the contrasting event, the acts *happen*. It is not indicated that Philip is an active creator of the events. Instead, it is implied that the events are happening in some way because of Philip, but not directly through any actions he takes. Where Simon has to perform actively, Philip simply exists in a space with signs and wonders, implicitly because of his devotion to Christ.

This is in keeping with the distinguishing factors between magic and miracle as identified by Remus. In his study of Origin’s presentation of Celsus’s arguments against the validity of Jesus as a truly divine figure Remus shows that the “presence of manipulations,” either through incantations, potions, or bodily movement, is “distinguishing mark of magic” in second-century

⁹ FOOTNOTE ON MESSIANIC CONTRUCTIONS NEEDED

discourse.¹⁰ In Origin, Celsus identifies Jesus as a γοης, and says that he is only able to perform his works and wonders through use of “formulas or recipes (μαθηματα, 1.6) that can be learned by others to produce the same effects.”¹¹ From this we can understand that true extraordinary works (works that are performed through access to real divine power) cannot be recreated or repeated by just anyone, whereas magics, that use manipulations of words, bodies, or external tools can be recreated and repeated by anyone who has access to those words or tools.

Magic vs Miracle

Justin Martyr identifies Simon the Samaritan’s acts as “magical deeds” (ποιησας μαγικας) performed with the power of demons (δια της των εωεργουντων δαιμονων τυχνης δυναμεις). (*Apology* 26) Here the distinction is between acts performed by accessing the power of the true God, versus magics performed through access to demons. Justin uses these category distinctions to argue that Jesus himself did not practice magic but rather performed miracles. In Chapter 30 of the *Apology*, Justin asks his reader a rhetorical question, asking if Jesus was himself a “man born of men” were not his “mighty works” performed by “magical arts”? The answer is, of course, no: Justin presents arguments proving that Jesus was in fact performing acts through power he accessed directly from God, which he was able to access because he was the Christ prophesied by the Hebrew prophets.

By making the argument at all, Justin implicitly acknowledges that the acts themselves – those things called alternatively magic and miracle – are virtually indistinguishable and can only be categorized through knowledge of where the power *behind* the act comes from.¹² If you were

¹⁰ Remus, “‘Magic or Miracle’? Some Second Century Instances,” 134.

¹¹ Remus, 135.

¹² Other developments of the argument state that the acts performed by the so-called magicians appear effective, but are transitory, and their effectiveness disappears, or that the acts themselves are mere illusions. *Acts of Peter*, in Remus, 133, note 24.

to see Jesus on the street in Cana, turning water into wine, and then encounter Simon the Samaritan on the road to Flavia Neapolis the next week, doing the same thing, you, as a casual observer, would not know who was the magician, and who was the miracle-worker. To identify the difference, *you must yourself be an expert*. You yourself need expert knowledge to distinguish between the saviour and the sorcerer, or someone with expert knowledge who can do this for you. This is the direct benefit of the seeming-similarity between practitioners for figures such as Justin. By being able to see Jesus's distinction from Simon, and telling others about it, Justin positions himself as indispensable. If the "mighty works" performed by Jesus and Simon the Samaritan look the same to a casual observer, but the casual observer lacks the skills to distinguish between the two (placing their immortal soul in danger), they need an expert who will identify the true miracle-workers from among the charlatans.

This argument cannot, however, apply to anyone other than Jesus himself. Jesus is the only one who can be the prophesied messiah, therefore he is the only one who can use this status to perform mighty works through access to God's power. What then of the Christians who came after, who performed healings or exorcisms through the power of God, but were not, of course, themselves messiahs? The answer, for Justin, is that all these following acts were performed *in Christ's name*. While their access to power was through a remove, they performed their acts through accessing the same divine as Jesus, only routing it through him first, rather than directly from God.

The Magi

The biography of Jesus commonly known as the *Gospel According to Matthew*, hereafter *Matthew*, is a reinterpretation of earlier biographical narratives of Jesus of Nazareth, creatively written and interpreted by a late first- or early-second-century author. The text displays multiple

reworkings of source documents by the author, in the introduction of the fulfillment formulas, the five-fold narrative construction, and the composition of a birth narrative for the hero. My primary concern here is with the birth narrative. Specifically, with the characters the author creates for the narrative, and what the author is trying to communicate about Jesus through those characters. The author, who in the interest of simplicity I name Matthew, had available to him perfectly serviceable accounts of Jesus's life, including most of the key events and sayings reproduced in *Matthew*. It is through an examination of alterations and additions made with authorial agency that we can sketch an understanding of the author's motivation for composition. By reading the differences between *Matthew* the text and the sources used in composition, we can build a window through which to glimpse Matthew the author, however opaque the glass may prove to be. With a focus on the magi and their place in the nativity narrative, we can explore the author's understanding of magic, miracle, and the religious experts that performed both.

Matthew's magi are religious experts "from the east" who display their expertise in two distinct ways in the text: first, their reception and independent interpretation of divinely given wisdom, and second, in the gifts that they bring to the infant Jesus. Additionally, the magi themselves are symbols of divinely granted wisdom. They are from the east, the "origin of magic, astrology, and religious wisdom," and so by their very presence Matthew introduces the importance of these skills and arts for religious experts.¹³ The magi also display their ability to receive and interpret divine wisdom by their correct interpretation of the sign of the star itself. The association between eastern wisdom and astrology in the ancient imagination is well-

¹³ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, trans. James E. Crouch, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 112.

established,¹⁴ and by effectively following the sign of the star to Jesus, Matthew's magi perform that function without assistance in interpretation.¹⁵

The magi also receive divine communication through a dream. Throughout *Matthew* dreams serve an important communicative function, providing a knowledge link between the divine and mundane, between God and God's people. In Matthew's nativity there are five revelatory dreams, four given to Joseph, and one to the magi. The dream given to the magi in 2:12, which instructs them to return home by a different road, bypassing Jerusalem and Herod, shows that they are able to receive direct communication from God, which they are also able to correctly interpret. This revelation is contrasted with Joseph's dreams, which bracket 2:12. Joseph receives two divine revelations, at 1:20-23 and 2:19-22. However, Matthew notes that in Joseph's dreams wisdom is mediated through an angel, whereas in the dream given to the magi no mediator or interpreter is indicated. Matthew assumes, rather than explicitly states, the importance of dream interpretation as a function of religious experts. This is unsurprising, as he has previously assumed that his readers and hearers will have the cultural knowledge to recognize the multiple functions of the magi, as astrologers, magicians, and ritual-practitioners. I here argue that we are meant to understand that the magi are able to interpret their own dreams as

¹⁴ EXPLANATION NEEDED

¹⁵ There is room to argue that the astrological skill of the magi was somewhat limited, as they arrive first in Jerusalem rather than Bethlehem, and have to seek the counsel of the "chief priests and scribes" to follow the sign to its eventual location. (Matt 2:2) There are two narrative possibilities here. The first is that Matthew intended the reader to understand that all other religious experts are inferior to the Jews, and therefore the magi requesting help from Herod was always intending to lead to consultation with the "chief priests and scribes" to show their superior abilities. The second possibility is that this episode is set up to lead to the massacre of the innocents so that the prophecy Matthew quotes at 2:17. The massacre needed to happen, so Herod needed to find out about Jesus's birth and status somehow, and so, enter the magi. Both possibilities can be argued as probable. Matthew's reliance on prophecy as well as textuality strongly allows for the second option, while his understanding of the Israelite scriptures and teachings by the scribes as superior to all others and correct *up until the point of the beginning of Jesus's career* allows for the first.

divine communication in their function as religious experts, and that Joseph, as a non-expert, requires an angelic mediator.¹⁶

The gifts the magi bring to Jesus are the clearest expression of the value placed on so-called magical experts in *Matthew*. Each gift serves two symbolic functions. First, they are all three extremely expensive luxury goods. Frankincense and myrrh are both tree-resins, used in ritual practices throughout the ancient near east.¹⁷ Gold is itself associated with luxury and kingly wealth throughout the ancient near east and the Hellenistic world. All three items also have magical and wisdom associations. Gold was used for inscribed amulets from the classical period¹⁸ and for spells to transmit dreams,¹⁹ myrrh ink was used for writing oracular requests,²⁰ and frankincense smoke is called for in a number of spells for bringing on or transmitting dreams.²¹ That these items were used for divination and other magical purposes does not directly imply that Matthew is imagining these uses, of course. However, it is unlikely that the author would have been unaware of the magical properties and functions of the gifts, as they place in the hands of *magoi*. Magical practitioners were themselves skilled ritual specialists, and likely

¹⁶ It is, of course, also possible that the lack of mediator or interpreter is merely a narrative oversight, that Matthew the author just neglected to include a required mediator in the dream given to the magi, as I believe he does in the final dream given to Joseph at 2:22. In the crucifixion narrative Pilate's wife is also sent a dream about Jesus, the meaning of which is not obviously interpreted for her. In 27:19 Pilate's wife sends a message to him, telling Pilate to have nothing to do with Jesus "for today I have greatly suffered because of a dream concerning him." Matthew does not lay out the meaning of the dream, but implies that it is the reason Pilate ritually cleanses his hands of Jesus's blood. It is possible that Pilate is the interpreter of this dream; as a Roman civic official he may have served as a civic priest prior to, or during, his governorship, and he may be for Matthew here a wisdom-interpreter. However, whether Pilate's wife's dream is interpreted by Pilate, herself, or another character in Matthew's imagining, I am confident that Matthew would give their magi characters the ability to interpret dreams without mediation, as they are here personifications of wisdom and divinely-accessed power.

¹⁷ Luz, *Matthew 1-7*, 114–15.

¹⁸ Roy Kotansky, "Incantations and Prayers for Salvation on Inscribed Greek Amulets," in *Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion*, ed. Christopher A. Farone and Dirk Obbink, 107-137 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 110.

¹⁹ Samson Eitrem, "Dreams and Divination in Magical Ritual," in *Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion*, ed. Christopher A. Farone and Dirk Obbink (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 180.

²⁰ Myrrh ink is referenced throughout the Greek Magical Papyrus as a preferred ink for writing magic incantations. Eitrem, 180.

²¹ Eitrem, 177–79.

priests as well. Divination, dream interpretation and transmission, and healing spells are all practices that Matthew is comfortable with Jesus and his disciples participating in. I am convinced that consumers of Matthew's texts were meant to understand the gifts as both signs of kingly place and power, and as the tools of Jesus's future trade as a ritual specialist and religious expert.

The textual reception of the magi presents a somewhat different interpretation that what I argue is present in *Matthew*. Ignatius of Antioch, in his letter to the Ephesians, presents the visit of the magi, in extremely poetic language, as a subsummation of their power by Jesus. "And all the rest of stars, with the sun and moon, formed a chorus to this star, and its light was exceedingly great above them all." (*Ephesians* 19) The author is asking the reader, none too delicately, to understand Jesus as "this star", and the magi as "the rest", whose light is dimmed by the brightness of Jesus. Jesus, by his incarnation, destroys all magic in the world and brings about the new kingdom.²² This function of the magi – that they are present in the narrative solely that they might prostrate themselves at the feet of the infant Jesus to show his superiority and miraculous, rather than magical, nature – continues throughout much of the reception history and is particularly present in the second century.²³ Multiple second-century passages relating to the

²² This reading of Ignatius is dependent on prior knowledge of the *Gospel of Matthew*. In *Eph.* 4 Ignatius entreats the recipients of the letter to "become a choir ... that you may with one voice sing to the Father through Jesus Christ." It is possible that the turn of phrase in *Eph.* 19 is merely a poetic parallel frame to this earlier phrase. There are other notes in *Ephesians* reminiscent of *Matthew*, such as in 14 where the Ephesians are told that "the tree is made manifest by its fruit", in reference to false teachers, which of course we, who are well-schooled in the New Testament, immediately recognise as *Matthew* 7:16 and *Luke* 6:43. There is, however, no *direct* evidence that Ignatius knew *Matthew* and therefore our understanding of 19 as a reference to the magi must be understood as a supposition, and not as a direct reference.

The traditional dating of *Matthew* to 85CE does allow for Ignatius' s familiarity with this version of the nativity, and of course there is always the assumption that the story of the magi predates *Matthew* itself, and was merely incorporated into the gospel. This is the view presented by the community production model of Gospel composition.

²³ For an extensive treatment of the reception of the magi see Eric Vanden Eykel, *The Magi: Who They Were, How They've Been Remembered, and Why They Still Fascinate* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2022).

magi assume that “readers and hearers will know what *magoi* or *Chaldaioi* and *astrologi* are and that these are reprehensible titles.”²⁴

In his extensive justification of understanding Jesus as the prophesied Israelite messiah in the *Dialogue with Trypho*, Justin argues that in Moses’s competition of extraordinary works against Pharaoh’s ministers Moses’s deeds were miracles “performed by God through his faithful servant” while the “magicians” performed their deeds by accessing demons and devils. (*Dialogue* 79.30)²⁵ Here we see an analogous representation of the Egyptian ministers and the magi, continuing the parallel representations of Jesus as the new Moses as first constructed in *Matthew*. Justin’s exegesis of Exodus 7 shows that the eventual besting of the Egyptian ministers by the plagues brought by God displays the superior power of God through Moses, and the magical arts of the ministers are shown to be less than the miraculous works of Aaron and Moses. This is analogous to the symbolic besting of the magi by Jesus, displayed in their prostration at his feet.

The competition with the Egyptian magicians and the prostration of the magi both display the superiority of the Biblical heroes, Moses in the first instance and Jesus in the second. It is clear that the authors of the Exodus narrative and the author of *Matthew* intended their readers and hearers to understand that Moses and Jesus, and thereby the Israelite God, are possessors or accessors of true divine power. Pompeius Trogus writes that Moses was a dream-interpreter, and more generally, knowledge of dream-interpretations was attributed to the Hebrews by Porphyry.²⁶ Where these two narratives diverge though is in the power being accessed by the secondary characters. The Egyptian magicians are, in Justin’s understanding and in the Exodus

²⁴ Remus, “‘Magic or Miracle’? Some Second Century Instances,” 131.

²⁵ Justin Martyr, *Iustini Martyris Dialogus Cum Tryphone*, trans. Miroslav Marcovich (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1997).

²⁶ Wendt, *At the Temple Gates: The Religion of Freelance Experts in the Roman Empire*, 91.

narrative, performing their feats through false magic and demonic power. It is less clear what is happening in the Matthean nativity narrative. The two displays of divine communication and wisdom from the magi bracket their visit to Jesus: before their visit they correctly interpret the sign of the star, and after their visit they are granted a communicative dream. From this we can surmise that even after they have given their gifts to Jesus they continue in their functions as religious experts. They have extended their functions to Jesus, and in their prostration acknowledged his superior position, but their own power is not diminished by this. Additionally, their correct interpretations of divine signs and wonders – the star and the dream – are performed in the service of the Israelite God, so it can follow that they perform these acts by accessing the same divine power as Moses and Jesus.

Some Conclusions

The presentation of some religious experts and practitioners as magicians and others as miracle-workers is a discursive tool used to authorize and deauthorize through narrative production. Discursive authorization is required because in the textual descriptions of the acts of magicians and miracle-workers appear to be the same, and the descriptions imply that to distinguish between the two requires specialized knowledge. The arguments of authorization rely on conceptions of rationality and validity in accessing the power of the “true” god, versus deauthorization through conceptions of irrationality and falsity in accessing the power of demons. The goal of identifying what actions and functions were imagined magical, and what were imagined miracle, is possible only as a reflection of narrative constructions of authorization and deauthorization. The propensity to authorize religious experts by naming their actions miraculous in the ancient sources such as the writings of Justin Martyr is reproduced in the veneration of texts we name philosophical. Overwhelmingly the textual productions of

authorization fall within these categorizations. The *Gospel of Matthew*, however, displays a preference for practitioners of arts usually described as magicians that is not present in the other literature. Matthew shows a veneration of magical practices such as astrological divination and the practices represented by the gifts of the magi unique among the texts of the New Testament, and this veneration urges a tempering of our own, modern, conceptualization of the place of practices deemed magical in the second century.