When the Miracle Worker Breaks Bad: Invoking Jesus in Anathema and Maledictions

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Abstract: Back in 1995, I was a student in Harold Remus's course on Magic and Miracle. From discussions in that course I became interested in the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, which depicts the young Jesus using his powers both to bless and to curse his neighbours in Nazareth. Despite scholars' frequent smearing of the text as "crude" and "ridiculous," it was clear to me, thanks to Harold's guidance, that whoever wrote the text believed that these stories were appropriate for telling what happened in Jesus' early years. The childhood tales are not the only examples from Christian literature of a Jesus who curses. The broadening of the definition of curse to include oaths and woes demonstrates that even the biblical Jesus performed more curses than many modern readers would expect—and be comfortable with. Jesus also curses, or is expected to curse, in two other sources: "magical" formulae and book curses. There are a number of examples from the magical papyri of both God and Jesus being invoked, either explicitly or implicitly (e.g., in the crosses that frame the invocation), to maim or to kill the curse's intended target. Scribes similarly call upon God (see e.g., Rev 22:18–19) or Jesus in order to safeguard books against harm or theft. While most Christian book curses threaten anathema (excommunication, though this can lead to harm), some explicitly invoke the "curse of Jesus" against would-be malefactors. Both the magical curses and the book curses demonstrate that Christians felt no hesitation about calling upon the name of Jesus to cause harm upon another person. Modern Christians associate Jesus more with turning the other cheek and being kind to children, but earlier Christians had a more multi-faceted view of Jesus, one more suited for helping them in the dangerous and capricious world in which they lived.

Keen readers of the New Testament Gospels will be aware of Jesus' curse of the fig tree (Mark 15:38 par.).[1] It is often cited as the one occasion where Jesus uses his powers for ill and has been a source of consternation for theologians who desperately seek a way to reconcile this episode with the Jesus who sits children on his knee, comforts widows, and brings sight to the blind. But a curse story need not explicitly feature the word "curse." If we broaden of the definition of cursing to include oaths and woes, then a withered fig tree is not Jesus' only victim—consider the woes on Jerusalem (Matt 23:59), and on Chorazin and Bethsaida (Luke 10:13–15//Matt 11:20–24), and Jesus' remark that on his return, the "accursed" will be cast into eternal fire at the Last Judgment (Matt 25:41).[2] Add to the Gospel stories other examples of cursing in the New Testament—including the deaths of Judas and Annanias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1–11), and Paul's blinding of Elymas (Acts 13:6–11)—and in early apocrypha and hagiographa—such as the young Jesus in the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* and the apostles in the apocryphal acts. Christian literature is replete with images of holy men who are just as likely to curse as to bless.

It should really come as no surprise then to see Jesus continue his cursing spree into late antiquity and the Middle Ages. But in these time periods Jesus curses not in stories of his earthly

[1] This paper builds on my previous work on cursing that includes the following presentations: "Curse Stories in Early Christian Literature" (CSBS 2005), "Studying Curses and Curse Stories: Some Musings on Methodology" (CSBS 2006), "Cursing and Curse Stories in the New Testament Apocrypha" (AELAC 2006); "Cursing and the Apostle: The Fight for Authority in Early Christianity" (Westar Institute 2017; published in 2019), and "Cursing Jesus: The Denial of Peter in the Context of Ancient Curse Practices" (CSBS 2018).

[2] On the range of curse phenomena in biblical texts, see Burke, "Cursing and the Apostle," pages.

years but in invocations calling on the heavenly Jesus to harm would-be thieves and mortal enemies. One group of curses appear in books and libraries to guard texts from destruction and transformation. The other can be found in texts of ritual power—known more colloquially as magical papyri and curse tablets—created to bring solace to those who lack the power to right perceived wrongs. Both forms of curses have been largely ignored or diminished in discussions of Christian religiosity because their implied violence ill-fits the perception of Christianity as ridding the world of "pagan superstition." But recent scholarship has argued that cursing is very much an aspect of Christian belief and practice from its origins to present day.[3] Alongside perceptions of Jesus as a comforting companion in times of trouble he was also considered a smiter and a fighter who would intercede on behalf of believers in need of supernatural assistance.

1. Magical Papyri and Curse Tablets

The practice of cursing is likely as old as belief in gods but the evidence goes only as far back as our earliest extant writings. These include tomb and treaty inscriptions, legal and medical texts, and exploits of special humans and the gods they serve. Most of these examples involve calling upon a god to bring harm to or in some way "bind" their enemies, chiefly through illness and disease, which are attributed to demonic forces. Curse narratives, which can sometimes appear in incantations as *historiola*,[4] depict gods and holy men using their divine powers to inflict harm, demonstrating that these figures can curse effectively. Some humans have more power than others to utter effective curses, but most people needed help, so they would seek out a practitioner who knew all of the right words, right implements, and right rituals to be successful. Thanks to a number of discoveries over the past century, there is a trove of evidence for curse texts (hereafter referred to as "incantations")[5] and curse tablets (also called *defixiones*) available to study. The number of *defixiones* alone is said to exceed 1700, most dated between 100 BCE and 500 CE, with the majority found in Egypt (in Coptic and Greek) and Britain (Latin).[6] Curses come inscribed on thin sheets of lead and lead alloys, as well as ostraca, limestone, gemstones, papyrus, animal bones, wax, and ceramic bowls. The reasons for the curse include vengeance (against thieves, former lovers), advantage in sports (to injure a competitor) and business (to damage a rival), and to ensure success in legal battles (to tongue-tie a witness). Along with invocations to the deity or spirit responsible for the curse, the tablets could feature also a range of mysterious words and symbols

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[3] See particularly Frankfurter, "Ancient Magic in a New Key"; Nasrallah, *Ancient Christians*; and McKie, *Living and Cursing*.

[4] On *historiola* see Frankfurter, "Narrating Power"; specifically Christian *historiola* are discussed in Bélanger Sarrazin, "Les appels au 'Jésus guérisseur.'"

[5] Following the usage of de Bruyn, explained in *Making Amulets Christians*, 2, 15–16.

[6] The estimate is from Nasrallah, *Ancient Christians*, 32. See ibid, 30–38 for introductory remarks about the materials, as well as Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 3-41; McKie, *Living and Cursing*, 12–58; de Bruyn, *Making Amulets*, 43–67; and Sánchez Natalias, *Sylloge of Defixiones*, 5–67. The standard corpora of evidence includes (in historical sequence): Audollent, *Defixionum Tabellae* (=DT); Preisendanz, *Papyri Graecae Magicae* (=PGM; revised and expanded by Albert Henrichs); Kropp, *Ausgewählte Koptische Zaubertexte* (=AKZ); Jordan, "Survey"; Daniel and Maltomini, *Supplementum Magicum* (=SM); Betz, *Greek Magical Papyri in Translation*; Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets* (=GMA); Urbanová, *Latin Curse Tablets* (=LCT); Sánchez Natalias, *Sylloge of Defixiones* (=SD); and the online Kyprianos database of Coptic Magical Papyri project (=KYP; https://www.coptic-magic.phil.uni-wuerzburg.de/). The present study, which focuses on Christian materials, draws chiefly on several specialized collections: Gager, *Curse Tablets* (=Gager); Meyer and Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic* (=ACM); and de Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*.

(*voces mysticae*, *ephesia grammata*, and *charaktêres*), excerpts of narratives and hymns, and drawings of human figures, animals, and other creatures.

Early scholarship on curse tablets and other "magical" artifacts was somewhat negative and dismissive, essentially siding with early and medieval Christian leaders who contrasted its illicit sorcery with their authoritative religion (e.g., John Chrysostom, *Adv. Jud.* 8.6.5; 8.8.4).[7] More recent writers have adopted a more emic approach, endeavoring to understand the perspectives of those who created and used the materials. One result of this focus has demonstrated that the boundary between Christian "magic" and "religion" is somewhat porous; indeed, not only do the incantations sometimes incorporate excerpts from scripture and liturgy, but it appears that the priests and monks who preached from these texts sometimes doubled as "magical" specialists.[8] And some critics of "magic" objected only to the non-Christian gods invoked in incantations; they were fine with replacing them with Christian figures, images, and charms.

That Christians created and used magical formulae is clear from several factors.[9] The most obvious is the name of deities that are invoked, which could include God and certain angels (though these could be Jewish, not Christian), but particularly Jesus, the apostles, Mary, and Judas. Decorative symbols, such as crosses, certainly indicate Christian usage. Language too could be a determining factor, since Coptic incantations are said to be entirely Christian creations. But other factors need to be considered also: a Christian could use an incantation that has no observably Christian features, and so too an incantation that incorporates Jewish and Christian deities alongside others could be ostensibly polytheistic. And while our attention here is focused on the presence of Jesus in the incantations, his interchangeability with God raises questions about who the creator/user sees as the power behind the curse.

The curse incantations can be divided into two groups: those that call for harm against others and those that call for protection from others. Both testify to belief in the power of the incantations. Protection incantations invoke Jesus and other Christian figures to intercede on their behalf against demons and disease, which are often linked in the texts. A third/fourth-century silver band from Lebanon, for example, calls upon angels and divine names along with "One God and his Christ" to protect the wearer against "every daimon and from every power of daimones and from daimonia and from spells and curse tablets" as well as from "dizziness and insanity" (Gager 125). Another from the fifth century is a protection from fever but reads (in part), "Flee, hateful spirit! Christ pursues you" (PGM P5b; ACM 17).[10] One "Hebraic" charm from the third century credited to the legendary Egyptian magician Pibechis incorporates Jesus as a deity useful for dispelling demons; the conjuration begins, "I adjure you by the God of the Hebrews, Jesus" (PGM IV.3007–86). And a sixth-century lead tablet from Dalmatia adorned with crosses begins "In the name of the Lord, Jesus Christ, I denounce you, most foul spirit of Tartarus" and commands the spirit to remain beyond the Jordan River where Jesus once restrained him (Gager 119).[11] There is

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[7] See the discussion of Christian discourse against "magical" techniques in de Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 18–42.

[8] De Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 7–8, 243. De Bruyn notes also the handbook that was found buried with a monk (ibid, 84–85). See also Frankfurter, "Sortes, Scribality, and Syncretism."

[9] See further de Bruyn and Dijkstra, "Greek Amulets."

[10] See the discussion in de Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 107–109.

[11] A similar action is described in SM I 32, though here it is the Euphrates River that Jesus makes still. See de Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 114–15. Additional protection incantations that invoke Jesus: ACM 20 (PGM P 10), ACM 22 (PGM P 13a), ACM 23 and 24 (PGM P 15a.b.), 26 (PGM 1.210-11). Of particular interest are amulets containing the *Epistles of Christ and Abgar* (on which, see ibid, 153–57; and Bélanger Sarrazin, "Les appels au 'Jésus guérisseur,'" 191–93). Bélanger-Sarrazin ("From Amulet to Prayer") examines 22 of these in Coptic. The apotropaic

nothing particularly striking about the idea that Jesus would protect believers, but the incantations suggest that this is not a passive act, that Jesus doesn't simply protect with his presence, rather he battles with demons on behalf of the user.

If you are willing to see Jesus as a defender from evil powers then you are likely to consider him to be an instrument of curses—this player works offense as well as defense. There is no shortage of Christian curse incantations, some invoke God, some angels and other powers, and some Jesus. One fourth-century lead tablet from Beth Shean in Galilee includes *voces mysticae* and a number of Semitic and Egyptian names of deities, but also has a line of tau-rho and box symbols. It reads, "Lord angels, bind, bind fast the tendons and the limbs and the thought and the mind and the intention of Sarmation, to whom Oursa gave birth" and then names two other targets; then it continues with several additional punishments: "choking them, tying up their thoughts, their mind, their hearts, their intention, lest they inquire further after an account of calculation or anything else" (Gager 77). A plea for revenge calls on the "Lord" for assistance: "O lord, master of the earth, avenge me on the one who opposes me and on the one who has driven me from my place, and pay him back at once, lord, so that he may fall into hands harsher than his own" (ACM 51; PGM P15c). Another invokes the Lord, God, and several angels, and then calls on them to "trample Victor Hatre, Papnoute. Bring him down. He is acting like a demon. God, may you bring down David his son. Render him friendless, in prison, like a bronze chain, as I produce the trusty words." The user then curses everyone who curses him and says to "number them with Judas on the day of judgment"; the user also likens their enemies to the Jews who called for Jesus' death and to Cain (ACM 88). In one curse, a monk by the name of Apa Victor, invokes Saot Sabaot against a woman named Alo; among the punishments he desires for her are "bring loss and grief," "may the darkness take her," "may hunger and misery rule over [her body]," "may furnace flames(s) come from [her] mouth," and "may (the) curse (of) god descend upon [her] and her entire family house(hold)" and "make them bedridden" (ACM 104). Finally, a widow's curse against a certain Shenoute is framed by Christian symbols (crosses, the word "Emmanuel," alpha and omegas) and invokes God to "bring upon him fever and chill and jaundice" (ACM 89).

As for incantations that specifically name Jesus, they are best presented in a list:[12]

> An incantation to leave a man impotent and protect a woman from sexual advances reads, "binding which Jesus Christ was . . . upon the wood of the cross" and later states, "may that binding be upon the male organ of Pharaouo and his flesh; may it dry it up like wood and make it like a rag upon the manure pile," etc. (ACM 85; similarly ACM 86 and 87).
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> Jacob's curse against Maria, Tatore, and Andreas features numerous invocations, but most striking is: "[The body] and the blood of Jesus Christ, strike Maria daughter of Tsibel, and Tatore daughter of Tashai, and Andreas son of Marthe, at once!" Not only are the adults cursed but also their entire households and children (ACM 91).
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> Jesus and angels are invoked against Martha by Mary: "Michael, Gabriel, Souleel! You must bring her away by the method of an ulcerous tumor. Arise in your anger, bring her down to a painful end, to put aside marriage, and send forth (?) punishment, she pouring

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conclusion—"the place to which this manuscript will be affixed, no power of the adversary will be able to approach that place"—makes it more than an incantation to protect the wearer's health.

[12] Many of these examples are drawn from ACM which presents 24 texts (ACM 88–122) in a chapter on Coptic Christian curses. See also de Bruyn, *Making Amulets Christian*, 124–35.

forth worms, (that is) Martha. My lord Jesus Christ, you must bring her down to an end. Yea, Jesus Christ, you must dissipate her hope so that no one desires to assist her" (ACM 100). The same scribe writes a similar curse for Jacob against Hetiere (ACM 101).

The lengthy "Praise of Michael the Archangel" from the Heidelberg handbook is primarily a protection incantation invoking Michael and other angels but also calls upon the Trinity to battle evil powers: "The curse that comes out of the mouth of the father and the son and the holy spirit must come upon you and destroy you" (ACM 135).

A short Greek curse from the fifth/sixth century reads: "ΧΜΓ Above all, bad times for punishable Theodorus; for he is bad (SM II 62). Another of similar provenance calls upon the Lord God to "strike down Philadelphê; and her children, Lord Lord Lord God God, strike them down with her. Jesus Christ, pity me and hear me, Lord" (SM II 61; ACM 29).

A prayer by Sabinus calling upon God to judge and punish his daughter Severine and (her husband?) Didymus includes, "Son of the great God, whom man never beheld, you who Son of the great God, whom man never beheld, you who granted the blind to see the light of the sun, show as before your godlike wonders. Pay memorable compensation for the sufferings which I suffered, which I endured on account of my only daughter, striking down my enemies with your firm hands" (SM II 59; see also the related SM II 60).

Also of interest are a collection of six *defixiones* that feature the image of a figure with a rooster's head, crest and tail; on its chest is written, in abbreviated form, "Jesus Christ of Nazareth, Jesus Christ of Nazareth, and God, God, God."[13] All six *defixiones* were found in the fountain of Perenna in Rome, where they were deposited, likely by the practitioner who fashioned them, in the fourth or fifth century. We know they are curse tablets because two of them include the names of their victims: Leontius on one (SD 25), and four names on another along with their prescribed punishment: a fever (SD 26). Figures of Jesus appear in other incantations, sometimes accompanied by curses. For example, the Arabic/Coptic Schott-Reinhardt papyrus (P. Baden V 123) from the eighth century features an orant labelled, in Greek, "Jesus Christ in Bes" (Bes is an Egyptian deity) next to a love spell; another image of Jesus appears on the reverse along with additional love spells and a curse.[14] What is interesting here is that Jesus need not be invoked in the incantation; he can appear pictorially as a kind of guarantor of its effectiveness.

[13] See also Sánchez Natalias, *Sylloge of Defixiones*, 23 and 67 for discussion; further discussion (and images) in Németh, "Jesus in Pagan Magic."

[14] The cover illustration of ACM is based on a sketch of the figure from AKZ, vol. 3.3, abb. 6. The text of the papyrus appears in Bilabel and Grohmann, *Griechische, koptische und arabische Texte*,. 333, 337, l. 103, 338, 389, and pl. 9. The manuscript is viewable via the links to KYP M315. For other depictions of Jesus in non-cursing incantations, see ACM 128, 130–32, and the unpublished KYP M42.

Left to right: two of the Jesus images from the Perenna *defixiones*; "Jesus Christ in Bes" from P. Baden V 123.

2. Book Curses

Book curses, also called anathemas or maledictions, may very well be as old as books.[15] The earliest examples are found in the library of clay tablets belonging to Babylonian king Assurbanipal (668–626 BCE).[16] Here the scribe calls upon the deities Ashur and Belit to destroy the name and posterity of anyone who takes the tablet or writes their name on it. The oldest known Greek book curse is found in a third-century copy of Menander's *Sikyonios*.[17] Curses were used in texts for the same reason as in treaties and tomb inscriptions: to safeguard something that is beyond the power of the composer to protect. They can be found in three places: within a text (by its author; e.g., Rev 22:18–19; *Letter of Aristeas* 311), within a manuscript (by its scribe or the book's donor), and within a library (by its owner or curator). Our focus here is curses by scribes. Unfortunately, book curses are not as well documented as curse tablets. Previous studies present examples and discussions of their origins and development, but there are no comprehensive, well-documented collections.[18] So, the overview presented here is unavoidably limited.

Why was it so important to protect books? For one, before mass printing, handwritten and decorated books were of great value. They were very expensive to produce (more so for the materials than the labour) and considered very precious.[19] Few copies of a given text may be in existence, so if a manuscript is destroyed—by accident or intentionally, to re-use the materials by palimpsesting, to sell the expensive bindings, or to create perfume—it could be lost forever. A second reason is catharsis for scribes.[20] Conditions in scriptura were poor: scribes complain about unheated rooms, chairs without back support, and poor light; some grumble about the drudgery of the work (though, to be fair, some found joy in it too and sought eternal rewards for their pious efforts), a lack of interest in what they were copying, and anxiety about making errors (expressed

[15] "Books" here and throughout includes various media, including clay tablets and rolls. Curses can also be attached to other written works, such as wills, charters, and grants. For introductions to the history and development of book curses, see Baker, *Book Curses*, 1–11; Thompson, "Cursory Survey" (=*Bibliologia Comica*, 91–118); and Watson, *Curse Poetry*, 1–53.

[16] Reproduced in Drogin, *Anathema*, 52–53; and Baker, *Book Curses*, 22–23.

[17] Drogin, *Anathema*, 54.

[18] The examples are drawn primarily from Marc Drogin's oft-cited and entertaining study *Anathema!*; and Eleanor Baker's similar *Book Curses*. Crüwell, "Die Verfluchung der Bücherdiebe," is more erudite but also limited. For some regional collections, see Klapper, "Altschlesische Schreibverse," 27–28; and Wichner, *Kloster Admont*, 213.

[19] Drogin, *Anathema*, 29–35.

[20] Drogin, *Anathema*, 1–16.

some times in a prayer to Christ for help at the start of their work). One twelfth-century scribe writes,

> A man who knows not how to write may think this is no great feat. But only try to do it yourself and you will learn how arduous is the writer's task. It dims your eyes, makes your back ache, and knits your chest and belly together—it is a terrible ordeal for the whole body. So, gentle reader, turn these pages carefully and keep your finger far from the text. For just as hail plays havoc with the fruits of spring, so a careless reader is a bane to books and writing.[21]

Some scribes simply summed up their efforts in a proverb: "Three fingers hold the pen, but the whole body toils."[22] Of greatest concern was the possibility of theft, which could occur in the process of lending a book to another monastery for copying or from visiting monks on pilgrimage taking home more than purchased souvenir badges and relics.[23] The pillaging and destruction of monasteries by invaders or rival denominations was also a pressing concern. Not every monastery employed book curses—there was no ecclesiastical rule requiring them;[24] nevertheless, some included one in every book copied in their scriptoria, ultimately leading to stereotyped invocations that devalued their impact.[25] In the Middle Ages, book curses are inscribed only in religious works; copies of secular writings were protected only by a curse that extended to an entire library.[26]

Once the book was out of the scribes' hands, the only thing they could do to dissuade anyone from stealing, altering, or destroying their work was to include a curse.[27] These appear with much variety, from the simple to the elaborate, often in rhyme, sometimes with very specific outcomes: the would-be thief's body parts could be detached, their eyes removed, or worse still they could be struck dead or sent to hell. A curse needs an agent. In the Christian system God would be the smiter, or Jesus . . . or both at once, given their trinitarian relationship. If no deity is named, then one (God/Jesus) is implied. Drogin gives a few examples of curses invoking God (or the Lord/Judge/Eternal King):[28]

> This book is one,
> And God's curse another;

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[21] From Prior Petrus of the Spanish Monastery of Santo Domingo de Silos around 1091–1109 (London, British Museum, Add. 11695). Reproduced in Drogin, *Anathema*, 19.

[22] Drogin (*Anathema*, 24) says that the proverb shows up in manuscripts "with monotonous regularity."

[23] In more recent centuries, it was pilfering scholars who became the monasteries' concern. Constantine von Tischendorf's theft of Codex Sinaiticus is a well-known example. On colonial views about manuscript preservation, see Crüwell ("Die Verfluchung der Bücherdiebe," 213–14), who boasts that that Renaissance scholars were justified in stealing books from libraries because the church no longer properly cared for them.

[24] But there were rules *against* them. In 1212, the Council of Paris banned the use of anathemas intended to stop the theft of books, but the practice continued (Baker, *Book Curses*, 37; Thompson, *Bibliologia Comica*, 95).

[25] Crüwell, "Die Verfluchung der Bücherdiebe," 214–15.

[26] Crüwell, "Die Verfluchung der Bücherdiebe," 212.

[27] Well, not the *only* thing. Some books include entreaties appealing to the reader's sympathy for the scribe's efforts, some monasteries reduced theft by banning lending, and some libraries simply chained the books to the shelves. Thieves could be deterred also by legal punishments; stealing books was a serious offense since it was considered a religious crime (Crüwell, "Die Verfluchung der Bücherdiebe," 200–202).

[28] Drogin, *Anathema*, 72–74. Unfortunately, Drogin's sources for most of these examples are either no longer known to him or are inaccessible. Baker, however, who also includes this curse, identifies the manuscript of each of her examples (see *Book Curses*, 68).

They that take the one
God give them the other.

Whosoever removes this Volume from this same mentioned Convent, may the anger of the Lord overtake him in this world and in the next to all eternity. Amen.

Who takes this book from St. Nazarius
The Judge's wrath will make his life precarious.

He who this book tears or steals,
God send him the black sickness of hell.[29]

Therefore I entreat . . . God and the Angels and . . . every nation of mankind, whether near of far, that no hindrance presumes against my work. If {anyone} acts against my work with his hands, would that the Eternal King {take} this cursed person and lower {him} into the lowest level of Hell {to be} tortured with Judas, and anathema and maranatha. {Let him also receive} by the hand of God the cruellest plague {and both he and his} sons struck with leprosy so that no one inhabit his house. (note: this curse from 627 is the earliest example of an "anathema" book curse; see further below)

If anyone does so [alters this will], may God destroy him both soul and body, both here and in the future, unless I myself change it.[30]

But any Christian reader of the Old Testament would be familiar with a vengeful God who punishes the disobedient. Since Jesus is rarely portrayed that way in Scripture, it may seem surprising to see his name in book curses.

Christ's curse upon the crook
Who takes away this book.[31]

This book is one,
Christ's curse is another;
He who steals the one,
I pray well that he is sent the other.
Said John Wrightson.[32]

This book, legible in scripture,
Is here in this place attached with a chain,
So that it may endure,
And here perpetually still to remain,
From year to year; wherefore upon pain
Of Christ's curse, of fathers and of mothers,

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[29] This modern English translation is from Baker, *Book Curses*, 74.
[30] This last one is from Baker, *Book Curses*, 28.
[31] Drogin *Anathema*, 71 (from Thorndike, "More Copyists' Final Jingles," 325).
[32] Baker, *Book Curses*, 56. A similar curse is reproduced ibid, 76.

No one should hence attempt to remove it,
While any page rightly hangs with the others.[33]

This book belongs to Mistress Agnes Lyell.
Whoever steals this book shall have
Christ's curse and mine.[34]

A manuscript of the Apocrypha (Esdras, Tobias, Judith, Esther, and the Book of Maccabees) from Christ Church in Canterbury invokes the "malediction of Jesus Christ" along with his mother and the Blessed Martyr Thomas.[35] Mary, who is just as unlikely a smiter as Jesus, is mentioned in a Syriac manuscript from St. Petersburg. The curse threatens would-be thieves with "may the Virgin be a foe to him" and goes on to say "may his fate be one with the fate of Judas Iscariot."[36] Another in a fifteenth-century copy of the *Brut Chronical* reads:

He who steals this book,
May Our Lady give him ill health.
Either with rope, sword or knife;
He shall have a short life.
Therefore, for the love of Our Lady,
I pray you let this book lie.
Said William Bentley.[37]

And a third, contemporary manuscript, threatens "the anathema of God, the Blessed Mary, and all the saints."[38]

This "curse of Judas" is mentioned in a number of book curses,[39] sometimes paired with other villains of the past, including Nero (as the executioner of Peter and Paul), Annas, Caiphas, and Pilate, Ananias and Sapphira, Cain, the rebels Dathan and Abiram (from Num 16), and several heretics (Simon Magus, Arius, and Sabellius).[40] One noteworthy example appears in a colophon at the end of the *Martyrdom of Thomas* from the Dayr al-Suryān manuscript used by Agnes Smith Lewis to publish the Egyptian collection of apocryphal acts of the apostles; it reads, in part, "And after he shall have taken it out his lot shall be with Judas, the betrayer of his Lord."[41] The Judas

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[33] Baker, *Book Curses*, 64–65.
[34] Baker, *Book Curses*, 75.
[35] Drogin, *Anathema*, 79–80.
[36] Drogin, *Anathema*, 109 (drawing from Taylor, *Judas Curse*, 250).
[37] Baker, *Book Curses*, 63.
[38] Baker, *Book Curses*, 73.
[39] Drogin, *Anathema*, 84 (a copy of St. Gregory's *Expositio Novi Testamenti* in the Harvard College Library), 90 (a volume of Valerius Maximus in the Bodleian Library; see Jackson, *Anatomy of Bibliomania*, 371), 94–95 (Abbey of St.-Denis; see Crüwell, "Verfluchung der Bücherdiebe," 207–208) 96 (a cartulary of the Monastery of St. Pere I in 1053; Martin, "Judas Iscariot Curse," 436 n. 1), 99 (a grant by Petrus Veremudi of Andradi, Spain in 1226; no source provided), 104 (Crüwell, "Verfluchung der Bücherdiebe," page undetermined), 110 (Wattenbach, *Das Schriftwesen im Mittelalter*, 287). For another Judas curse, see Baker, *Book Curses*, 77; and further discussion in Thompson, *Bibliologia Comica*, 97–98.
[40] Drogin, *Anathema*, 96, 104, 84 (respectively). For further examples of Dathan and Abiram, see Taylor, "Judas Curse," 235–36; Nero, ibid, 243 and Martin, "Judas Iscariot Curse," 435 n. 1. On heretics, ibid, 436 n. 1. On Pilate and Caiaphas, see Merrill, *Story of Manuscripts*, 30.
[41] Reproduced in Taylor, "Judas Curse," 250–51; and Thompson, *Bibliologia Comica*, 93.

curse has a wider circulation beyond book curses. It may have started out as a Christianization of the official oath of the Greeks and Romans;[42] in print, it appears in political pronouncements, pontifical decrees, records of gifts and deeds of sale (particularly to monasteries), epitaphs, wall of churches, and poetry.[43] One particularly interesting appearance of the curse is found in the Jewish anti-gospel *Toldoth Yeshua*, where it is said that the "wise men of the people" deny how Jesus and Judas battled in the sky; "they curse and rebuke Judas Iscariot, and when they have strife and dispute among themselves, they say to one another, 'May it be done to you as Judas Iscariot was to Jesus.'"[44] While the Judas curse uses Judas's fate as a type of punishment rather than appealing to his ability to curse, it does make the reader recall how God has dealt with villains of the past.

Other Christian figures that are invoked as agents of curses include the twelve apostles. One curse states, "If any man dare carry it off, either secretly or publicly, let him incur the malediction of the twelve apostles and let him also receive the heavier curse of all monks."[45] The "indignation of Almighty God and of the blessed apostles Saint Peter and Saint Paul" are twice threatened in cartularies of the Monastery of Mary in Prouilhe (from 1236 and 1248).[46] An even larger number of powers are invoked by Bernhard of Montfaucon, a fourteenth-century monk, who invokes the 318 Nicean Fathers, the Trinity, the Mother of God, John the Baptist, and all the saints.[47]

Many book curses threaten anathema on would-be thieves. Anathema essentially means excommunication but it is much more serious punishment than it would seem. It entails "complete rejection of a person from all association with the Church, from relationship with its flock, and from any possibility of salvation in the Hereafter, and declared him to be the property of Satan; could be considered a death sentence."[48] The earliest appearance of anathema in a book curse is in a volume donated to the Abbey of St.-Denis in 627, listed above.[49] As here, anathema is often paired with the word maranatha—Aramaic for "Our Lord has come" or "Lord come" (from 1 Cor 16:22)—and works to intensify the curse. Over time, the threat of anathema came to mean any curse; for example, "Whoever steals [this book] or sells it, may there be anathema on him."[50] One

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[42] Martin, "Judas Iscariot Curse," 437.

[43] Each category is examined with examples in Martin, "Judas Iscariot Curse"; expansions in Taylor, "Judas Curse" (who pays particular attention to book curses, pp. 246–51). Three additional examples of epitaphs are given in McLean, "Christian Epitaph." Of related interest is the presence of Judas in healing charms, chiefly for skin ailments where the state of the afflicted is likened to Judas who "lost his colour/warmth when he betrayed Jesus" (Taylor, "Judas Iscariot," 4–10). Judas appears also in several eighteenth-century *defixiones* against thieves (ibid, 11–12); one of these employs nails, with one symbolically driven into the head of the thief that "should hurt you as much . . . as it did the disciple Judas, when he betrayed Jesus" (my trans.) and another to the lung and liver that should be as painful as Pilate's experience in hell.

[44] Cited in Taylor, "Judas Curse," 235 n. 4 from Kraus, *Das Leben Jesus*, 100 (trans. mine from German).

[45] Drogin, *Anathema*, 71 (citing Merrill, *Story of the Manuscripts*, 31).

[46] Martin, "Judas Iscariot Curse," 450–51.

[47] Drogin, *Anathema*, 60; Crüwell, "Die Verfluchung der Bücherdiebe," 204; and Taylor, "Judas Curse," 249–50 (which includes also a second, similar example).

[48] Drogin, *Anathema*, 58. For a more expansive discussion beyond book curses, see Vodola, *Excommunication* (see esp. pp. 1–7 on excommunication as a curse).

[49] Drogin, *Anathema*, 93–95; Taylor, *Book Curse*, 239–40; and Thompson, *Bibliologia Comica*, 94.

[50] Drogin, *Anathema*, 67. Additional examples in Baker, *Book Curses*, 39–59. See also the list of manuscripts with anathema curses in Cim, *Amateurs*, 63–65. Cim mentions also a marble tablet in the reading room of the Vatican Library inscribed with a decree of Sixtus V threatening excommunication on anyone who removes even a single book without the Holy Father's permission. Similarly, in 1752 Pope Benedict XIV issued a bull threatening book thieves with excommunication in order to protect his library in Poland.

variation is the threat of being erased from the Book of Life[51] or simply being "cut off" as in a memorable curse from the Greek Patriarch Athanasius (late 13th/early 14th cent.) who wrote in Arabic at the bottom of first page of Genesis in Codex Alexandrinus, "Whoever shall remove it thence [from the cell of the Patriarch of Alexandria] shall be accursed and cut off." The curse may have backfired, however, because Athanasius later took the codex with him when he moved to Constantinople.[52]

Book curses mostly went out of fashion with the printing press, which made book production easier and less expensive.[53] But early printed books (or *incunabula*) have many manuscript qualities (for example, they lack title pages and page numbers) and one of these is the anathema, which continues to appear almost a century and a half after the arrival of printing. For example, Pope Sixtus V (1585–1590) issued a Papal Bull threatening automatic excommunication to any printer who might alter the text of the 1590 Sixtine Vulgate. To warn readers, the anathema is included in its opening page.[54] As book production moved into the Enlightenment, book curses became more this-worldly and comical.[55] Henry *Pigot's Christmas Tales for the Amusement and Instruction of Young Ladies and Gentlemen in Winter Evenings* opens with the warning, "This book is mine, and none of thine, therefore let it alone / If you take it I will break your pate and send you home."[56] Inscriptions in personal copies of books tend to threaten gaol or the hangman's noose rather than damnation.[57] Book curses also continued an existence as a feature of book plates, though by this time they are made more for amusement than protection.[58] And the curse of Jesus is nowhere to be found.

Like it or not, Jesus is consistently depicted as a cursing deity throughout much of Christian history. In the Gospels, he uses his divine abilities to wither a tree and threatens entire cities with destruction; the withering of the fig tree may even be a case of sympathetic magic—just as the tree is destroyed, so too will Jerusalem. Jesus performs additional curses in apocryphal texts, particularly in accounts of his childhood. And Christian writers had few hesitations in portraying his chosen followers the same way; the apocryphal acts are redolent with stories of the apostles cursing their opponents. So it should come as no surprise to see Jesus and other Christian figures being invoked in incantations and anathemas. The stories of Jesus demonstrate that he is a being of power that can smite his enemies and presumably the enemies of those who believe in him. He is considered effective in battling demons and disease, and he can cloud people's minds, tie their

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[51] Drogin, *Anathema*, 70.

[52] Drogin, *Anathema*, 69–70. Similarly, Charles V's gift of books to the Dominicans under the rule of Bishop Pierre de Villars of Troyes was accompanied by a special bull of Gregory XI (issued in 1371) threatening excommunication if they were dispersed. Nevertheless, the collection was sold in the sixteenth century with some of the books finding their way to the Bibliothèque nationale (see Thompson, *Bibliologia Comica*, 95–96).

[53] Extensive discussion of the post-medieval history of book curses in Thompson, *Bibliologia Comica*, 102–13.

[54] Drogin, *Anathema*, 99.

[55] As O'Hagen writes, "While in the Medieval period book curses appeared to carry a very serious threat of punishment, by the Edwardian era, in many cases, the book curse was seen as a 'quirky' practice that many book owners followed out of adherence to tradition rather than to pose any real threat to potential thieves" ("Steal not this book," 270; citing Crain, *Children in the Margins*, 116).

[56] Baker, *Book Curses*, 98.

[57] Examples in Baker, *Book Curses*, 89–91, 94. Discussion in Crüwell, "Die Verfluchung der Bücherdiebe," 218.

[58] Edwardian book plates are surveyed in O'Hagan, "Steal not this book." An amusing book plate in books from the Widener Library at Harvard University warns against theft. It tells readers that the book (2504 feature the plate) was stolen from Harvard College Library and later recovered. The thief was sentenced to two years hard labor (see Thompson, *Bibliologia Comica*, 116 n. 36).

tongues, strike them with illness, impotence, and even death. Furthermore, his punishments are expected to include also the offender's children and household. The examples presented here are representative of what is found in the sources; others are extant, but more importantly, there is much that has not survived. In a world where everyone, it seemed, used incantations, Jesus curses must have been very common indeed. Book curses, however, are restricted to a fairly small community: writers and readers. But copyists and book donors who add curses to their work lived in the same world as the creators and users of incantations, so it is likely they were influenced by them. Book curses similarly threaten God's wrath and their punishments include attacks on their opponents' bodies (such as plague and leprosy) and soul (removal from the Book of Life, excommunication, and damnation). Some books just threaten "Christ's curse," whatever that might be. One of the more interesting commonalities between the two categories of curses is the use of scriptural (and sometimes non-scriptural) precedent. The *historiola* of the incantations work the same way as the references to biblical villains like Judas and Pilate: they remind readers that God/Jesus punishes evildoers and that the curser's enemies risk suffering the same fates. Despite the wording of the title to this study, Jesus does not "break bad" in anathema and maledictions. He was always bad, or bad enough to be thought willing to harm the enemies of his believers. He didn't break bad, he was born bad.

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