

JESUS THE MAGICIAN:

A RESPONSE TO MORTON SMITH

by

Frederick W. Norris

JESUS THE MAGICIAN:

A RESPONSE TO MORTON SMITH

Nearly everyone has some curiosity or enjoys the search for some lost treasure. My father-in-law often begins his most interesting observations by saying: "I have always been curious about . . ." I used to rummage through my grandmother's attic and the out buildings at the farm just to find old things. My son recently looked at the twenty-five year old annual from my high school graduating class and exclaimed: "Hey, Dad! This looks like 'Happy Days!'"

Morton Smith, a learned professor at Columbia University, describes such a treasure hunt and the joy of the find. In 1958 at the monastery of Mar Saba twelve miles southeast of Jerusalem he found what has proved to be a very old text, one previously unknown in modern times. It was written on the back two and one half leaves of a volume devoted to the writings of Ignatius. In its present form the letters are from an 18th century hand, but it seems quite likely that the text itself was written by Clement of Alexandria near the end of the second century. Smith transcribed and translated the text and set to work investigating it. In 1973, Harvard University Press published his large study of that short, fragmentary text; a popularized version was printed by Harper and Row the same year in order to reach a broader readership.[1] In 1978 he offered another volume, entitled Jesus the Magician. The preface was finished in August, 1977, at the Evangelische Stift in Tuebingen.[2]

On the basis of this Clementine text and his own prolific research, Morton Smith has proposed that Jesus should be viewed as a deceitful illusionist, a magician in the worst sense of that term, probably one who was noted for a number of practices which most Christians would consider immoral including homosexuality.[3]

That may be quite a shock to you. Many of us have

thought the failure of the Gospel to persuade was tied to our practice of the faith, and have been impressed by how many modern opponents of Christianity have conceded the goodness of Jesus. But obviously others have not.

For Smith, the gospels are basically cover-ups by the apostles and the earliest Church, attempts to delete all the truths about Jesus and make him into the moral figure which he appears to be in the Scriptures. His attempt is not like that of Bertrand Russell, who questions Jesus' morality by employing paragraphs from the Gospels to show that Jesus was not as moral as Buddha or Socrates.[4] We can argue the meaning of specific verses against the claims of Russell. That can also be done in particular places with Smith. But basically he wants to go behind the texts. He explains the moral Jesus as a figment of Christian imagination, a model person who appears only after all his questionable deeds have been expunged from the record.

Smith's case is built on the picture of Jesus which is drawn in large part from Jesus' opponents rather than those whom we would recognize as his followers. The New Testament itself notes that Pharisees and Scribes thought Jesus was in league with Beelzebub. It says Jesus mixed spittle with soil to heal a blind man. (John 9:6) He is also pictured as spitting on the tongue and putting his fingers in the ears of a deaf-mute in order to heal him. (Mark 7:33) Similar actions can be found in descriptions of Hellenistic magicians. For Smith both the late first and early second century Rabbis and other outsiders like Josephus claimed that Jesus was indeed this immoral magician.

But for him the decisive place to find his explanation is in this fragment of Clement which speaks of a secret Gospel of Mark, one which was not circulated publicly, but was kept in the church at Alexandria. The fragment has Clement say that he knew of two early versions of Mark, one kept hidden because of its difficult sayings and symbols. In the quotation

from this so-called gospel Jesus is described as spending the night with a naked young man and initiating him into the Kingdom of God.[5] In Smith's view the Carpocratians, a gnostic sect from Egypt who apparently used ground-up, aborted fetuses in their celebration of the Lord's Supper, represent the truest lineage of Jesus himself. They faithfully continued his sexual perversions.[6]

Perhaps this is a bit much just after breakfast. But it is the type of literature which makes it absolutely clear how much we must ever be investigating our own Christian origins. The tasks which the Tuebingen institute has undertaken must be of concern to every believer, not just scholars. To look again at the origins of Christianity is crucial. It is important for every Christian.

What steps shall we take in investigating Smith's claims? Were this a convention of New Testament scholars or historians of early Christianity a careful analysis of Smith's methodological errors, his historical misinterpretations, should be investigated.[7] But here that would be long and boring. (It probably would be there also, but we expect such dry speeches at those meetings.) So let us look first at an overview of the scholarly discussion of Smith's claims. Smith himself has reviewed the debate in a 1982 article in Harvard Theological Review. [8] There he notes that the overwhelming opinion of qualified scholarship is that the fragment is indeed part of a letter from Clement of Alexandria. Yet he also indicates that there is wide division as to the genuineness and the origin of the quotations from the so-called Secret Gospel of Mark. Some think they might predate our gospels; others think they may well be second century forgeries. The one person whom Smith says fully accepts his arguments is the English scholar, Trevor-Roper, whose expertise is in modern European history. You may remember him from the debate about the Hitler diaries. It was Trevor-Roper who first said those forgeries were genuine, then changed his mind when nearly everyone else found them to be

ingenuine.[9] If his judgment in his speciality is so bad, perhaps he should not be followed outside his speciality.

Second, it is wise to concede that some early Christians embodied immoral doctrine and life. The Carpocratians, who preached that all must first sin in order to be eligible for salvation, were an early sect, probably in existence by about 125. Their practices were so licentious that some 19th century translators refused to bring over into English the Latin descriptions from Irenaeus. Even in Scripture, one Christian in Corinth was sexually involved with his father's wife. (I Cor. 5:1-5) Magic has not been unknown in early Christian or first century Jewish circles. Simon Magus tried to buy Peter's power after he had become a Christian. (Acts 8:9-24) Some in Ephesus only began to discard their magical practices at the time of their conversion, even though they came from Jewish backgrounds. (Acts 19:11-20) All claimed to be Christians.

Although all the sources which we have for sizeable, immoral, magical communities who claimed to be Christians come from the second century, it is not unlikely that some Christians similar to the Corinthian cad, Simon Magus, or the Ephesian Christians might have retained the name of Christ and their own immoral, magical practices. It is not certain that we can claim that these understandings and practices were always much later than New Testament Gospels and Acts. What Luke described in his prologue may be stories of Jesus which were of this character. We do not know for certain.

But there are things which we can know and should insist upon. Here we must examine the plausibility of Smith's claims that the apostles and the early Church were involved in a mammoth coverup. The New Testament accounts of Jesus and the early Church are rather remarkable in that they do indicate what other groups thought about them. It is precisely from the New Testament that Smith learned of the earliest Jewish

opposition to Jesus as a sorcerer in league with the Devil. (Mt. 12:24; Mk. 3:22; Lk. 11:15) There is no coverup there. The opposing views are presented. They are attacked, both by statements from Jesus and from the church. But they are represented faithfully enough that Smith can use them.

It is also the case that not all opponents of Christianity saw them as an immoral, magical community. Pliny, governor of Bithynia in c. 112, found Christianity to be widespread in his province. He investigated its members, tortured some deaconesses to make sure they told the truth, and banned their meetings. But he found them to be basically a superstitious people who ate meals together and took oaths to be moral.[10] Galen, the famous physician philosopher of second century Asia Minor and Rome, thought Christians to be dim witted, but he praised their courage and moral character.[11] Lucian, the second century satirist from Syria, who tells the tale of Peregrinus, says that Christians could easily be fooled by charlatans. But in recounting the story he demonstrates how kind and generous the community was, how its morality perhaps surpassed its common sense in that case.[12] Smith could have listed more opponents who thought Christians were immoral. But not all opponents of Christianity found Christians to be immoral illusionists.[13]

Furthermore, the earliest apologists for Christianity made it a point to criticize most heavily the immorality of the pagan Gods. Why should people worship Zeus if one of his most prominent activities was turning himself into yet another animal or bird so that he could seduce yet another beautiful woman? Not all second century folk who claimed to be Christians were committed to immorality and magic.

In fact it is precisely this battle for morality which occupied some of the best minds of Christian theology. Origen, a third century Alexandrian who ended his career in Palestine, attacked the pagan philosopher Celsus when Celsus claimed that Jesus was a Egyptian

magician of questionable character. Origen states his case boldly:

"No magician uses his tricks to call the spectators to moral reformation; nor does he educate by the fear of God people who were astounded by what they saw, nor does he attempt to persuade the onlookers to live as people who will be judged by God." [14]

In another place he notices that although there are similarities between a wolf and a dog, the important thing is the difference. The dog can be your friend. The wolf eats you. Then he asks if there is a similarity between the power of sorcery and power of God, "then why should we not also examine carefully people who profess to do miracles, and see whether their lives and moral characters, and the results of their miracles, harm men or effect moral reformation." [15] For Origen it is the moral view which determines whether or not God is involved.

Eusebius, the fourth century theologian-historian also from Caesarea in Palestine, repeats Origen's claim that no deceiving magician teaches moral reform. But he also notices that if the apostles were deceived, if they were really the uneducated, rather common men which the New Testament says they were, where did they get the moral penetration and good sense to create the wonderful doctrine and ethic which one finds in that same New Testament? If Jesus were evil, and they were too dumb to know better, where did the grand moral tone of Christian faith come from? [16]

To recast Eusebius' question more in terms of Smith's view of the apostles, if they were sharp but deceitful how did they invent this deep concept of the moral life? Why would men die for something which they knew to be a lie? That again raises Origen's point that deceitful people do not call others to moral reform.

For Smith, however, it is Paul who is the moral reformer. He is the one who overpowers the legalism of the Jewish Christians and the libertinism of the

earliest apostles. [17] Yet that view also offers more puzzles than it does solutions. If Paul knew the pillars in Jerusalem, both Judaeizers and evidently some libertines and thus had learned their views of Jesus, and if he were a moral, intelligent man, why would he cover up Jesus' evil? Why did he not just dump Jesus and find someone who was moral? If Paul and his followers were such moral reformers and had such a large number of attitudes and acts to cover up, why did they not look for another leader? Why would they create such an ethical religion based on Jesus when they knew that from the beginning he was evil?

Although such a short presentation does not do justice to the problem, I do hope that I have raised some significant questions concerning the plausibility of Smith's case. Although his historical reconstructions of specific texts deserve careful attention to show his lack of solid, critical judgment, I think it is the implausibility of his coverup theory which makes his case the weakest. [18]

In conclusion, however, I would like to offer three pieces of unsolicited advice for approaching such attacks on the center of Christian faith.

First, as Eusebius suggests, use reverent reason backed by solid critical judgment. [19] This has always been the approach of the European Evangelistic Society. The Clement fragment which Smith found indicates that Clement thought the truth should only be told to those who were ready for it. He suggested that Christians should even lie under oath about the existence of a secret gospel of Mark because the evil Carapocratians might gain followers if it were read. [20]

That is not the Christian way. The New Testament does not suppress evidence as best we can tell. The twelve often look like nincompoops. They almost never get anything right the first time. That is why Peter's confession of Jesus was such a shock. That same Peter rashly cut off the ear of a priest's servant and then

impulsively denied Christ. The very way in which the apostles either depicted themselves, allowed themselves to be depicted, or were remembered by the early Church gives credence to their histories. People who rely on the grace of God can let others know how foolish they are. If the apostles or the Church were going to suppress something, wouldn't they have suppressed their own nincompoopery? No wonder they are believable. They were sinful mortals just as we are.

Yet often in the name of Christian piety such truths are expurgated. My mother once had an editor rewrite part of her description of Peter's impulsiveness because readers might get the wrong idea. What do you say about someone who runs out of a boat across water, if not that the fellow is impulsive? Smith is able to mount a case for hearing the opponents and the Carpocratians because Constantine had the works of opponents and heretics burned. My colleague Fred Thompson had a book burned by the publisher just about five years ago because he wrote something contrary to the publisher's beliefs. If Christians suppress different opinions, why should moral, fair people believe us? For those who are bright, the other views should be fairly argued. For those who are not so gifted or so mature the issues may not be understood anyway. Suppression of evidence protects nothing.

Second, the structure of the Gospel demands more than intelligent search. It requires the changed moral life which it proclaims. In the deepest sense Christian doctrine is what can be lived. We would be totally foolish to think that by gaining points in philosophical or historical argument we have necessarily won the case. Both the institute and the congregation in Tuebingen must reflect the Christian life as must we. No intellectual snobbery, no elite authoritarianism can effect the goals of the Gospel. Christians do not need to be stupid. It doesn't even help. But being a smart Alec gains nothing either. Jesus knew more than any of us and yet he was compassionate and kind while also being demanding. As

Joy Davidman Lewis says: "Most of the ordinary people who lose their faith are not overthrown by philosophical argument; they are disillusioned by the churchmen they meet. One sanctimonious hypocrite makes a hundred unbelievers." [21]

Finally, or perhaps in the beginning, it is the call to worship which pulls us on. Yet that call is not without its own sense. If Jesus were a deceiving, immoral magician, then we should not follow him. We should seek another. But if he is the compassionate Saviour who had time for children, for prostitutes, probably for homosexuals -- without ever losing his own virtuous character -- then he is worthy of our worship. He has the right to be addressed as our Lord. That is what we preach and what molds our practice as we live in but not of the world.

NOTES

1. Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973). The Secret Gospel (New York: Harper & Row, 1973).
2. Jesus the Magician (New York: Harper & Row, 1978).
3. Ibid., pp. 137-139.
4. Bertrand Russell, Why I am not a Christian And Other Essays, ed. by Paul Edwards (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), pp. 3-23.
5. For an English translation of the text, cf. The Secret Gospel, pp. 14-17.
6. Ibid., pp. 134-138.
7. Three reviews based primarily on the large scholarly work from Harvard Press point up Smith's misconstrual of the historical task: Paul Achtemeier, review, Journal of Biblical Literature 93 (1974), pp. 625-628, Joseph Fitzmyer, "How to Exploit a Secret Gospel," America 128 (1973), pp. 570-572 and R.P.C. Hanson, review, Journal of Theological Studies N.S. 25 (1974), pp. 513-521. Probably the best exchange of opinions appears in Reginald Fuller, Longer Mark: Forgery, Interpolation or Old Tradition? (Center for Hermeneutical Studies, Colloquy 18) ed. by Wilhelm Wuellner (Berkeley: Center, 1975). A number of scholars, including Smith, responded to Fuller's position that Smith's reconstruction is inaccurate. Probably the best treatment of the relationship between magic and Jesus' life is to be found in John Hull's Hellenistic Magic and the Synoptic Tradition "Studies in Biblical theology, Second Series #28" (Naperville, IL: Alec R. Allenson, Inc., 1974)
8. "Clement of Alexandria and Secret Mark: The Score at the End of the First Decade," Harvard Theological Review 75 (1982), pp. 449-461.
9. J. J. Jones, "Are the Hitler Diaries Genuine? A Famous

- British Historian Has Two Answers -- Yes, and No!" Peoples Weekly 19 (May 16, 1983), p. 50.
10. Pliny, Ep. X.96.
 11. Fragment preserved in an Arabic translation, cf. R. Walzer, Galen on Jews and Christians (London: Oxford University Press, 1949), p. 51.
 12. Lucian, On the Death of Peregrinus 11-16.
 13. Smith is both selective in the texts he chooses to study and often rather strange in the interpretations which he gives of the texts chosen.
 14. Origen, Against Celsus, I.68.
 15. Ibid., II.52.
 16. Eusebius, The Proof of the Gospel III.5.
 17. Jesus the Magician, p. 53. cf. Hanson's review, p. 518.
 18. Edward C. Hobbs, within his response in Fuller, op. cit., pp. 19-22 puts much the same question of impossibility although he frames it in terms of Ockham's razor: why create a more complicated explanation when a clearer and simpler one is available?
 19. Eusebius, op. cit., III.4.
 20. cf. the English translation of the fragment, The Secret Gospel, p. 16.
 21. Joy Davidman Lewis, Smoke on the Mountain (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953) p. 59.

MAILING ADDRESS:

EUROPEAN EVANGELISTIC SOCIETY
James L. Evans, Executive Director
P.O. Drawer E
Atlanta, GA 30364