

Healing, Miracle, and Magic in Non-Christian Sources

After the beginning of the third century, early Christians were increasingly insistent on portraying Christ as a miracle worker. In the catacombs and on funerary monuments such as sarcophagi, Christ heals and performs miracles as mentioned in the Gospels. However, any viewer will begin to notice the unique features in the artworks depicting Christ. The implement that Christ wields as he performs his divine office has been the subject of some debate. While it appears to be a wand, this determination is far from conclusive. The art historian Thomas Mathews has memorably suggested that this iconographic inclusion suggests that Jesus was considered a magician.¹

However, the “wand” of Jesus does not indicate that he was necessarily understood as a magician. While the specific issue of the so-called wand will be treated in the final chapter, the next two chapters provide a valuable summary of the non-Christian and Christian evidence concerning healing, miracle, and magic in Late Antiquity. The eminent art historian Erwin Panofsky states that any true interpretation of an image must acknowledge a strong familiarity with cognate literary sources.² This truly makes the interpreter’s task an interdisciplinary one. Only by examining the context of the image of Christ the Miracle Worker can we discover a cogent interpretation.

In Late Antiquity, individuals were greatly concerned about their health and well-being. The fragile nature of existence became only too apparent when illness or injury struck. Remedies were sought with fervor that bordered on fanaticism. With limited options in the health care system of Late Antiquity, the belief in miraculous cures was very pervasive. Medicine and miracle would naturally be linked together, since healing was so closely associated with

1. See Thomas Mathews, *The Clash of Gods* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 54–89.

2. E. Panofsky, *Studies on Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 15.

religion. Generally speaking, the belief in supernatural cures naturally rose from belief in the unbelievable.

Health care in Late Antiquity was not completely dissimilar from our contemporary system. Care was difficult to procure, not always effective, and occasionally expensive. In general, a sick person seeking treatment in antiquity had four options. The person could (1) go to a physician, (2) use homeopathic self-administered remedies, (3) seek the aid of a magician or employ magical incantations, or (4) visit a temple of the local healing cult. All of the health care options except homeopathic remedies required some type of payment. While all four options never lacked practitioners, I will claim that the healing cult was the most popular in the first four centuries. Moreover, physicians acknowledged the healing cult, since the cult treated chronic illnesses such as paralysis or blindness. The divine healing option often provided more individual attention to such chronic ailments. Even if the effect was “care” more than actual “cure,” the treatment of the healing cult was touted as successful more often than not.³ Although greatly ridiculed in some quarters, magic was widely practiced. However, the realm of magic and the excessive expression of devotion (*superstitio*) were viewed by intellectuals as improper, manipulative, and abhorrent. As the rivalry between non-Christians and Christians elevated in the second and third centuries, magic and the magical arts were terms of slander for the parties to use against each other.

The images of Christ the Miracle Worker were possibly influenced by all four options, but they were particularly affected by healing cults that served as competitors in the realms of religion. Images of Christ healing could visualize Jesus effecting cures and securing eternal life, showing Christianity as superior to any competing healing cult. In Late Antiquity, the line separating the category of healing and miracle working from that of religion was often quite fine. Figures such as the healing god Asclepius or the magician Apollonius of Tyana were parallels as well as potent adversaries of the emerging Christian religion and its chosen deity of Jesus Christ.⁴

Late Antique religion had certain rubrics of acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Excessive frivolity or superstition was maligned on one side, while nonbelief or atheism was ridiculed at the opposite end. Healing and miracle working often crossed the borderline separating true *religio* and *superstitio*.

3. See Vivian Nutton, “Healers in the Medical Market Place: Towards a Social History of Greco-Roman Medicine,” in *Medicine in Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 33.

4. Gary B. Ferngren, *Medicine and Health Care in Early Christianity* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009). Ferngren devotes some significant space to the influence of the cult of Asclepius upon early Christianity.

Cicero affirmed that true *religio* was a positive expression of the preservation of ritual and tradition in relation to the gods, while he branded *superstitio* as excessive and antiquated.⁵ A healing or a miracle may fall somewhere in between these two polarities. However, non-Christian and Christian writers appear to be in agreement in their thoughts on superstition and opposition to magic, although this similarity did not stop one group from lobbing verbal epithets at the other.

This chapter will discuss the historical context of Late Antiquity that is so critical to understanding the images of Christ performing healings and miracles. First, the background and understanding of miracle and magic in Late Antiquity will be examined. By considering how non-Christian groups viewed miracles and magic, one can perceive similarities with the Christian understanding of miracles. The understanding of magic is relevant to any study of healing and miracle working, since they share some significant overlap. The critic Celsus, the references in Greek Magical Papyri, and the hagiography of Apollonius of Tyana by the author Philostratus provide ample evidence of this. Finally, the popularity and tradition of the healing cult of Asclepius will be detailed, showing the impact Asclepius had on Late Antiquity. By the third century, the Late Antique culture was a receptive atmosphere for the images of Christ the Miracle Worker that became the motif of choice in early Christian art.

BACKGROUNDS: MAGICIANS AND MIRACLE MEN IN LATE ANTIQUITY

The belief in divine healing maintained a powerful place in ancient medicine, whether doctors liked it or not. Physicians attempted to minimize the role of the divine—what we will (with some trepidation) generally call “religion”—in medical treatment. They claimed that any successful healing treatment of a patient was due to the prescription they themselves provided, not an incantation or the will of gods, and more importantly, that the cause of the malady also was not due to the gods.⁶ Still, people of all walks of life placed a high value on religiously associated healings. Faced with the choice of heeding the advice

5. Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* 2.28. Translation by H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1933).

6. The writings of the Hippocratic Corpus argue that disease has less to do with philosophy and more to do with medical explanations dealing with the physical body. The author of the treatise *Sacred Disease* attacked any notion that disease is caused by the gods and that any proper treatment can be performed by magical incantations and the like. See *The Sacred Disease* 1.2; and Nutton, *Ancient Medicine* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 65.

of his physician or the cult of the healing god Asclepius, the second-century orator Aelius Aristides favored the divine prescriptions.⁷ Methods of healing in antiquity encompassed medicine, miracle, and magic, and religion seeps through all three areas. Medicine was a category that included practicing physicians in the empire. Late Antique physicians usually treated patients for a fee, and prescribed any number of healing methods. These prescriptions might include the drinking of wine or gentle exercise as prescribed by Asclepiades, or the balance of humors and attention to anatomy as expounded by Galen. Medicine was not without its severe critics. It also was not opposed to religion. Galen, perhaps the best-known and most influential Late Antique physician, dedicated his first essay on anatomy to Asclepius and exalted the divine cures of the god as a reality.⁸

“Miracle” is perhaps a more difficult term to define in the context of Late Antiquity. Miracles in paganism and Christianity were a result of a direct appeal to the gods and were acts of divine benevolence bestowed upon believers in response to their faith. The miracles of Jesus in the gospel accounts in the New Testament loosely follow this definition. In the early twentieth century, Rudolf Bultmann deconstructed the formula of a miracle story, claiming it was a three-part sequence with a problem, the resulting miracle, and a demonstration of the efficacy of the miracle, occasionally followed by praise for its effectiveness.⁹ The healing of the paralytic in Matthew 9 follows this sequence. A paralytic is brought to Jesus; Jesus orders the man to take up his mat and walk (9:6); the paralytic walks home, and the awe-struck crowd praises God.

Miracle stories had an evangelistic dimension. The end result of healing accounts in the gospels was often faith in God on the part of onlookers or one-time opponents of Christianity. Many accounts end with the crowd’s “amazement” at Jesus’ miracle. In Acts 13:4–12, belief was brought about through miraculous punishment, not healing. Summoned by the governor in Cyprus, Paul and Barnabas encountered a magician, whom Paul rebuked and struck blind in the name of God. The story’s dénouement is the belief that was instilled in the witnessing governor.¹⁰

7. Aristides, *Orations* 49.8–15 (Behr). Even to the apparent detriment of his health.

8. Nutton, *Ancient Medicine*, 279; Howard Clark Kee, *Medicine, Miracle, and Magic in New Testament Times* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 61.

9. Rudolf Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic*, trans. John Marsh, rev. ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 210.

10. A. D. Nock, *Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1933), 14.

The evangelistic element of miracle accounts was not unique to Christianity. Philostratus reported that the miracles of Apollonius were followed by recognition and belief, such as the imprisoned Apollonius removing his leg from the fetters, astonishing and instilling belief in his follower Damis.¹¹ Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* described Lucius' transformation from an ass to a human as evidence enough for Lucius' conversion to the Isiac mysteries.¹²

Both non-Christian and Christian miracle stories followed a similar formula of describing a successful action by the god. One difference between the two sets of stories concerns the miracle of raising the dead, particularly the episode of Zeus killing Asclepius for performing a resurrection. This aspect of Asclepius' story enjoyed some prominence in antiquity, given the mentions by Plato, Cicero, Justin, Clement, and Tertullian.¹³ Servius claimed Asclepius was killed for the resurrection of Hippolytus, drawing the ire of Hades and forcing the divine retribution of Zeus.¹⁴ On the other hand, Diodorus Siculus maintained Asclepius raised a great many people from the dead, and Apollodorus in the first century specifically reported six people resurrected by Asclepius.¹⁵ Whether Asclepius was guilty of performing one resurrection or many, the result of his action was death by the thunderbolt of Zeus.

Christ is credited with several resurrections in the four gospels, most notably the raising of Lazarus in John 11:1-10. Although resurrection stories can be described as "miracles," it is still debatable whether healings should be considered as such. In John, the Lazarus story is not necessarily a healing, but it is restorative. Lazarus is not resurrected to eternal life just yet. He is restored to a human condition; he is vulnerable to disease and will die again. A resurrection may not appear to be a typical healing. However, in the Bible and art, resurrections and healings appear to operate similarly. They exhibit and promote the healer's power in order to instill awe and gain the belief of onlookers.

Reports of Asclepius or Apollonius of Tyana resurrecting men could have the same effect as reports of Jesus raising Lazarus. Like a miraculous healing,

11. Philostratus, *Life* 7.38. Damis retells this story and how he came to recognize Apollonius as divine in 8.13.

12. Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 11.5.

13. See the testimonies collected in Emma and Ludwig Edelstein's *Asclepius: Collection and Interpretation of the Testimonies*, vols. 1 and 2 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1945), 48-57.

14. Servius's *Commentary on the Aeneid*, 6.398 in Edelstein, T. 111. The resurrection of Hippolytus is often mentioned. See Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 1.27.4-5; and Sextus Empiricus in *Against the Professors* 1.260-262.

15. Diodorus Siculus, *The Library of History* 4.71.1-3; Apollodorus, *The Library* 3.10.3-4.

a resurrection would gain support for the healer from the watching crowds. Miracle and healing stories achieved the desired result by amplifying the dramatic tone of the narrative. Miracle accounts were excellent marketing and public relations tools for religion. The nature of the healing that occurred guaranteed that the tale would be remembered, and the success and popularity of the healing deity involved would be subsequently spread. Several accounts of healings by Asclepius also embodied an ineffable sense of drama. Prior to the era of Late Antiquity, in the work of Aristophanes from 380 BCE, two snakes purportedly licked the patient Plutus's eyes, and his vision was subsequently restored.¹⁶

Although miraculous healing accounts existed in Late Antiquity, bountiful evidence also exists of patients healed by means of ancient medicine or by the cult of Asclepius. These healings can be described as fairly mundane. Even without the “miraculous” element as exhibited in the snakes of Plutus, and even if they lacked the drama of miracle stories, healings procured by divine aid were still credited to the divine. Howard Clark Kee argues that the number of ordinary healings in the early centuries indicates the difference between this era and earlier Hellenistic medicine.¹⁷ It would be a mistake to claim that miracles and healings were becoming separate entities in Late Antiquity. In fact, the development of Greco-Roman medicine beginning in the Common Era exhibited a close relationship between healings and miracles. Beginning in 160 CE with Julius Apellas's report of his healing at Epidauros, Asclepius was seen not only as a divine friend and helper, but also as a savior. Asclepius' treatment altered the course of his life, and Apellas sincerely believed his life was now under the care and protection of the god.¹⁸

Apellas' belief marked a new direction in Asclepius devotion in Late Antiquity. Efficacious healings by Asclepius were followed by a broader transformation of the patient's life. Aelius Aristides indicated that Asclepius was not only a healer of the body, but a healer of the soul as well. Asclepius healed the patient externally and internally. This characterization of healing recalls the healings of Christ in the gospels. Jesus healed both body and soul. The man born blind in John 9 was healed and cleansed of sin. Thus, a working definition of “miracle” in a Christian context could be any healing through a divine channel that involves an inward and outward transformation.¹⁹

16. Aristophanes, *Plutus* 633–747.

17. Howard Clark Kee, *Miracle in the Early Christian World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), 89.

18. *Ibid.*, 88.

While healings and miracles can be described as intertwined in Late Antiquity, the same cannot be said of miracles and magic. Miracles were products of divine agents, while magic involved the human manipulation of the divine for personal means. Magic involved repetition of a spell in order to produce a desired end. Like *superstitio*, the term *magic* and the practice of magic were maligned. Respected by some but despised by many in Late Antiquity, magic is most often described as originating in Persia, as Pliny the Elder describes the migration of magic from Persia to Greece in his *Natural History*.²⁰ Book 30 of Pliny's *Natural History* largely ridicules the practice of magic.²¹ In republican Rome, the practice of magic usually involved love spells. Any negativity toward magic in Rome usually arose from concern that it could be used to threaten established property rights.²²

In imperial Rome, magic began to take on a negative connotation, in part due to the heightened sensitivity toward non-Roman influences, as recorded in Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*. Up to the present, the term *magic* has surely been interpreted quite negatively.²³ Disputes concerning magic often addressed the issue of authority. Plutarch, who lived from 50 to 120 CE, described the divergent roles of superstition and atheism in his essay "On Superstition."²⁴ Plutarch was not against religion. He believed that for a citizen, "the pleasantest things that men enjoy are festal days and banquets at the temples, initiations and mystic rites, and prayer and adoration of the gods."²⁵ The superstitious person won favor with the gods with spurious rites and rituals. For Plutarch, *deisidaimonia* (the Greek term used for "superstition") included magic and incantations.²⁶ His descriptions of the misguided rituals of the superstitious

19. This definition is also what critics call the marks of a magician. Morton Smith, *Jesus the Magician* (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1978), 81. For evidence of Christian healings as superior, see Smith, chapter 3, 92 and the apocryphal *Acts of Peter and the Twelve*, 11.

20. Pliny, *Natural History* 30.3-13.

21. Ibid. 28.10.47; 28.12.49; 28.4.21; 28.5.28.

22. Fritz Graf, "Excluding the Charming: The Development of the Greek Concept of Magic," in *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power*, ed. Marvin W. Meyer and Paul Mirecki (Boston: Brill Academic, 2001), 41. Sulla in 81 BCE dictated edicts against the use of sorcery, although this was an edict against those who used poisons or magic for murder.

23. Jonathan Z. Smith, "Trading Places," in Meyer and Mirecki, *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power*, 16. Smith argues that magic is an evaluative term, used to characterize "the other."

24. Plutarch, *On Superstition* 170A. While the essay has usually been ascribed to Plutarch, it is questionable whether he is its true author or not. For further reading, see Smith, "De Superstitione," in *Plutarch's Theological Writings and Early Christian Literature*, ed. Hans Dieter Betz (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 6-7.

25. Plutarch, *Superst.* 169D (Babbitt, LCL).

person depicted the workings of a magician in antiquity. Plutarch described the strict attention to detail and correctness of the superstitious sacrifice—for example, praying to the gods in a normal cadence and not resorting to fitful, “barbarous” phrases.²⁷ Superstition made demands of the gods, instead of supplicating and honoring the gods.²⁸ In his depiction of people plagued with superstitious fear, Plutarch claimed their fatal flaw was their susceptibility to magic. While atheism was the polar opposite of superstition, Plutarch understood why one would choose ignorance over depraved magic.²⁹ His task was not to condemn superstition and atheism equally, but to show how both ways of thinking avoided the waters of “true religion” that lay between the opposing realms.³⁰

Atheism and despicable magic dwell outside Plutarch’s understanding of true religion. Within true religion, there was indeed room for miracles and liturgical drama. Plutarch’s understanding was echoed by Marcus Aurelius in 170 CE. Marcus Aurelius credited Diognetus for advising him “not to busy myself about trifling things, and not to give credit to what was said by miracle-workers and jugglers about incantations and the driving away of demons and such things.”³¹ For Marcus Aurelius, the practice of magic was a distracting nuisance.

Superstition was not the path to true religion, and any element of Christianity would bear the stain of superstition if it persisted in outwardly displaying signs of a magical nature. The philosopher Celsus attacked Christianity with a similar understanding of superstition. His attack, however, focused on the person and work of Christ, as he chose to malign the Jesus with the term *magician*.

26. See Introduction for a treatment of the terms *superstitio* and *deisidaimonia*. The terms are better described as loosely related rather than a Greek and Latin word for the same thing. *Deisidaimonia* can refer to “religion” in general, but could also indicate a negative aspect of religion, superstition. Plutarch’s treatise, *deisidaimonia* is synonymous with *superstitio*.

27. Plutarch, *Superst.* 166B.

28. See H. Armin Moellerling, *Plutarch on Superstition* (Boston: Christopher, 1962), 78.

29. Plutarch was more concerned that those who are superstitious are not similarly condemned as the atheists. See *Superst.* 169F. Also see Robert L. Wilken, *The Christians As the Romans Saw Them* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 61. Plutarch wondered why atheists then are accused of impiety while superstitious people are not. He cited *The Odyssey*, in which Anaxagoras called the sun a stone and was brought to trial, while the Cimmerians who never believed in the sun were never accused of impiety. See Moellerling, *Plutarch on Superstition*, 78–79.

30. Plutarch, *Superst.* 171F.

31. Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 1.6 (Long). See Marcus’s praise of divine healing at 1.17, and see the Introduction.

CELSUS ON MAGIC AND MIRACLES

Celsus was a pagan philosopher who around 177 CE wrote an influential work against the Christians, entitled *The Great Doctrine*.³² Much of what we know about Celsus can be gathered in Origen's *Against Celsus*, written about eighty years later, and in a statement in Eusebius's history. Eusebius wrote in his history that when Origen was over sixty years old, he wrote the eight treatises in reply to the work of "Celsus the Epicurean," branding Celsus with a questionable label handily provided by Origen.³³ Origen's response to Celsus reveals the fact that Celsus's work was fairly well known, since it prompted him to construct a rebuttal. Origen was obviously worried that Christians "may be shaken and disturbed by the writings of Celsus," indicating that this was a serious matter indeed.³⁴

Celsus decried Christianity as a superstition from the outset, citing the secret rites of the religion: "Christians perform their rites and teach their doctrines in secret."³⁵ Celsus was vicious in tearing down any association between Christianity and philosophy.³⁶ He attempted to devalue Christianity by insisting that it reeked of superstition. Celsus described Christians as similar

32. The date of Celsus's work depends on the identity of the "Celsus" in question. Origen, *Against Celsus*, pref. 4, and 1.8; PG 11, 669B. For example, this is not the same Celsus as the author responsible for the books *On Medicine*. The Celsus from Nero's time was likely the author of *On Medicine*, Aulus Cornelius Celsus. The latter Celsus from Hadrian's time was probably the philosopher in question, but his identity as an Epicurean is problematic, for if anything, the Celsus portrayed in Origen's response is a Middle Platonist. For further reading, see Lucian, *Alexander the False Prophet*, 25, 47, 61; Chadwick in his introduction to his translation of *Contra Celsum* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), xxv; Michael Frede, "Origen's Treatise *Against Celsus*," in *Apologetics in the Roman Empire: Pagans, Jews and Christians*, ed. Mark Edwards, Martin Goodman, and Simon Price (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 148; Theodor Keim, *Celsus Wahres Wort* (Zurich: Fussli, 1873), 276; R. Joseph Hoffman, *On True Doctrine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 30–33.

33. Eusebius, *Ecc. History* 6.36.2 (PG 20, 596C).

34. Origen, *Cels.* pref. 4 (PG 11, 647A). For a more recent Greek text, see M. Borret, *Contre Celse*, SC 4 vols. 132, 136, 147, 150 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1967–76). The English translation cited of *Against Celsus* derives from Henry Chadwick, *Contra Celsum* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953).

35. Origen, *Cels.* 1.3–4 (PG 11, 657–664; Chadwick).

36. Galen's role in this discussion is worthy of note. See Richard Walzer, *Galen on Jews and Christians* (London: Oxford University Press, 1949); and Robert Wilken, "Collegia, Philosophical Schools, and Theology," in *The Catacombs and the Colosseum: The Roman Empire as the Setting of Primitive Christianity*, ed. Stephen Benko and John J. O'Rourke (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1971), 277; and Wilken, *The Christians*, 74. Galen aligned Judaism and Christianity under the subject heading of philosophy. He further ridiculed both groups' systems of inquiry: "If I had in mind people who taught their pupils in the same way as the followers of Moses and Christ teach theirs—for they order them to accept everything on faith—I should not have given you a definition." Walzer, *Galen on Jews*, 15.

to “worshippers of Mithras and Sabazius, and whatever else one might meet, apparitions of Hecates or of some other daemon or daemons.”³⁷ In Celsus’s mind, Christians prey on the gullible, just as superstition does. The Christians are thus guilty of duping people into belief by preying upon their irrational fear; the same fear Plutarch identified in his laments *On Superstition*. According to Celsus, Christianity bears the stain of superstition. The philosopher spoke of Christianity as a precarious foreign cult, and therefore Christianity was an invalid road to true piety.

One of Celsus’s primary tactics was to accuse Christianity of magical practice. Celsus claimed that “Christians get the power which they seem to possess by pronouncing the names of certain daemons and incantations,” insinuating that Christians use magical chants and charms to garner power.³⁸ Celsus maintained that magic is not the mark of a true philosophy.³⁹ By placing Christianity in the realm of magic, Celsus could argue that Christianity cannot be a philosophy. The practice of magic is wholly outside the realm of philosophy. Magicians cannot be philosophers.⁴⁰ Celsus was not disputing that Christians have power; he was merely criticizing the source and use of that power. Celsus accomplished this by focusing on the person of Jesus. According to him, the miracles of Jesus were the true calling card of a magician. In an attempt to prove that Jesus used magic, Celsus asserted that there was no divine hand involved in the miracles. Jesus might have worked miracles, but Celsus disputed the Christian claim that he was the Son of God.

Much of Celsus’s attack on Christianity was based on his characterization of the miracles of Jesus as the marks of a magician. Celsus claimed, “It was by magic that he was able to do the miracles which he appeared to have done; and because he foresaw that others too would get to know the same formulas and do the same thing, and boast that they did so by God’s power, Jesus expelled them from his society.”⁴¹ Celsus argued that the miracles performed by Jesus were the work of a magician, since he used magical incantations. Jesus naturally had to protect his status as a magician. He had to prevent anyone from learning his

37. Origen, *Cels.* 1.9 (PG 11,676B; Chadwick).

38. Origen, *Cels.* 1.6 (PG 11, 665; Chadwick). Also see Robert M. Grant, *Greek Apologists of the Second Century* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988), 136–39.

39. Origen, *Cels.* 1.69 (PG 11, 789). Origen questioned whether this Celsus is the same Celsus as Lucian’s, who wrote several books against magic, indicating that his opponent is possibly amenable to magic.

40. Eugene Gallagher, *Divine Man or Magician? Celsus and Origen on Jesus* (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1980), 46; also see Wilken, *The Christians*, 94.

41. Origen, *Cels.* 1.6 (Chadwick).

spells, the secrets of his tradecraft; thus, he was forced to expel some people from his circle. By associating Christ's miracles with the practice of magic, Celsus was able to besmirch Christ's divine reputation. Christ's miracles could have been just magic tricks:

Let us believe that these miracles were really done by you . . . the works of sorcerers who profess to do wonderful miracles, and the accomplishments of those who are taught by Egyptians, who for a few obols make known their sacred lore in the middle of the market-place and drive daemons out of men and blow away diseases and invoke the souls of heroes, displaying expensive banquets and dining-tables and cakes and dishes which are non-existent, and who make things move as though they were alive although they are not really so, but only appear as such in the imagination. . . . Since these men do these wonders, ought we to think them sons of God? Or ought we to say that they are the practices of wicked men possessed by an evil daemon?⁴²

In his response to Celsus's slander against Christianity, Origen refuted any characterization of Jesus as a marketplace magician. While agreeing that the miracles of Jesus could not be explained, Origen said calling them magical spells was erroneous. He pointed out that Christians make no use of spells; the disciples performed miracles only in the name of Jesus, not by using incantations.⁴³ Jesus did not perform tricks to show off his own powers; he used his power to call observers to moral reformation.⁴⁴ Furthermore, Origen claimed he knew of no sorcerers who used tricks to educate people about God or to persuade people to live lives as men of God. Magicians were in the business of producing love charms or health remedies, not transforming the lives of humanity. Jesus was unique in the fact that his strong moral life served as an example to his followers, a quality that no sorcerer exhibited, since sorcerers were swallowed up by their own greed.

The force of Origen's defense shows that Celsus's accusations against Jesus were considered serious.⁴⁵ Origen countered them by focusing not on Jesus' methods, but on his end results—namely, moral transformation and the

42. Origen, *Cels.* 1.68 (Chadwick).

43. *Ibid.*

44. *Ibid.*

45. See Harold Remus, *Pagan-Christian Conflict over Miracle in the Second Century* (Cambridge, MA: Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, 1983), 58.

call to live a life under God. For Origen, the source of Jesus' power was unquestionably divine, since it was selfless and for human benefit. The label of "magic" was a powerful one in Late Antiquity. Origen and other church fathers often had to maneuver around such a charge instead of combating it head-on. In their polemic, Celsus and Origen both maintained that magic was disreputable. For us to measure the weight of their disdain, we must examine the negative conception of magic in Late Antiquity.

THE GREEK MAGICAL PAPYRI (PGM)

The use and practice of magic was fairly widespread from the sixth century BCE through Late Antiquity. While magic had faithful practitioners, there were critics who feared its influence or envisioned it as a threat to religion. Just as the terms *deisidaimonia* and *superstitio* may have been positive at one point but slowly came to be considered negative, the same can be said for the terms *goes* or *magos* (terms used to signify a "magician"). Plato connected the term *goes* with *magos*, designating religious figures as corrupt seers.⁴⁶ Plato believed that the magician threatened the relationship between humans and the gods; the use of magical practices aimed at manipulating the gods corrupted the ideal relationship of human submission to the gods' will.

Just as Alexandria was renowned as a center for medicine in the ancient world, its sister Egyptian city of Memphis was noted as the center for magic. The early church father Jerome and the Late Antique satirist Lucian among others, cited Memphis as the capital of magic.⁴⁷ In Jerome's *Life of Hilarion*, a boy engraves a spell upon a copper sheet and buries it beneath the house of the object of his desire. Hilarion restores the girl to health and orders the copper sheet bearing the incantation to be removed. Jerome's story offers several insights into the use of magic in the ancient world. First, magic is obviously a learned art and cannot be successfully performed by just anyone. In the *Life of Hilarion*, the boy from Gaza had to travel to Memphis to procure his charm. Jerome's text also illustrates a customary use of magic: love spells. In the ancient world, it was fairly common for men to employ magic in order to gain the affection of a woman. Love spells and incantations were not used

46. *Goes* and *goeteia* were terms associated with ritual mourning, the practice of healing and divination. After Plato, *magos* and *goes* were similarly defined and understood. See Fritz Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World*, trans. Franklin Philip (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 24–25.

47. Jerome, *Life of Hilarion* 21; Lucian, *Lover of Lies* 34–36. See Graf, "How to Cope with a Difficult Life: A View of Ancient Magic," in *Envisioning Magic: A Princeton Seminar and Symposium*, ed. Peter Schäfer, Hans G. Kippenberg (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 93–94.

for wanton sexual gratification, but rather to obtain a wife, usually as a last resort. A wife was often an economic asset; through marriage, a man could gain access to a family's fortune.⁴⁸ This should not give magic a veneer of nobility, however; love spells to procure an unwilling wife were precisely what led to legal restrictions against magic in the empire.⁴⁹ In the first century, the book of Acts of the Apostles reports the burning of books of spells in Ephesus. And according to Suetonius, Augustus ordered that all books of the occult—books that would have included love spells—be burned upon their discovery.⁵⁰

The Greek Magical Papyri (PGM), a collection of spells and formulae from Egypt spanning the second century BCE to the fifth century CE, record hundreds of magical incantations.⁵¹ The PGM provides insight into the use of magic for divination. Many recorded spells are for oracles and encounters with the gods, usually by dreams.⁵² Their efficacy depended on reciting the spell in the correct manner and never deviating from its prescription. The PGM indicates such an emphasis by insisting that the formula be said properly. In a proper magical rite, it was essential to speak the name of the deity and the name of the supplicant: "Wherefore, O Lady (Aphrodite) act, I beg, attract (name) whom (name) bore, to come with rapid step to my door."⁵³ If one wants to quench fire, kill a snake, send dreams, or ensure a wife's fidelity, the spell must be said properly to the letter.⁵⁴

Many spells are love charms, while others are for healings and remedies. The PGM describes many rites and incantations for the purposes of healing. Saying, "the wrath of Apollo, far-darting Lord," will cure bloody flux, and carrying around the inscription "Would that you be fated to be unborn and to die unmarried" serves as a contraceptive.⁵⁵ There are numerous spells for

48. Graf, "How to Cope," 104. In Rome, akin to the propagation of Greek medicine, magic's foreign nature likely did not engender it favorably to the elite. Cicero is ambivalent, as he associates the magi with Persia, saying they interpreted the dreams of Cyrus and are a group of "wise men and scholars among the Persians." See Cicero, *On Divination* 1.46.91. The poet Catullus, a contemporary of Cicero's, also associated the magi with Persia, noting that the magi are a product of incest, and thus impious. See Catullus, *Carmen* 90.

49. Magic used to falsely marry a widow and accrue at least a portion of her property (or at the very least higher status) is precisely what Apuleius is accused of nearly two hundred years later. See Apuleius, *Apologia* 90.

50. Acts 19:19; Suetonius, *Life of Augustus* 31.

51. Hans Dieter Betz, ed. and trans., *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation, Including the Demotic Spells* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

52. PGM VII 664-85 (Betz).

53. PGM IV 2907 (Betz).

54. PGM XIII 264-325 (Betz)

restoring sight and aiding sleep. Whether for divination or for healing, spells were popular because humans wished to take actions into their own hands to obtain divine or miraculous aid. Magic required only careful attention, repetition, and of course, a fee or sacrifice to the magician or source who provided the formula.

The spells contained in the PGM mandated secrecy. Commands to secrecy were essential to prevent knowledge of the magic from spreading, and also to protect the interests of the magician.⁵⁶ If everyone knew the spell, the magician would be useless and unimportant.

Late Antique authors often followed the precedent of earlier authors such as Catullus or Pliny in casting magicians as disreputable characters. The satirist Lucian criticized the life and death of the Cynic philosopher Peregrinus, once a Christian, who manipulated crowds into believing in his magical ability. Lucian argued, “He manufactures myths and repeats certain oracles . . . to the purport that he is to become a guardian spirit of the night; it is plain, too, that he already covets altars and expects to be imaged in gold . . . it would be nothing unnatural if, among all the dolts that there are, some should be found to assert that they were relieved of quartan fevers by him, and that in the dark they had encountered the guardian spirit of the night!”⁵⁷ Lucian decried Peregrinus as acting in a vainglorious manner, all the way up to his self-immolation. But even after his death, his followers still believed in his resurrection and reported seeing his risen body dressed in white raiment.⁵⁸ Lucian’s account indicates people’s need and desire to believe in the ineffable, even when the circumstances of the story are quite ridiculous and beyond logic. The figure of the magical man such as Peregrinus fulfills such a desire. Lucian provided an insight into the ability of magicians to attract a vast following in Late Antiquity.

APOLLONIUS OF TYANA

According to his hagiographer Flavius Philostratus, Apollonius of Tyana would be misplaced in any discussion of magic. Even while describing Apollonius’s wondrous acts, Philostratus never called him a magician and appeared to hate magic as much as Celsus and the early Christians. Philostratus’s work, published around 217 CE, was a defense of Apollonius, not as a magician but as a miracle worker with a divine nature. Apollonius performed healings, exorcisms, and

55. PGM XXIIa 2-14 (Betz).

56. Gerd Theissen, *The Miracle Stories of the Early Christian Tradition*, trans. Francis McDonagh (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), 68.

57. Lucian, *Passing of Peregrinus* 27-28 (Harmon, LCL).

58. Lucian, *Passing of Peregrinus*, 40.