

Reviews

JESUS THE MAGICIAN by Morton Smith. *Victor Gollancz*, 1978 pp. 222 £6.95

THE AIMS OF JESUS by Ben F. Meyer. *SCM*, 1979 pp. 335 £9.50

JESUS THE MAN AND THE MYTH by James P. Mackey. *SCM*, 1979 pp. 311 £4.95

Morton Smith of Columbia University is a great scholar. The range of his interests, and the variety of scholars who respect him, may be measured by the four-volume festschrift for his sixtieth birthday, *Studies in Judaism in Late Antiquity*, edited by Jakob Neusner (1975), certainly the most exciting survey of early Christianity in its original environment that has appeared in recent years. His new book comes with a dust-wrapper adorned with fulsome acclaim by distinguished historians: Hugh Trevor-Roper ("I marvel at Dr Smith's exact and delicate scholarship"), Michael Grant ("Enthralling"), and so forth.

The thesis is that the gospel writers did their best to censor the miraculous element but that Jesus in fact made his way primarily because he was a great magician. The gospels themselves, especially if they are read in the light of Morton Smith's great erudition in magical writings contemporary with early Christianity, reveal this unmistakably. The homage of the magi was paid to Jesus as the supreme magus (Matthew 2). He had an uncanny power over men so that they dropped all to follow him (Mark 1: 16-20): "tax collectors and sailors of the worst sort", as Celsus called them. He could read people's minds, predict what would happen, fly in the air (Matthew 4, 5), walk on water, glow all over (the Transfiguration), not to mention his curing the sick, exorcizing the crazy, and much else of a magical nature. He could "ascend", or levitate; he was able to appear to people after his death. By using his name as a spell his followers would be able to cast out demons, speak in new tongues, pick up serpents and not be injured, and so on (Mark 16:17).

Morton Smith has an ingenious explanation for the notoriously baffling detail about the young man who was with Jesus

in the garden of Gethsemane, "naked but for a linen cloth" (Mark 14: 51). In a text that he found in 1958 in the library of the ton Smith discovered a story allegedly from a longer version of Mark, about Jesus's raising a rich young man from the dead, who came to him in the evening six days later, naked but for a linen cloth, to be taught "the mystery of the kingdom of God". In his popular book on this text (*The Secret Gospel*, 1973), Smith hinted that this "mystery" was a union with Jesus that "may have been physical" (p. 251). Jesus emerges as an itinerant magician, homosexual and schizophrenic, a very Hellenistic figure owing almost nothing to Judaism.

That Jesus appeared to many people as a magician, and could certainly be represented as employing wellknown magical formulae (e.g. the scene in the Capernaum synagogue in Mark 2), cannot be denied. What Morton Smith reads as the Catholic Church's deliberate attempt to suppress this fact, by destroying as much of the evidence as possible, may of course be taken differently. It has, after all, been suggested by Theodore Weeden that the cult of Jesus as miracle-worker was precisely the "heresy" that compelled Mark to compose his gospel in the first place, to insist on Jesus as the righteous one who suffered innocently: in other words, to correct the Hellenistic-pagan superstitious picture by insisting on the theological Jewish context. But, together with J. Hull's *Hellenistic Magic and the Synoptic Tradition* (1974), the learning in *Jesus the Magician*, for all the wrongheadedness of the judgments, must help to extend our understanding of the multiple response that Jesus of Nazareth clearly evoked.

Ben F. Meyer, after lengthily rejecting scepticism about "historical-Jesus research" (he is a Catholic scholar), certainly

locates Jesus very firmly in his native Jewish context. He demonstrates from the gospel material that Jesus sought the restoration of Israel by means of a radical eschatological demand which inevitably meant apocalyptic judgment as well as salvation. Relating Jesus's mission and self-understanding to the history of the people of Israel, and in particular to the religious movements dating at least from the time of the Maccabees (second century B.C.), Professor Meyer finally finds the answer to the question as to what made Jesus behave as he did in the after-life (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) of the most significant deed in his whole life – that is, his *death*.

This is, therefore, an entirely different picture of Jesus from that offered by Morton Smith (who receives a passing mention on p. 255). The aims of Jesus may be deciphered by strict historical analysis of the gospel material and they are aims intelligible only in Jewish terms. At the same time, however, the subsequent interpretations of his aims by his disciples are not regarded as irrelevant. Paying tribute both to Lonergan and to E. P. Sanders ("my friend and colleague"), Professor Meyer represents the best in recent Catholic exegesis: thoroughly critical in his historical method and yet concerned with doctrinal effects. Readers should perhaps be warned that it is a learned book, with over sixty pages of notes.

With his new book James Mackey, now settled in California, surely establishes himself as the finest Irish theologian of his generation (he was born in 1936). Compared with recent interpretations of Jesus by famous Continental theologians his book seems to me to be far better than either Hans Kung or Walter Kasper. Wolfhart Pannenberg's somewhat earlier book, published originally in 1964, is much more speculatively doctrinal in approach (curiously enough) than any of the current Catholic essays in Christology. But James Mackey also comes well out of comparison with Edward Schillebeeckx's mammoth work-in-progress. In fact, for at least three reasons it seems to me that Mackey is better value than Schillebeeckx. For one thing, instead of three volumes of 600 pages each, he manages to distil what he has to say to some 300 pages. Secondly,

he is not prone to build theological theories upon highly controversial exegesis (think of Schillebeeckx's confidence in Q!). Thirdly, his fine chapter on the Council of Nicaea locates his New Testament Christology in precisely that wider tradition, the absence of which has laid Schillebeeckx open to attack by the heresy-hunters. On the other hand, of course, Mackey's book is not a workshop, as Schillebeeckx's is, inviting collaborative reading and rewriting by fellow professionals, but for the general reader there is no better book on Jesus.

Starting with the ascertainable history of the death of Jesus (execution for alleged political offences), Professor Mackey goes on to present the Resurrection as "the first comprehensive christology" (p. 120). I remain unconvinced that the word "myth" can ever be purified sufficiently for use in the dialect of the Christian tribe, but in Mackey's sense it means that "the mythic manner of perception and expression" (p. 81) is equivalent to the imaginative or symbolic, which he might have done better to emphasize and extend. Some readers will dislike his stress on the experience of the resurrection as "the experience and consequent understanding of Jesus as an exalted power or spirit in our lives" (p. 111), as an experience to which circumstantial evidence of the revivification of a dead man remains totally inadequate. It is important to see that the historical Jesus is a man of faith (chapter 4). The experience of Jesus as life-giving spirit is the nucleus of the diverse New Testament christologies (chapter 5). The defeat of Arius, and the establishment of the two-natures-in-one person doctrine, is Christology full-grown (chapter 6): in Jesus one encounters the one true God, only in Jesus does one encounter the one true God, and yet it is only Jesus that one encounters (p. 233). Finally (chapter 7), Professor Mackey, against Bultmann, stresses again the importance of the quest for the historical Jesus.

As Albert Schweitzer pointed out in the *Quest*, in 1906, "There is no historical task which so reveals a man's true self as the writing of a Life of Jesus". He wasn't joking.

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