

Robert Conner, *Magic in the New Testament: A Survey and Appraisal of the Evidence* (Oxford: Mandrake of Oxford, 2010). vi + 356 pp., \$23 (paper), £12.99 (paper).

Robert Conner, the relatively enigmatic author of this work (the reviewer could find but sparse biographical information concerning him and so wonders if the attribution is not in fact a *nom de plume*), attempts to scrutinize themes which he believes “to be of particular importance to a modern nonsectarian understanding of Christian origins.” Those themes include 1) early Christian texts and the problematic nature of their transmission, along with “evidence for the suppression of descriptions of magical acts,” 2) the “problem of the New Testament accounts as historical sources,” 3) Jesus’ apocalyptic message “and its connection with magical performance,” 4) the fact that the apocalypse does not materialize “and the theological reaction to the failure,” and 5) “the role of magic and mystery cults in early Christianity.” For important methodological reasons Conner also defines the distinction between “religion” and “magic” in the Introduction. He states, “for the purposes of this book we will define *religion* as *magic for the masses* and *magic* as *religion for the individual*. Religion typically deals with the future after death, and magic with more immediate concerns” (emphasis his). A foundation for his arguments having been laid, Conner launches into the body or the work.

In the opening chapter on ancient sources, and endeavoring to demonstrate his facility with the Greek of antiquity (which he does throughout the book), the author discusses issues which are relatively standard methodological considerations for anyone familiar with higher criticism, and the history of textual transmission and editing – however, with some provocative conclusions. In the following chapter Conner discusses the birth narratives of Jesus as contained in the canonical gospels, while also incorporating information from later apocryphal works, focusing at one point on Jesus’ possible sexual orientation. Chapter three is a well-reasoned discussion of the early Christian expectation of an impending apocalypse, which informed both Jesus and Paul’s actions (read: magic in the form of exorcisms and healings), and the “Great Disappointment” that its lack of materialization must have meant for member of the early community. What this inevitably led to, paraphrasing Conner, is that the early followers of Jesus had to revisit (or truly visit it for the first time?) the theological drawing board. And from this visitation two primary ideas developed: 1) the chronologically slow deification of Jesus, and 2) the jettisoning of the idea of an imminent earthly reign of

the Messiah. Chapters four and five concentrate on both the reason(s) for the execution of Jesus (i.e., he was a *magos*) and the post-resurrection/ghost stories, wherein time is spent on his polymorphic appearances. Chapters six through ten cover the magical practices of ancient Palestine, Jesus, and the Pauline churches. These four chapters compose the central arguments of the book, and are worthy of long and focused reflection, especially in regards to matters exegetical and hermeneutical. Chapter eleven surveys the magical duals that took place between rival magicians in the Acts of the Apostles and the Pauline epistles. Chapters twelve and thirteen deal primarily (and in very, very truncated fashion) with early Christian heresies and the well-known apologetic debate between Origen and Celsus.

Overall, this reviewer found Conner's book to be a fascinating and thought provoking read. Frankly, with the pop-culture fluff on the market today dealing with a "Gnostic Jesus," or "Jesus-as-Sorcerer," my hopes were not all that high. This, however, is a well-reasoned book written by an individual who is knowledgeable of both primary and (important) secondary sources, as well as ancient Greek (unfortunately, for whatever reason, Conner chose to exclude the diacritical marks from his text). Conner builds a strong case, based on the information he carefully chose to include in his examination. That being said, there are a few mostly methodologically problematic issues that need be addressed. But first, one historical oversight that Conner makes in the first chapter (which is common post-*The Da Vinci Code*) is when he states, "After the Roman emperor Constantine declared Christianity to be the official religion of the Empire in the fourth century." That edict was not Constantine's making, but rather effectively fell to emperor Theodosius I a number of years later. Second, while a discussion of Jesus' sex life or lack thereof in chapter one, or the relationship between the centurion's "boy" in chapter seven is provocative, neither added substance to the author's overall argument. It simply was not germane to Conner's task at hand. Third and semi-related to the last point, the author has a highly stylized way of introducing and briefly arguing issues that are historically or exegetically very questionable, thereafter admitting as much, but ending the discussion abruptly. In doing so he leaves the door wide open to less than well-reasoned additional "interpretations" by less contextually or linguistically knowledgeable readers. Lastly, Connor's footnote style is immensely troublesome. In some cases he includes the author of a work and the title, but more often than not only the title of a work is cited along with page number. This sends the reader on a wild goose chase through the bibliography (which is extensive) in order to find a more specific bibliographic reference. The more I spent time with *Magic in the*

New Testament, the more I divined that this might not simply have been an oversight on the part of the author.

In closing, I would recommend this book to advocates of/for non-traditional interpretations of Jesus and the early church, as well as more mainstream Christian or secular scholars interested in the possible role of magic in antiquity and the ancient church. It is without question one of the most learned works I have had the opportunity to read in this genre.

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