

Was Jesus Accused of Necromancy?

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And Herod heard of it, for [Jesus'] name became known and they were saying, "John the Baptist has been raised from the dead and because of this the powers are at work in him."

But others said, "He is Elijah," but others said, "A prophet, like one of the former prophets." But when Herod heard, he said, "John, the one I beheaded, this one has been raised!"¹

According to the earliest gospel as Jesus' fame for exorcism and healing spread, Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee, became aware of it and, like others, sought an explanation for "such powerful works" (*δυναμεις τοιαυται*).² By the time Jesus' reputation came to Herod's attention, Jesus had passed his power over spirits to select disciples and began sending them out in pairs to preach and drive out demons—"he gave them *authority over unclean spirits*"

¹ Mark 6:14-16.

Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

² Mark 6:2.

(ἐξουσιαν των πνευματων των ακαθαρτων).³ Soon the source of Jesus' ἐξουσια (*exousia*), "authority," became a topic of great interest; some proposed that Jesus was Elijah *redivivus*, or "a prophet like one of the former prophets," but Herod subscribed to a different explanation: "John, the one I beheaded, has been raised."

From a naïve reading of the text one might assume that Herod thought Jesus was John the Baptist back from the dead, most unlikely given that the career of Jesus and John overlapped and Herod had previously protected John.⁴ The early tradition is clear that Jesus began to preach and perform works of power after John had been imprisoned but before his eventual execution. Asked by John's disciples if he is the "Coming One," Jesus replies,

"When you go back, report what you hear and see to John. The blind are receiving sight and the lame walk about, lepers are being cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are being raised and the poor receive the good news."⁵

Herod—"that fox"⁶—was a Roman client whose position depended on his ability to keep the peace in his province, so it is probable that the activities of both John and Jesus were closely monitored and that "the crowds going out to be baptized by [John]"⁷ contained informants who reported John's activities.

Carl Kraeling appears to have been the first to propose a reading of the text of Mark that not only accords with the culture of the era, but more importantly with the vocabulary and context of the passage: "John the Baptist has been raised from the dead and *because of this the powers are at work* (δια τουτο ενεργουσιν αι δυναμεις) in [Jesus]."

Between demons as the servants of magicians, and spirits of the dead used in a similar way there is no basic distinction. Both are beings of the spiritual order, not limited by time or space, and endowed with supernatural powers...What the people and Herod originally said about Jesus' relation to John was that Jesus was using the spirit of John brought back from the dead to perform his miracles for him.⁸

³ Mark 6:7, 13.

⁴ Mark 6:20.

⁵ Matthew 11:3-5.

⁶ Luke 13:32.

⁷ Luke 3:7. Compare Mark 3:22 that mentions the scribes that 'come down from Jerusalem'.

⁸ Kraeling, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 59 (1940): 154-155.

Carl H. Kraeling (1897-1966) was an eminent historian and noted archaeol-

The gospel of Mark rapidly establishes Jesus' reputation as a master manipulator of spirits. Jesus teaches "as one who has authority (*ως εξουσιαν εχων*) and not like the scribes"⁹ and lest any doubt remain about what Jesus' "authority" encompassed, Mark has Jesus' Jewish contemporaries answer:

"What is this? A new teaching *based on authority* (*κατ' εξουσιαν*)—he gives orders to the unclean spirits and they obey him!" And instantly the report about him spread out in every direction into the whole region of Galilee.¹⁰

Jesus' fame is clearly linked to exorcism—superior textual acumen and exegetical prowess would hardly be the sort of news one would expect to spread like wildfire among the mostly illiterate country folk of rural Palestine. Although Jesus is sometimes addressed as "rabbi," just what the speakers intended by this title is unclear. In Mark, Jesus is so addressed by Peter, James, and John after they witness the transfiguration.¹¹ In John, Nicodemus so addresses him, but appears to do so in recognition of his miraculous signs.¹²

Several features of the gospel narrative explain Herod's response. First, it is clear that Jesus quickly established a regional reputation as an exorcist and healer—"he went through all of Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and *casting out devils* (*τα δαιμονια εκβαλλων*)."¹³ After the initial report from Capernaum,¹⁴ news that Jesus has returned home causes a dense crowd to gather¹⁵ and when Jesus leaves, a mob of Galileans follows, joined in turn by a the curious from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, from villages across the Jordan, and from Tyre and Sidon.¹⁶ By now Jesus' renown is such that he can no longer openly enter a town,¹⁷ and at this point Jesus chooses twelve disciples and sends them out "to preach and *to have authority to cast out demons* (*εχειν εξουσιαν εκβαλλειν τα δαιμονια*)."¹⁸ Jesus' fame as an exorcist continues to spread; soon other exorcists begin to invoke *the power of his name*—"for his

ogist who, while teaching at Yale, simultaneously held the department chair in both Near Eastern Languages and New Testament Criticism and Interpretation.

⁹ Mark 1:22.

¹⁰ Mark 1:27b-28.

¹¹ Mark 9:5.

¹² John 3:2.

¹³ Mark 1:39.

¹⁴ Mark 1:21.

¹⁵ Mark 2:1-2.

¹⁶ Mark 3:7-8.

¹⁷ Mark 1:45.

¹⁸ Mark 3:14-15.

name became known.”¹⁹ Jesus’ “name” is not merely his reputation; it is quite literally a name to conjure with.

“Teacher,” said John, “we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us.”²⁰

The use of Jesus’ name by other exorcists is “clearly an example of professional magical use,”²¹ a practice that apparently continued even after his death.²² Regarding the unknown exorcist of Mark 9:38, Schäfer observes, “using the powerful name of Jesus had nothing to do with believing in Jesus...the magical use of the name of Jesus worked automatically, no matter whether or not the magician believed in Jesus.”²³

The account of the centurion’s slave boy provides further insight into the nature of Jesus’ authority:

As he entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, entreating him, “Lord, my boy is lying at home paralyzed, suffering terribly.” Jesus said to him, “I will come and heal him.”

The centurion replied, “Lord, I am not worthy for you to step under my roof, but say the word and my boy will be healed. For I, too, am a man with authority, having soldiers under my command, and I say to this one, “Go!” and he goes, and to another, “Come!” and he comes, and to my slave, “Do this!” and he does it.”²⁴

The wording of the pericope of the centurion and his boy—“to my slave, ‘Do this!’ and he does it” (τω δουλω μου ποιησον τουτο και ποιει)—is nearly identical to a spell preserved in the magical papyri in which the magician commands his spirit assistant, “Do this task and he does it immediately” (ποιησον τουτο το εργον και ποιει παραυτα);²⁵ the phrasing of Matthew is also similar to the *Sepher Ha-Razim*: “...to declare the names of the overseers of each and every firmament...and what are the names of their attendants...to rule over spirits and over demons, to send them (wherever you wish) so they will go out like slaves.”²⁶ Jennings and Liew conclude,

¹⁹ Mark 6:14.

²⁰ Mark 9:38, NIV.

²¹ Hull, *Hellenistic Magic and the Synoptic Tradition*, 72.

²² Acts 19:13.

²³ Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud*, 60.

²⁴ Matthew 8:5-9.

²⁵ Preisendanz, *Papyri Graecae Magicae* I, 182.

²⁶ Morgan, *Sepher Ha-Razim*, 17-18.

What is stunning is that both the centurion and the Pharisees are basically embracing the same assumptions: authority works within chains of command. Just as a centurion can order the coming and going of soldiers and servants under his command, the ruler of demons can cast out demons under its rule. What then is the centurion implying about Jesus' identity? He believes that Jesus can order the coming and going of the demon that has been "torturing" his boy-love with paralysis because he believes that Jesus is the commander or the ruler of that and other demons. In other words, not only are the centurion and the Pharisees in agreement about how authority operates, they further concur on the identity of Jesus as a commanding officer in the chain of demonic beings.²⁷

Although one might expect rejoicing from a populace released from the power of Satan by a formidable exorcist, the response to Jesus' power is not relief, but fear. The Pharisees and Herodians begin to plot his murder,²⁸ his family claims Jesus is "out of his mind,"²⁹ and the scribes who come from Jerusalem to see what all the commotion is about claim that Jesus "has Beelzeboul (Βεελζεβουλ έχει) and he casts out demons by the ruler of the demons."³⁰ Jesus' own disciples are terrified of his powers³¹ and the inhabitants of Gerasa, where Jesus casts demons out of a man and allows them to enter a herd of swine, fear him and beg him to leave.³²

That Jesus "has Beelzeboul" is a clear accusation of sorcery. Indeed it is a claim that Jesus is the magician *par excellence* because he has bound Beelzeboul, the prince of demons. As Eitrem noted, "it marks the proper distance between John the Baptist and Jesus when John is said to 'have a demon' (Matt. xi.18) but Jesus is said to 'have Beelzebub' (Mark iii.22)."³³ Jesus is more powerful than John because he controls a more powerful demon. Kraeling, to his credit, noted this usage: "A clear case of this is the Beelzebub controversy, in which Jesus is said 'to have Beelzebub' βεελζεβουλ έχει (Mk 3 22). This does not mean that Jesus is the unfortunate plaything of Beelzebub; it means, rather, that Jesus is accused of being a magician who by incantations and magical practices has obtained control over Beelzebub and makes him do his bidding even when this is to Beelzebub's own disadvantage."³⁴

²⁷ Jennings & Liew, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 123 (2004): 485-486.

²⁸ Mark 3:6.

²⁹ Mark 3:21.

³⁰ Mark 3:22.

³¹ Mark 4:41.

³² Mark 5:15, 17.

³³ Eitrem, *Some Notes on the Demonology of the New Testament*, 4.

³⁴ Kraeling, 154.

The belief that magicians drove out one demon with the aid of a yet more powerful demon—“driving out one nail with another”³⁵ as Lucian has it—is reflected in Eusebius’ claim that Apollonius’ famous exorcism was accomplished “with the help of a more important demon.”³⁶ That “to have” Beelzeboul is to command Beelzeboul is further confirmed by the language of Revelation where the risen Christ is “the one who has the seven spirits of God (ο έχων τα επτα πνευματα του θεου) and the seven stars.”³⁷ “These seven spirits are thought of as autonomous beings, and they are equated with the seven angels which stand before God...What does it mean that Christ ‘has’ them? It obviously means that He has authority over them, that He can command them...”³⁸

That “to have” Beelzeboul is to *have authority* over Beelzeboul is further confirmed by the nearly identical wording of a necromantic spell to retain power over the ghost of a man who died violently:

I beseech you, Lord Helios, listen to me [name to be supplied] and grant me the power over *this spirit of a man killed violently* (τουτου του βιοθανατου πνευματος) from whose tent I hold [a body part]. *I have him with me* [name of deceased], (εχω αυτον μετ’ εμου [του δεινα] a helper (βοηθον) and avenger for whatever business I desire.³⁹

The “tent” (σκηνη, skēnē) is the body, the house of the soul, in this case a corpse; the identical metaphor occurs in 2 Corinthians, where “in the tent” (εν τω σκενει) means “in the body,”⁴⁰—the ghost of the murdered man is the sorcerer’s “helper” (βοηθος, boēthos), a spirit entity like the risen Jesus, “the Lord, my helper” (Κυριος εμου βοηθος).⁴¹

As a βιαιοθανατος (biaiothanatos), a victim of violence, the spirit of John the Baptist has the makings of an unquiet ghost—“Needy and dangerous figures waiting in the shadows of existence...particularly those who died young or violently, the unhappy and unsatisfied dead with their restless energy and free-floating rage.”⁴² “...no living person has the power of even a minor nameless hero, whose power flows simply from the fact that he is dead and angry about it, and cannot sleep still...many heroes die angry...waiting to be aveng-

³⁵ Lucian, *The Lover of Lies*, 9.

³⁶ Conybeare, *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana* II, 551, 567.

³⁷ Revelation 3:1.

³⁸ Hanse, “εχω,” *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* II, 821.

³⁹ Preisendanz, *Papyri Graecae Magicae* IV, 1947-1954.

⁴⁰ 2 Corinthians 5:4.

⁴¹ Hebrews 13:6.

⁴² Rabinowitz, *The Rotting Goddess: The Origin of the Witch in Classical Antiquity*, 104.

ed for their murders; these are potential actors in ghost stories, dangerous and partly wakeful.”⁴³ The ghost of John the Baptist, “a biaiothanatos, those who have been killed by violence,” is “part of a wider class of the restless dead, who came to be thought of as the typical instruments of malign magic.”⁴⁴

Peter Bolt’s comments on Mark 6:14-16 merit an extended quote:

Despite the fact that so few have noticed it, and so many have ignored it, it seems that the narrative is saying clearly that Herod considered Jesus to be a magician who had raised John’s spirit in order to capitalize upon its power. This is why the focus is upon John’s beheading. A beheaded man, as a *βιαιοθανατος*, would make a powerful ghost and would be highly sought after by the magicians. When Herod suggests that Jesus has ‘raised’ John, he uses language that regularly appears in the magical material for the summoning of the ghostly *daimon* from its rest in the underworld in order to do the magician’s bidding.⁴⁵

Although the modern rationalist might suppose a headless spirit would be worse than useless, the magical papyri contain frequent references to the power of headless entities of various sorts.⁴⁶

That Lucian parodied the claims of the Christian gospels is easy to suspect given his examples of those who die violently:

“We are just attempting to persuade this hard-headed fellow,” Eucrates said, pointing at me, “to believe that some *spirits and ghosts and souls of dead men* (*δαιμονας...και φασματα και νεκρων ψυχας*) exist and wander around above ground and appear to whomever they wish. I blushed and bowed my head out of respect for Arignotus.

“Perhaps, Eucrates,” he said, “Tychiades means to say that *only the souls of those who died by violence* (*τας των βιαιωσ αποθανοντων μονας ψυχας*) walk about, for example if someone hanged himself,⁴⁷ or was beheaded,⁴⁸ or crucified or departed from life in similar fashion, but that those who die from the usual causes do not.”⁴⁹

⁴³ Vermeule, *Aspects of Death in Early Greek Art and Poetry*, 7, 27.

⁴⁴ Gordon, *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: Ancient Greece and Rome*, 176.

⁴⁵ Bolt, *Jesus’ Defeat of Death: Persuading Mark’s Early Readers*, 191-192.

⁴⁶ Preisendanz, *Papyri Graecae Magicae* II, 11; IV, 2132; V, 98, 125, 130, 145; VII, 233, 243, 442; VIII, 91.

⁴⁷ Matthew 27:5.

⁴⁸ Matthew 14:10.

⁴⁹ Lucian, *Lover of Lies*, 29 (my translation).

That the exorcist/sorcerer controls the demon is the whole point of Jesus' question, "How can one enter a strong man's house and seize his belongings *unless one first binds the strong man?*"⁵⁰ After a thorough review of the intrinsic evidence of the gospel accounts, Samain concluded that to "have Beelzeboul" must be understood in an active sense, *to have authority* over the demon:

Christ is the master of Beelzeboul and he controls him to the point of using him to perform exorcisms...joined with the ruler of the demons, he compels him, by using his name, to perform the miracles he wants, particularly exorcisms; no spirit, no demonic power, can resist him...*Δαιμονιον εχει* therefore means that Jesus is a false prophet, a magician.⁵¹

Samain's conclusion agrees perfectly with the analysis of the Christian apologist Origen, who, above all other writers from antiquity, provides us with the most fulsome explanation of how exorcism and magic were thought to work:

Once we concede that it is consistent with the existence of *magic and sorcery* (*μαγειαν και γοητειαν*), *made active by evil demons* (*ενεργουμενην υπο πονηρων δαιμονων*) that are invoked, *spellbound by magical charms* (*περιεργοις θελγομενων*), *submitting to practitioners of sorcery* (*ανθρωποις γοησιν υπακουοντων*)...⁵²

Demons, like "the strong man" of Jesus' analogy, are *bound*, compelled by Christian exorcists as well as pagan magicians, forced to submit by prayers or incantations, a magical *force majeure*⁵³—"This kind can never be cast out except by prayer"⁵⁴—which in the Christian spiritual economy is accomplished by using the powerful name of Jesus: "Did we not cast out demons in

⁵⁰ Matthew 12:29.

⁵¹ Samain, *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 15 (1932): 468, 470, 482.

My translation of "...le Christ est maitre de Béelzéboul et le domine au point de l'employer pour opérer ses exorcismes...uni au chef des demons, il le forcerait, possédant son nom, à opérer les prodiges qu'il veut et spécialement les exorcismes; nul esprit, nulle puissance démoniaque ne lui résiste...signifie donc encore que Jésus est un faux prophète magicien."

⁵² Origen, *Contra Celsum* II, 51.

⁵³ It is a nearly constant claim by Christian apologists that spells and prayers are different in kind, a claim utterly overturned by ancient usage. Spells in the magical papyri are quite often called "prayers" (*ευχαι*) as anyone familiar with the material knows. Jewish magicians also failed to observe any distinction between spells and prayer; the *Sepher Ha-Razim* instructs the magician, "fall upon your face to the earth and pray this *prayer* (*הפלח*)."⁵⁴ (Morgan, *Sepher Ha-Razim*, 71.)

⁵⁴ Mark 9:29.

your name?”⁵⁵ What are incantations used to drive out demons if not prayers to be delivered from evil? Indeed, for Origen the confessions of Christian faith are “just like spells that have been filled with power” (ὡσπερι ἐπωδᾶς δυνάμειος πεπληρωμένους).⁵⁶

Regarding the use of Jesus’ name in exorcism, Origen explains,

A similar philosophy of names also applies to our Jesus, in whose name, in fact, innumerable demons are seen driven out of souls and bodies, so *effective it was* (ἐνεργησαν) on those from whom [the demons] were driven. And on the topic of names we have mentioned that those who are experts in the use of incantations relate that the spell pronounced in the appropriate dialect⁵⁷ *achieves* (ἐνεργησαι) the very thing commanded, but said in another tongue becomes weak and capable of nothing.⁵⁸

Significantly, Origen’s explanation duplicates the demonological use of ἐνεργεω in Mark: “because of”⁵⁹ [raising John the Baptist] *the powers are at work* (δια τουτο ενεργουσιν αι δυναμεις) in [Jesus].⁶⁰ Regarding ἐνεργεω (energēō), “to be at work,” Bertram notes that in the New Testament “theological or demonological use is predominant.”⁶¹ The “powers” suspected to be at work in Jesus are spirits.⁶²

Both ἐνεργεω and corresponding noun, ἐνεργεια (energeia), from whence *energy*, are used in the magical papyri for working sorcery; it “generally refers to the (activated) power of magic...the actual ‘activating’ of a magic spell.”⁶³ The magical papyri contain a number of examples that permit us to contextualize this and cognate terms: “the ritual called ‘the Sword,’ which is

⁵⁵ Matthew 7:22.

⁵⁶ Origen, *Contra Celsum* III, 68.

⁵⁷ Preservation of the “appropriate dialect” is the likely reason for the retention of the Aramaic expressions in Mark 5:41 and 7:34—which are missing from the parallel passages in Matthew and Luke. Aune notes “the importance attributed to preserving adjurations and incantations in their original language” and proposes that the preservation of Aramaic in Mark occurred “for the purpose of guiding Christian thaumaturges in exorcistic and healing activities.” (Aune, *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt* II.23.2:1535.)

⁵⁸ Origen, *Contra Celsum* I, 25.

⁵⁹ δια τουτο is clearly causative; following Smyth, it could be translated, “owing to, thanks to, on account of, in consequence of...” (Smyth, *Greek Grammar*, 375.)

⁶⁰ Mark 6:14.

⁶¹ Bertram, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* II, 653.

⁶² Compare Romans 8:38, 1 Peter 3:22, etc.

⁶³ Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets*, 241.

unequaled *owing to its [magical] power*” (δια την ενεργειαν),⁶⁴ “*the sacred power* (την θειαν ενεργειαν) of the symbols you are about to possess,”⁶⁵ “the preparation of the magical working” (η κατασκευη της ενεργειας),⁶⁶ “pull up the plant while invoking the name of the demon, *demanding that it be very effective*,” (παρακαλων ενεργεστεραν γενεσθαι),⁶⁷ “you have the rite of *the greatest and sacred power* (του μεγιστου και θειου ενεργηματος).⁶⁸

Paul’s letter to the Ephesians participates fully in the broader cultural assumption that figures raised from the dead are sources of miraculous power—the Ephesian Christians will know “the surpassing greatness of his power among us who believe, *according to the working* (κατα την ενεργειαν) of the power of his might, which *he put into operation* (ενεργησεν) by raising Christ from the dead.”⁶⁹ The spirit of the risen Christ stands against “*the ruler of the authority of the air* (το αρχοντα της εξουσιας του αερος), *the spirit even now at work* (του πνευματος του νυν ενεργουντος) in the sons of disobedience.”⁷⁰

The connection between Jesus’ *violent death by crucifixion* and the *derived power* (δυναμις, *dunamis*) is everywhere presupposed in the writings of Luke and Paul. The apostles testify to Jesus’ resurrection “with great power” (δυναμει μαγαλη).⁷¹ As Kraeling noted, “*Δυναμεις* are either ‘mighty works’ (cf. Mk 6 5) or the powers by which such works are done (cf. in Mk 5 30).”⁷²

“If *δυναμις* [*dunamis*, my note] is understood here as ‘miracle working power,’ that is, the sort of power that works *δυναμεις* (‘miracles’), then the apostles’ role in testifying to the resurrection is not just oral, but linked directly to their miracle working.”⁷³ As Myllykoski notes, the raising of Jesus “is the foundation miracle for the whole narrative of Acts”⁷⁴ as it is in the gospel of John, which specifies that the spirit will not be given until Jesus is “glori-

⁶⁴ Preisendanz, *Papyri Graecae Magicae* IV, 1718.

⁶⁵ Ibid, I, 274.

⁶⁶ Ibid, III, 290.

⁶⁷ Ibid, IV, 2976.

⁶⁸ Ibid, XII, 317.

⁶⁹ Ephesians 1:19-20.

⁷⁰ Ephesians 2:2.

⁷¹ Acts 4:33.

⁷² Kraeling, 149.

⁷³ Reimer, *Miracle and Magic: A Study in the Acts of the Apostles and the Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, 91.

⁷⁴ Myllykoski, *Wonders Never Cease: The Purpose of Narrating Miracle Stories in the New Testament and Its Religious Environment*, 162.

fied.”⁷⁵ Acts consistently connects the performance of signs and wonders with the risen Jesus, “nailed up and killed by the hands of lawless men.”⁷⁶

The gospel of Mark shares the basic assumption behind necromancy: *as residents of the spirit world, ghosts and demons know both the future and truths concealed from mortals*. A voice from heaven first announces that Jesus is the Son of God,⁷⁷ but the next spirit to identify Jesus as the “holy one,” is a demon.⁷⁸ The demons “knew who he was”⁷⁹ and are blabbering it everywhere—Jesus is the “Son of God.”⁸⁰ The Gerasene demoniac, who “lived among the tombs,”⁸¹ implying possession by a ghost, identifies Jesus as the “Son of the Most High God.”⁸²

Necromancy, strictly speaking, is the practice or art of obtaining information concerning the future by communication with the dead who...are thought to share with gods and demons a knowledge of things beyond the ken of living mortals...the term necromancy has a wider connotation by virtue of which it describes the practice of accomplishing through the instrumentality of the spirits of the dead any or all of the deeds belonging to the sphere of “black magic.”⁸³

Spirit manipulation was standard magical praxis in the Middle East for at least a millennium or more before the time of Jesus and ghosts were often invoked to accomplish magical acts.

*I command you, ghost of the dead (εξορκίζω σε νεκυδαιμον), by the powerful and implacable god and by his holy names...in whatever form you had, and if you are able, transact for me [named] task, if I command you, now, now, quick, quick...[the ghost] will ask you, saying, “Command what you wish and I will do it.”*⁸⁴

Small wonder “by associating itself with power over demons Christianity associated itself with magic in the minds of its critics.”⁸⁵

⁷⁵ John 7:39.

⁷⁶ Acts 2:22-23, 43.

⁷⁷ Mark 1:11.

⁷⁸ Mark 1:24.

⁷⁹ Mark 1:34.

⁸⁰ Mark 3:11.

⁸¹ Mark 5:3.

⁸² Mark 5:7.

⁸³ Kraeling, 147.

⁸⁴ Preisendanz, *Papyri Graecae Magicae* IV, 2030-2053.

⁸⁵ Sorensen, *Possession and Exorcism in the New Testament and Early Christianity*, 179.

Ross Kraemer has proposed that Mark emphasized the method of John's death precisely to counter a rumor that Jesus was John raised from the dead:

Why is Jesus not John resurrected from the dead? The gospel narratives are clear that this identification has been suggested. It would seem to be troubling to followers of Jesus for obvious reasons, namely, that it obscures distinctions between Jesus and John and may even subordinate the former to the latter...Jesus is not John raised from the dead because John's body and head were severed: only his body was buried by his disciples, while the whereabouts of his head, given to Herodias, are unknown, thus, implicitly, making his bodily resurrection impossible.⁸⁶

Regarding the reason why Jesus may have selected the ghost of John above all others as a source of power, this observation by Daniel Ogden bears careful note: "How significant were these categories of dead for necromancy in particular? Often the prime criterion for selecting a ghost for necromancy was the relevance of the individual ghost to the matter at hand. Hence, the ghost exploited was often a dear one...A further category that may have been particularly valued for necromancy was that of the exalted ghost."⁸⁷ Who could have been more relevant to Jesus' career or more exalted than John the Baptist? He is Jesus' forerunner, "the voice of one crying out in the wilderness," even a relative according to Luke, and of those born of women, who was greater than John?⁸⁸

Comparing Mark's account with those of the other gospels suggests that Kraeeling was spot on; the report of popular opinion in Mark, which at the very least strongly implied that Jesus was a necromancer, has been substantially rewritten by the other synoptics. As noted by Kannaday, "The text of the New Testament was in a potential sense an ammunition magazine, a common store of gunpowder and musket balls critical to victory in the campaign being waged by both pagan intellectuals and apologetic defenders."⁸⁹ The writers of Matthew and Luke attempt to preserve the tradition about John while at the same time disarming it.

In the process of redacting his version of the story, Matthew has Herod say, "*This man is John the Baptist (Ουτος εστιν Ιωαννης ο βαπτιστης)*. He was raised from the dead and *that is why the powers are working (δια τουτο αι*

⁸⁶ Kraemer, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 125 (2006): 343.

⁸⁷ Ogden, *Greek and Roman Necromancy*, 226-227.

⁸⁸ John 1:23, Luke 1:36, Matthew 11:11.

⁸⁹ Kannaday, *Apologetic Discourse and the Scribal Tradition*, 2004, Society of Biblical Literature.

δυναμεις ενεργουσιν) in him.”⁹⁰ The text of Matthew has Herod simply identify Jesus as John raised from the dead, but this clumsy gloss does not address the question of why “the powers” would be working in one raised from the dead—the New Testament records no case of special powers accruing to the resurrected—“there is no evidence of a contemporary expectation that the resurrected dead would be endowed with miraculous powers they did not possess during their lifetimes.”⁹¹ And as David Aune observes, “it is unclear how a resurrected John could be thought to perform miracles when he had not done so previous to his execution.”⁹²

Nor, even more obviously, does it address how Herod could have confused Jesus, who was still very much alive and whose “name” was widely recognized, with John, the man whose execution he had just ordered. If, as the gospels assert, John performed no powerful works while alive⁹³ even though “he will go before [Jesus] *in the spirit and power of Elijah* (εν πνευματι και δυναμει Ηλίου),”⁹⁴ a prophet of exceptional miracle-working power, how could Herod have imagined that John would start to produce a gasp-inducing series of wonders once raised from the dead? As Kraeling noted, such an identification “fails to take into account the strong individuality of John and the difference between him and Jesus.”⁹⁵

That Matthew’s reworking of the story has an apologetic intent is suggested by his stipulation that John’s disciples come and take his now headless body away, bury it, and tell Jesus about it.⁹⁶ Matthew wants his readers to know that John is not an *αταφος* (*ataphos*), *unburied*, a class of the dead likely to become a restless ghost. “It was commonly believed in ancient times that there were two classes of spirits of the dead which were relatively easy to conjure up and were thus most accessible for the purposes of ‘black magic.’ The first class is that of the *αταφοι* [*ataphoi*, my note], spirits of persons who had not received a regular burial...The second class, relatively more numerous and less immediately attached to a specific locality, is that of the *βιαιοθανατοι* [*biothatoi*], spirits of persons who had died a violent death.”⁹⁷

⁹⁰ Matthew 14:2.

⁹¹ Frayer-Griggs, *Matthew and Mark Across Perspectives*, 40.

⁹² Aune, “Magic in Early Christianity,” *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* 2.23.2 (1980), 1542.

⁹³ John 10:41.

⁹⁴ Luke 1:17.

⁹⁵ Kraeling, 153.

⁹⁶ Matthew 14:12-13.

⁹⁷ Kraeling, 154-155.

Luke, on the other hand, produces a Herod who is “completely perplexed,⁹⁸ unable to even begin to explain Jesus’ famous powers. Garrett admits that Luke has rephrased “the most damaging part of the account” to avoid the charge of necromancy, but next claims that the evangelists “did not share modern readers’ frequent assumption that identity of appearance implies actual identity.”⁹⁹ Garrett does not explain how she knows what assumptions the ‘evangelists’ shared; if their own opinion is to be allowed, it would appear they believed that appearances and identity were tightly linked, that ‘trees are known by their fruit.’¹⁰⁰ The alteration and omission of incriminating details by Matthew and Luke indicate that the writers shared common assumptions about appearance and identity—why emphasize Jesus’ exorcisms unless their performance established his identity, the Son of God?¹⁰¹ Garrett’s claim also ignores the reputation of Jews among Gentiles—Gentiles regarded Jews as accomplished exorcists and Jesus the Jew as a magician.

Everyone knows about the Syrian from Palestine,¹⁰² *the master of his craft* (τον επι τουτω σοφιστην),¹⁰³ and how he receives many moon-struck, frothing at the mouth and eyes rolling, and he sets them aright and sends them away sound of mind...standing beside them as they lie there he asks from whence [the demons] have come into the body. The madman himself is silent, but the demon answers in Greek or a barbarian [language] from whence and how he entered the man. By adjuring, or if the spirit does not obey, threatening, he drives out the demon.”¹⁰⁴

It is likely that Lucian had Jesus himself—renowned for casting out devils—in mind when composing his story of the Jewish exorcist and that he and his audience were enjoying a joke at Christian expense. “This passage enraged pious scholiasts who saw it as yet another of Lucian’s blasphemies.”¹⁰⁵ “It is possible this parody was inspired by some gospel story...”¹⁰⁶ “The church fathers, among them Irenaeus, Arnobius, Justin Martyr, Lactantius, and Origen, were keenly aware of the charge—made by Jew and Gentile alike—that Jesus was a magician.”¹⁰⁷

⁹⁸ Luke 9:7-9.

⁹⁹ Garrett, *The Demise of the Devil*, 3.

¹⁰⁰ Matthew 7:20.

¹⁰¹ Luke 4:41.

¹⁰² “The context of Lucian’s tale is Judaeo-Christian. The term ‘Syrian from Palestine in effect means ‘Jewish’.” (Ogden, *In Search of the Sorcerer’s Apprentice*, 133.)

¹⁰³ Elsewhere Lucian refers to Jesus as “that crucified sophist” (τον δε ανεσκολοπισμενον εκεινον σοφιστην). (Lucian, *On the Death of Peregrinus*, 13).

¹⁰⁴ Lucian, *The Lover of Lies*, 16.

¹⁰⁵ Jones, *Culture and Society in Lucian*, 48.

¹⁰⁶ Smith, *Jesus the Magician*, 57.

¹⁰⁷ Ricks, *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power*, 141.

It will come as little surprise to find that Kraeling's arguments have received short shrift among New Testament scholars of apologetic bent—Twelftree¹⁰⁸ and Hoehner¹⁰⁹ relegate Kraeling to the footnotes and neither addresses his thesis in any detail. Notwithstanding, several lines of evidence converge to support Kraeling's interpretation: the careers of John and Jesus, both of whom were well known—"People went out to [John] from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan"¹¹⁰—overlapped. Herod could not have confused them. Therefore Matthew's identification of Jesus as John back from the dead fails on textual grounds and is historically improbable.

The source of Jesus' authority over demons became a topic of speculation; some "were saying (*ελεγον*), 'John the Baptist has been raised from the dead *and because of this* (*και δια τουτο*) the powers are at work in [Jesus]."¹¹¹ The terms of the common people match word for word the terminology of the magical papyri, our clearest window into the work of popular magicians who were notable for raising ghosts as magical assistants. Indeed, the critics of early Christianity constantly compare Christian exorcism to "the works of sorcerers" (*τα εργα των γοητων*), the street magicians "who drive demons out of men, and blow away diseases, *and call up the souls of the heroes*."¹¹² Given the abundance of testimony from ancient sources, Kraeling's explanation has far more support than the alternatives.

That the notion of raising of a ghost for magical purposes would never have suggested itself in the context of early Christianity is questionable. Besides the references in near-contemporary non-Christian sources, the pseudo-Clementine *Homilies* of the early 4th century contain a specific reference to just such a practice that is attributed to Simon: "For he set out to commit murder, as he revealed as a friend among friends, extracting the soul of a boy from his own body by means of abominable invocations, *a helper* (*συνεργον*) to cause the appearance of whatever he pleased..."¹¹³

Kraeling's careful attention to the text distinguished "what *the people* were saying about Jesus"¹¹⁴ and Herod's own conclusion. Some claimed Jesus' powers could be attributed to the 'raising' of John "and because of this the powers are at work in [Jesus] *but others were saying* (*αλλοι δε ελεγον*), 'He's Elijah' (*Ηλιας εστιν*)"—not an impossible conclusion if Elijah was expected

¹⁰⁸ Twelftree, *Jesus the Exorcist*, 208.

¹⁰⁹ Hoehner, *Harod Antipas*, 188.

¹¹⁰ Matthew 3:5.

¹¹¹ Mark 6:14.

¹¹² Origen, *Contra Celsum* I, 68.

¹¹³ Clementine *Homilies* II, 26.

¹¹⁴ Kraeling, 148. (The emphasis is Kraeling's.)

to return—“*but others were saying (αλλοι δε ελεγον), ‘A prophet like one of the prophets.’*”¹¹⁵ “But when Herod heard, he said, ‘John, the one I beheaded, *this one has been raised (ουτος ηγερθη).*”¹¹⁶ Herod’s answer, “this one,” strongly implies his rejection of the other possibilities: Jesus is not Elijah, nor is he a prophet “like one of the prophets.” Jesus has ‘raised’ or ‘awakened’ John and “because of this the powers are at work in him.” Herod’s response, “this one” (ουτος) serves both to clearly identify the ‘risen’ John as the source of Jesus’ power and to dismiss the alternative theories; the demonstrative serves a similar function elsewhere in Mark: “*This [and no other] is my Son (Ουτος εστιν ο υιος μου), the beloved...*”¹¹⁷

Since Kraeling wrote, great progress has been made in understanding the popular culture of the Greco-Roman world as it applies to early Christianity,¹¹⁸ a culture now known to have been obsessed with magic and the supernatural. With the publication of material collected and edited by Mordecai Morgalioth,¹¹⁹ it became increasingly obvious that popular Jewish culture was likewise preoccupied with magic. Indeed, the broader understanding of the society in which Jesus and the early Christians moved both supports Kraeling’s interpretation of Mark 6:14-16 and clarifies the apologetic intentions of Matthew and Luke who apparently understood all too well the implications of the text as it stands in Mark.

¹¹⁵ Mark 6:14-15.

¹¹⁶ Mark 4:16.

¹¹⁷ Mark 9:7.

On the particularizing use of ουτος see Baur, Arndt & Gingrich. (*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 600-601.)

¹¹⁸ Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism and Ephesians: Power and Magic*, to cite but two of many possible examples.

¹¹⁹ Margalioth, *Sepher Ha-Razim*, 1966, Yediot Achronot.

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