

REVIEW

Attilio Mastrocinque, *From Jewish Magic to Gnosticism*
(Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), paper, xiii + 253 pp.

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Attilio Mastrocinque argues that the current sentiment of scholarship concerning what constitutes 'magic' in Jewish and Christian Antiquity is generally anachronistic compared to how the ancients themselves (Judeo-Christian, Greco-Roman, and Mesopotamian) would have understood the term

He accomplishes this through an exhaustive presentation of the evidence concerning the divine (and often diabolical) snake in a variety of Mediterranean and Mesopotamian religious and magical systems, including, but not limited to, Marcionite, Ophite, Gnostic (Christian and non-Christian), Hebrew, Chaldean, and (orthodox) Christian systems. Though the aspects he presents concerning the magical and religious symbol of the snake are vast, some points of special emphasis include the snake as Chnoubis and Chnum, the breaker of the giants, the leontocephalous (lion-headed) god, the divine worm, the ouroboros (the snake eating its own tail), Leviathan, the dragon, the digamma (with a Greek numerical value of 6), and the serpent in the garden of Eden (both as 'orthodox' Christians and Gnostics understood it).

The symbol of the snake, both in its universality and in its particularities, becomes for Mastrocinque a measuring-stick by which we might judge 1) the degree to which the religious/magical cultures in question have embraced or rejected syncretism with other proximate cultures; 2) the possible lines of transmission of or opposition to magic, at least insofar as the use of the symbol of the snake is concerned; and 3) the general views of each of these cultures upon magic, both in terms of a) relative acceptance or rejection and in terms of b) what constituted 'magic.' Needless, to say, for Mastrocinque to make such an appraisal, he must establish that the snake is of such central and universal importance to Mediterranean and Mesopotamian magical systems that it has the capacity to serve as such a measuring stick. Indeed, the presentation of his evidence, by and large, seems to accomplish this.

In his final chapter, Mastrocinque states that the aim of his presentation has been to establish that Gnostic magic, based upon the 'traditions of the Chaldeans,' "was in fact the Gnostic religion" (p. 204). Having said this, he realizes that such a statement is bound to lead to some confusion for sake of the ambiguity of the terms 'Gnostic' and 'magic.'

In his opening pages, Mastrocinque already addressed the current controversy in the definition of 'Gnosticism,' which he defines, for the purposes of his present study, as "a synonym for the heresies addressed by Irenaeus and related heresies of a similar nature" (pp. 4-5) [*italics ignored*].

Concerning the second term, 'magic,' he offers a variety of possible definitions each particular to a time, culture, and point of view. Of particular interest to Mastrocinque is the point of view of the 'Roman Christian Church,' which understood magic to be the 'work of demons.' Therefore, in opposition to the more neutral view of magic by the Greco-Roman cultures and in direct hostility to Gnostic heretics so-called, (orthodox) Christians came to view magic as demonic, the contrary term to 'miracle,' and polytheistic. To put it more accurately, however, as Mastrocinque

points out, 'magic' was a blanket condemnatory term that always connoted that activity practiced by the heretics. Hence, magic was condemned as heretical, and heretics were condemned as practitioners of magic. Christians, however, came to embrace classical literature and philosophy; therefore, the domain of magic was eventually considered to be a rather small feature within Greco-Roman religiosity and culture at large. Such an inherited definition of magic, Mastrocinque argues, is with us today and is the main hue that colors contemporary scholarship on the matter. Therefore, if we are to understand the way in which the ancients understood magic, we must lay aside our own constructs and must not, "claim that we are using an [sic] universal category of evaluation, because this universal category does not exist" (p. 210).

Mastrocinque has a masterful command of the evidence. Indeed, one of the major contributions of his book is the archaeological evidence, as of yet largely ignored, he brings to bear upon the subject, namely Gnostic gems and lamellae. Unfortunately, it is not always an easy matter to intuit toward what end he is presenting this evidence, and the content of the concluding chapter comes as some surprise. Hence, this book might be somewhat impenetrable to the uninitiated. Nevertheless, his synthesis of the evidence is compelling and his conclusions, as modest as they may be, are an insightful and necessary critique of what might be called a scholarly disdain concerning the subject of magic in Antiquity.