

# QUEST 52

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## Jesus Was Labeled a Magician and Deceiver in the Second and Third Centuries

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During his lifetime Jesus was labeled a deceiver (Matt 27:63; Luke 23:2, 5, 14; John 7:12, 47; cf. Deut 13:5) and demon possessed (Mark 3:22; Matt 9:34; 10:25; 12:24; Luke 11:15; John 8:48–49; 10:20–21). Interestingly, Jesus’ predecessor, John the Baptist, was also charged with being demon possessed (Matt 11:18/Luke 7:33). In the first three centuries C.E. these accusations continued in two specific forms. The earliest was that he was a political dissident of some sort (to be discussed below). The second and third centuries gave rise to another criticism, namely, Jesus was a magician (μάγος) and a deceiver (λαοπλάνος).<sup>1</sup> Stanton has traced the use of these terms (cf. Acts 13:6–12 [cf. Rev 16:13–14]; Philo, *Spec. Leg.* 1.315, *Vit. Mos.* 1.277; Josephus, *Ant.* 20.169–72; *J.W.* 2.261–63), and has shown that they were stock polemic against social figures (particularly Jesus) deemed to be disturbing to the social order.<sup>2</sup> “There was thus no period in the history of the empire in which the magician was not considered an enemy of society, subject at the least to exile, more often to death.”<sup>3</sup> The following sources illustrate how politically charged these accusations against Jesus were.

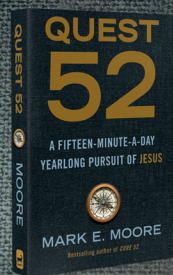
Celsus, a Neo-platonist philosopher who attacked Christianity (c. 175 C.E.), wrote *True Doctrine*, which is preserved to a large extent in Origen’s refutation *Contra Celsum* (c. 250 C.E.). He portrays Jesus as a lying magician: “Because he was poor he hired himself out as a workman in Egypt, and there tried his hand at certain magical powers (δυνάμεών τινων πειραθείς) on which the Egyptians pride themselves; he returned full of conceit because of these powers, and on account of them gave himself the title of God” (*C. Cels.* 1:28). Again, “The men who tortured and punished your God in person suffered nothing for doing it... What new thing has happened since then which

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<sup>1</sup> The difference between the two categories (dissident and deceiver) is partly due to the Roman provenance of the earlier accusations and the Jewish provenance of the later. But part of the difference is that there is little difference between calling someone a magician, a false-prophet, and a rebel since often it was through signs, wonders, or prophecies that people were led to follow a false messianic claimant (cf. Matt 7:15–23; 24:11, 24; Mark 13:22; Acts 13:6; Rev 16:13–14; 19:20; Josephus, *Ant.* 20.97; 20.160–66; *J.W.* 6.312; Suetonius, *Vespasian* 4.5; and Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.13). “Domitian’s expulsion of philosophers and astrologers from Rome is simply one instance of a general recognition that such teachers might be significant politically,” W. Horbury, “Christ as Brigand in Ancient Anti-Christian Polemic,” in *Jesus and the Politics of His Day* (ed. E. Bammel and C. F. D. Moule; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 187.

<sup>2</sup> Graham Stanton, “Jesus of Nazareth: A Magician and False Prophet Who Deceived God’s People?” in *Jesus of Nazareth: Lord and Christ: Essays on the Historical Jesus and New Testament Christology* (ed. Joel B. Green and Max Turner; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 164–80. Ramsay MacMullen, *Enemies of the Roman Order: Treason, Unrest, and Alienation in the Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), devotes an extensive chapter to both prophets and magicians, showing (a) the two categories were often confused and conflated (e.g., Tacitus, *Ann.* 2.27, 32; 12.22; Tertullian, *De Idol.* 9; *Apol.* 35), (b) both were dangerous to the Roman order because they stirred up the populous, especially in hopes for a new emperor. In 12 B.C.E. Augustus burned more than two thousand books of prophecy (Suetonius, *Aug.* 31.1), after which their private ownership was forbidden (Tacitus, *Ann.* 6.12), and under Tiberius the Sibylline oracles were carefully checked. For this very reason Augustus (at age 74 in 11 C.E.) banned divination. This clearly demonstrates that for Jesus to be cast in the light of a prophet or magician had dangerous political implications for his followers, especially given that Jews were considered by the Romans as especially given to noxious superstitions (Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.13).

<sup>3</sup> MacMullen, *Enemies of the Roman Order*, 125.



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might lead one to believe that he was not a sorcerer (γόης) but son of God?” (*C. Cels.* 8:41).

Justin, *First Apology* 30 (c. 160 C.E.), defends Jesus against his opponent’s claim that his miracles were done by magical arts. Again, in his *Dialogue* he says, “They [the Jews] said it was a display of magic art, for they even dared to say that he [Jesus] was a magician (μάγος) and a deceiver of the people (λαοπλάνος)” (*Dialogue* 69.7).

B. *Sanhedrin* 43a (c. 500 C.E.) records Jesus execution:

On the eve of Passover Yeshu was hanged. For forty days before the execution took place, a herald went forth and cried, “He is going forth to be stoned because he has practiced sorcery and enticed and led Israel astray. Anyone who can say anything in his favor, let him come forward and plead on his behalf.” But since nothing was brought forward in his favor, he was hanged on the eve of Passover. Ulla retorted: “Do you suppose that he was one for whom a defense could be made? Was he not a deceiver, concerning whom scripture says (Deuteronomy 13:8), “Neither shalt thou spare neither shalt thou conceal him?” *With Yeshu however, it was different, for he was connected with the government*” (emphasis added).

This truly is an extraordinary passage for a number of reasons: (1) It describes the death of Jesus by stoning (although allusion to his “hanging” occurs earlier). (2) It is only a Jewish trial; Romans are never mentioned. (3) They searched unsuccessfully for *defense* witnesses for forty days rather than *offensive* witnesses in the middle of a single night (per the canonical Gospels). This presentation looks suspiciously tendentious. Nevertheless, it too portrays Jesus as a dangerous public figure. Similarly, section 107b accuses Jesus of practicing magic and leading Israel astray.<sup>4</sup> These two clear references to Jesus in the Talmud are of a piece. Both portray Jesus as a heretic who led others astray, and both portray him as publicly dangerous.<sup>5</sup>

*Tosefta Hullin* 2:22–24 recounts a story of Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus being accused (then later acquitted) of heresy. He was mystified as to how such an accusation could have arisen. One of his students suggested that perhaps he had listened with pleasure to the teachings of a *min* (heretic). To this he replied, “By heaven! You remind me. Once I was strolling in the camp of Sepphoris. I bumped into Jacob of Kefar Sikhnin and he told me of a teaching of *minut* (heresy) in the name of Jesus ben Pantiri, and it pleased me.”

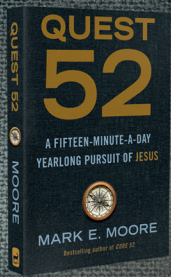
*Acts of Thomas* [3<sup>rd</sup> century C.E.] chapter 96 records Charisius saying to his wife Mygdonia, “I have heard that that magician and deceiver (μάγος ἐκεῖνος καὶ πλάνος) teaches that a man should not live with his own wife.”

Taken together, these sources demonstrate that the two-pronged accusation of deceiver and magician were political to the extent that such figures were socially subversive and publicly

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<sup>4</sup> “One day R. Jehoshua was saying Shema and Jesus came before him. R. Jehoshua signaled that he would receive Jesus, but Jesus thought that the rabbi repelled him. Then Jesus went out and hung up a title and worshipped it. R. Jehoshua said to him, ‘Return [to the teaching of your fathers]’ but Jesus said, ‘I have learned from you that everyone who sins and causes others to sin is given no chance to repent.’ *Thus a teacher had said, Jesus the Nazarene practiced magic and led astray and deceived Israel*” [*b. Sanh.* 107b].

<sup>5</sup> *B. Shabbat* 104b, recounts the story of Rabbi Eliezer (c. 70–100 C.E.) concerning one Ben Stada, Ben Pantera who worked spells he learned from Egypt and cut his flesh. His mother, named Miriam, was an adulteress and this magician son was her bastard. It is possible that this story was told in reference to Jesus and Pantera is a pun on the word *parthenos*. But Robert Van Voorst, *Jesus Outside the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 114–15 argues against the connection based on the fact that this section of the Mishnah, *m. Yebamot* 4.13, deals with near kin offspring, not bastards in general. At any rate, the connection to Jesus is too dubious for any definite connection. Although it is instructive that both Jesus and Ben Stada were accused of illicit “magic”.



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proscribed. Such was the state of affairs in the second and third centuries. If Stanton's argument holds that this can be extrapolated back into the first century (which appears reasonable), this would also describe the view of Jesus in his own day.<sup>6</sup>

**Summary:** Jesus' miraculous cures were portrayed as evidence of the in-breaking kingdom of God. They were presented as tangible promises of God's renewal of Israel. This is, perhaps, why it was the feeding of the five thousand that sparked the crowd to make him king. Such miracles were offensive to the current leaders of Israel who attempted to reinterpret them by labeling Jesus a deviant—a socio-political category. *While Jesus' miraculous cures do not portray him as a politician, they do place him in the political arena, at least as a perceived prophet of social protest who captured the attention of community leaders.*

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<sup>6</sup> Stanton, "Magician and False Prophet," 164–80.