



Ancient Christian Magic: Coptic Texts of Ritual Power

By Marvin W. Meyer, Richard Smith

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This thought-provoking collection of magical texts from ancient Egypt shows the exotic rituals, esoteric healing practices, and incantatory and supernatural dimensions that flowered in early Christianity. These remarkable Christian magical texts include curses, spells of protection from "headless powers" and evil spirits, spells invoking thunderous powers, descriptions of fire baptism, and even recipes from a magical "cookbook." Virtually all the texts are by Coptic Christians, and they date from about the 1st-12th centuries of the common era, with the majority from late antiquity. By placing these rarely seen texts in historical context and discussing their significance, the authors explore the place of healing, prayer, miracles, and magic in the early Christian experience, and expand our understanding of Christianity and Gnosticism as a vital folk religion.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Traditionalists may find heretical the use of "Christian" as a modifier for "magic." But it's an apt combination for this gathering of previously untranslated curses, recipes and spells ritualistically cast by Egyptian Christians. In the Coptic language of the early Gnostics the words for "religion" and "magic" have common roots. While the texts offered here are individually intriguing (especially those about sex and healing), their cumulative effect is, as the editors note, that "they demonstrate that Christianity can take the form of a folk religion . . . making use of ritual power for all sorts of practical purposes." There is, however, something else happening here as well. The materials gathered in this book largely date from the era of the Nag Hammadi Library, which, since its 1945 discovery in Egypt, has revealed aspects of early Christianity in a manner and scope comparable to that with which the Dead Sea Scrolls have illuminated the study of ancient Judaism; as a result, this collection also deepens and broadens our knowledge of how believers in Christ lived before the "Church" evolved. Readers who made a religion bestseller of The Nag Hammadi translation, for which Smith was managing editor, will find this collection to be a valuable adjunct to that benchmark of scholarship on Christian origins.

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From Library Journal

The use of magic or ritual in the early practice of the Christian religion reflects its roots in folk practices and beliefs. This volume presents a sampling of English translations of early texts, dating from 100 C.E. to the 12th century, that concern private rituals done for specific purposes (e.g., to attract a woman, to cure a medical problem). Each section begins with an essay about the kinds of texts included in the section. The book is valuable it makes available the English translations of ritual texts from the early era of Christianity that show how practitioners viewed their relationship to power, demons, angels, and God. Recommended for academic collections supporting Christian religious scholarship.

- Gail Wood, SUNY Coll. of Technology Lib., Alfred

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From Kirkus Reviews

Meyer (The Secret Teachings of Jesus, 1984) and Smith (The Nag Hamadi Library, not reviewed) provide literate and entertaining translations of a variety of early Christian magical incantations. For too long, the editors contend, scholars have tended to draw distinctions between what is called ``religion'' and what is termed mere ``magic.'' In an effort to help reverse this trend, they have assembled a large number of texts from ancient Egypt that were purported by their Christian users to have ritual power. Relying on the latest theories concerning ritual studies, these scholars demonstrate not only the falsity of this dichotomy but also the incredible diversity of expressions in an early Christianity that is too often thought to have been monolithic. The spells and formulae in the volume perform a number of different functions, from healing for specific physical ailments to the securing of love and sex. There is also a collection of curses, including the interesting and vituperative curse by a mother upon a younger woman who had captured her son's affections. The most important part of the volume deals with various rites practiced by the Gnostics (a catch-all appellation for disparate groups of Christian heretics who believe in salvation through secret, mystical knowledge), including an initiation and a spell for ascending through the heavens. The final section of the work offers selections from various magic handbooks of the ancient world. The book could have benefited from some attention to Tom Driver's recent *The Magic of Ritual* (not reviewed). Though primarily of interest to religious scholars, there is enough here to entertain interested lay readers as well. -- Copyright ©1994,

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