

**Smith, Morton — Studies in the Cult of Yahweh, Vol 2**

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It is never easy to review a series of articles. Usually they cover such a variety of subjects that one cannot do much more than give an overview of the titles. That would not be very meaningful in this case because this is a collection of some 40 articles. But because they are reprints of articles by one author,

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Morton Smith himself, there is more unity in this collection. In this second part, his articles about the New Testament, it is more like a spin-off from some well known book publications, especially his studies (1) *Heroes and Gods: Spiritual Biographies in Antiquity* (together with M Hadas, publ in 1965) and (2) *Jesus the Magician* (from 1978).

It is obvious that he defends the same positions: that is: (1) there is a genre which one can call aretology in which the words and deeds of a divine man are described. The Gospels are influenced by this genre and are more in line with it than any other non-Christian writing we know of. And (2) a further reflection on the Christology of Jesus. Jesus is not only a divine man, he is on the basis of his own self-awareness and seen from the option of his contemporaries a magician: someone who knows magic, who uses that knowledge for the benefit of people who ask for his help, and who, therefore, gets involved in discussions and controversy with the religious authorities.

In this series of articles the positions are partially repeated (in the studies on the divine man, on the ascent to the heavens and on the transfiguration story); but there are in part also additional specialised studies of detail. Fairly new is the attention for Paul. In several articles the author tries to show that Paul too belongs in the area of magic: in his self-awareness (possessed by the demon Jesus), in his way of acting (curses, leadership of the Christian community; speaking in tongues) and in the resistance which he evokes. Compared to the books the studies on magic writing are new. They form a step towards their *Formgeschichte*; a description of the (limited) influence of Jewish thought; aspects of the history of magic in antiquity. More on the side of this mainstream are the studies about the (pseudo-) Plutarch treatise, *De Superstitione*; about the history of the concept 'gnostikos' and of the terms 'apokalyptō' and 'apokalypsis'.

Morton Smith wanted to be an adherent of the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* from the beginning of this century (with people like Reitzenstein, Norden, Bousset e a). He brought this stream in exegesis for a good part to new life. His first class knowledge of the classical (Greek, Hellenistic, Jewish, Roman) antiquity, specialised on the religious aspect made this possible. Like Eric Robertson Dodds he was fascinated by the irrational in this culture; for Morton Smith that was the magic, the strange, the extravagant. And he never tired to make this clear 'opportune importune'. He manages to convey that fascination and that makes reading this book exciting notwithstanding the repetitions which one finds also. In this study we are (again) confronted with a completely different world. In this way he re-enforces the awareness that the New Testament can be understood from within only for a small part.

It is clear that he evoked a good deal of resistance. To quote just one of his exclamations: 'To describe the religion of Paul is, in Shakespearean terms, to take up arms against a sea of quibbles and expose oneself, on every side, to the slings and arrows of outrageous exegetes' (p 133). The resistance among the exegetes was not always or in all aspects right but that does not mean that there are not serious problems from a historical point of view. Even leaving apart whether the expression 'the divine man' as indication of a certain type of person and, parallel to this the genre 'aretology', can be used historically as M Smith thought — it seems to me that this discussion is settled against him — one can also ask questions about 'the magical' in classical culture. If one pays careful attention — M Smith obviously does not emphasize this all that much — it appears that the magical texts which are relevant for comparison with texts from the New Testament and which can more or less be dated are all later than the first century. I think that what happened with 'gnosticism' also happened with magic. While it may be said that the beginnings of it are to be dated in the first century, the real explosion of texts comes in the middle of the second century. What that means for the evaluation of the use of these texts to explain texts from the New Testament and thus for the scientific scaling of this part of Morton Smith's research project is not difficult to guess.