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# MAGIC, 'RELIGION' AND THE CONVERSION OF EGYPT TO CHRISTIANITY\*

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This paper aims to provide a general introduction to the practice of 'magic' in Egypt and to briefly illustrate the manner in which these practices continued after Egypt was Christianised in the later Roman Empire period. It is partly a response to questions about these topics from undergraduate students. Egyptian magic was distinctive in a number of ways and it is vital to keep this in mind when investigating topics related to Egyptian history. Moreover the continuation, almost unchanged, of magical practices which found their origin in the pre-dynastic period raises questions about the process of religious conversion. Thus the question arises as to the extent of conversion—what difference did Christianity really make to the spiritual lives of ordinary Egyptians?

## What is 'magic'?

At this point it might be worthwhile to make an attempt to define 'magic', especially in relation to that term against which it is normally juxtaposed—'religion'. 'Magic' is not easy to define. The term has normally been used in a pejorative sense; thus it is usually seen as a form of practice or belief which is not 'correct', especially in its relationship with the divine world and its denizens. 'Magic' is clearly not 'religion'.<sup>1</sup> Indeed in most people's minds magic is defined by its opposition to correct religious practice. The *Macquarie Dictionary* defines magic as (amongst other things): "the art of producing effects claimed to be beyond the natural human power and arrived at by means of supernatural agencies or through command of occult forces of nature".<sup>2</sup> 'Religion', however, is defined as: "the quest for the values of the

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\* This paper is the result of several different drafts, but first saw light as parts of two different chapters in my 1995 Macquarie Honours thesis. In its several different forms the ideas presented in this paper have been read and commented upon by Professor Edwin Judge, Dr Boyo Ockinga, Dr Ted Nixon and Professor Alanna Nobbs. Without their comments this paper would be much poorer, but needless to say none should be held responsible for any mistakes which remain. I am likewise very grateful to the anonymous reviewer whose comments helped to sharpen my approach to pagan Egyptian thought and practice. Finally, I am especially grateful to Dr Lea Beness for her careful and patient editing of the drafts for publication, without which this article would never have seen the light of day.

<sup>1</sup> Whatever 'religion' is. See the convincing case put by Edwin Judge in 'The Beginning of Religious History', *Journal of Religious History* 15.4 (1989) 394-412.

<sup>2</sup> s.v. 'Magic' in A. Delbridge et al. (eds), *The Macquarie Dictionary* (North Ryde, Sydney, 2001). This definition owes much to James Frazer's definition in *The Golden Bough: a study in comparative religion* (London, 1890). For other definitions of magic broadly

ideal life, involving three phases, the ideal, the practices for attaining the values of the ideal, and the theology or world view relating the quest to the environing universe". It is also defined as: "recognition on the part of man of a controlling superhuman power entitled to obedience, reverence, and worship"<sup>3</sup> These two definitions minimise the correspondences which often exist in ritual behaviour which could be characterised as either religion or magic: for instance the practice of rituals in an institutional religious setting which are aimed at achieving personal (and often quite selfish) goals, such as eternal life. They do, however, offer a starting point for the study of magic. Religion is, or should be, focused upon offering veneration to the divine, the focus is thus upon the divine, not humanity. Magic, however, is concerned with manipulating the divine for our own ends. It is focused upon and devised for human beings; the divine is simply a tool for the realisation of human needs and wants. Religion is theocentric; magic is anthropocentric.

The application of this definition of religion to the study of Egyptian culture indicates my strong preference for what might be termed a 'magical' (thus, anthropocentric) approach to the divine rather than a 'religious' approach. Magic was deeply ingrained in the Egyptian spiritual world.

### The Relationship between the Egyptian magician and the divine

Magic in Egyptian religion can be characterised as an impersonal force that is available for the use of both gods and men. Indeed it blurs the distinctions between the two.<sup>4</sup> *Heka* (magic)<sup>5</sup> could give a powerful magician superiority over even the gods. An illustration of this is the story of Pharaoh Unâs. The story is preserved in a very ancient text, which, although found in the Pyramid Texts of the Fifth Dynasty (2,600 BC), is probably pre-dynastic, and demonstrates the antiquity of Egyptian magical practices. The story concerns Unâs, who, upon death, ascends to the sky and, due to his command of the magical forces, is able to hunt down the gods, kill and then eat them, in order

consistent with this definition, see B. Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion and other Essays* (Boston 1948) and S. J. Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion and the Scope of Rationality* (Cambridge 1990).

<sup>3</sup> s.v. 'Religion' in *The Macquarie Dictionary* (n 2).

<sup>4</sup> This contrasts with other systems of magic that see it as a power unique to members of a particular cultural group rather than as a ritual technique available to everyone, i.e. as a uniquely cultural possession rather than an impersonal force. Cf. E. Evans Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford 1976) 2-4.

<sup>5</sup> For the word in Middle Egyptian, see A. Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar* (3rd ed.; Oxford 1976) 583a & 617b; in Bohairic and Sa'idic Coptic, see W. E. Crum, *A Coptic Dictionary* (Oxford 1939) 661. Also, David Frankfurter, *Religion in Roman Egypt: Assimilation and Resistance* (Princeton 1998) 211, and cf. 38-39 wherein he describes a personification of *heka*.

to absorb their *heka*.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, whilst practising magic, the ancient Egyptian magician was not only potentially able to command the gods, he could even take the identity of a god (often Thoth as he was the creator of writing and a practitioner of magic). Thus in a text written during the time of Nektanebos II (360-342 BC) a magician declared:

I am Thoth, master of the divine words, he who acts as an interpreter to all the gods.<sup>7</sup>

This attitude towards the divine survived well into Christian times. For instance, in the Coptic magic book from the second half of the tenth century entitled *The Praise of Michael The Archangel* the magician says:

Listen to me today, father of light, I am Michael: my name is god and humankind.<sup>8</sup>

In another tenth century text the magician declares that "I myself am God."<sup>9</sup>

Traditional Egyptian magic was thus characterised by the utilisation of *heka*: a power that could make the magician lord over even the gods and goddesses of the Egyptian pantheon. The polymath E. A. W. Budge<sup>10</sup> summed up this Egyptian approach to magic:

... one great distinction must be made between the magic of Moses and that of the Egyptians among whom he lived; the former was wrought by the

<sup>6</sup> R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts translated into English* (Oxford 1969) 80-83, 273-4; also Alan W. Shorter, *The Egyptian Gods* (Oxford 1981) 95-6.

<sup>7</sup> For the Metternich Stele, see C. E. Sander-Hansen, *Die Texte der Metternich-Stele (Analecta Aegyptiaca VII)* (Copenhagen 1956); translation in Christian Jacq, *Egyptian Magic* (trans. Janet M. Davis; Wiltshire 1985) 6-7. It has been argued that the mystic visions involved in Jewish Merkabah and Apocalyptic mysticism also involve the transformation of the mystic into an angelic "likeness of that Glory or divine image": so Gilles Quispel, 'Transformation through Vision in Jewish Gnosticism and The Cologne Mani Codex', *Vigiliae Christianae* 49 2 (1995) 189, quoting C. R. A. Morray-Jones, *Journal of Jewish Studies* 43 1 (1992). Yet Quispel attributes this to "Hellenic and Greek mysteriosophic" influence rather than Egyptian, claiming that this notion was later imported into the Egyptian Hermetic tradition (190).

<sup>8</sup> *The Praise of Michael The Archangel*, 2. ll. 29-30, in Marvin Meyer and Richard Smith (eds.), *Ancient Christian Magic: Coptic Texts of Ritual Power* (San Francisco 1994) 327; Coptic text: Angelicus M. Kropp (ed.), *Der Lobpreis des Erzengels Michael (vormals P. Heidelberg Inv. Nr. 686)* (Brussels 1966).

<sup>9</sup> Louvre, E 14 250. l. 33, in Meyer and Smith (n 8) 221.

<sup>10</sup> See the brief biography of Budge at: <[http://www.mnsu.edu/emuseum/information/biography/abcde/budge\\_cawallis.html](http://www.mnsu.edu/emuseum/information/biography/abcde/budge_cawallis.html)>

command of the God of the Hebrews, but the latter by the gods of Egypt at the command of men.<sup>11</sup>

Indeed Egyptian Magic is characterised by the ability to compel the gods, through magic and, in particular, threats, to act.<sup>12</sup> A spell from the Middle Kingdom contains just such a threat:

But if Osiris doesn't know his name, I will not permit him to travel down to Busiris, I will not permit him to sail up to Abydos, I will tear out his soul and destroy his corpse, and I will set fire to every tomb of his.<sup>13</sup>

The practice of using threats to compel supernatural figures to act survived into the Christian period. If Michael did not perform the deed required the Coptic magician would:

restrain [the sun] in the east, the moon in the west, the Pheides [in the] middle of the sky, until Michael comes [and] places his power upon my power and upon [my] right arm.<sup>14</sup>

Magic was also valuable in the afterlife, and contrasts with the high moral tone of much of high Egyptian pagan theology. The Egyptian judgment scene is a perfect illustration of this. In a rather farcical episode the deceased is described coaching his heart before it appears in court to make sure that it attests to the high moral standards of the defendant. The assumption behind this episode seems to be that it was the manner in which the defendant represented themselves that was important, not the facts of his or her deeds.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> F. A. W. Budge, *Egyptian Magic* (New York 1971) 6.

<sup>12</sup> Garth Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes: A Historical Approach to The Late Pagan Mind* (Cambridge 1986) 8; Geraldine Pinch, *Magic in Ancient Egypt* (Austin 1995) 73-75.

<sup>13</sup> Chester Beatty Papyrus VIII, in A. Roccati, 'Nuovi paralleli torinesi di testi magici ramessidi' *Aegyptus* 49 (1969) 7-11; translations in J. F. Borghouts, *Ancient Egyptian Magical Texts* (Leiden 1978) 7 and Shorter (n 6) 103-4.

<sup>14</sup> Berlin 8322, II 12-16, translation in Meyer and Smith (n 8) 232-33; original Coptic text found in Walter Beltz, 'Die Koptischen Zauberpapyri der Papyrus-Sammlung der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin' *Archiv für Papyrusforschung und verwandte Gebiete* 29 (1983) 72-74 and Angelicus M. Kropp, *Ausgewählte koptische Zaubertexte* (Brussels 1931) 16-19.

<sup>15</sup> Papyrus of Ani, §30B, pl. 3 in Raymond O. Faulkner (trans.), *The Egyptian Book of the dead, the Book of going forth by day, being the Papyrus of Ani* (San Francisco 1994). Note that the high moral tone of some ancient Egyptian texts contrasts with the magical approach generally taken to religion in Egypt. Cf. E. A. W. Budge, *Osiris and The Egyptian Resurrection I* (New York 1971), x-xi and H. Idris Bell, *Cults and Creeds in Greco-Roman Egypt* (Liverpool 1953) 13-14. This was commented on at the time by Porphyry, *Epistula ad Anebonem*, II, 8-9: "It troubles me very much how they (the gods) although invoked as superiors can yet receive orders as if they were inferiors, although requiring the worshipper to be just, they yet submit when commanded to do injustice themselves" (trans.

Indeed the entire afterlife experience was characterised by the magic associated with it. The deceased was given, in the *Book of The Dead* (or as the Egyptians called it, the *Coming To Light By Day*), the words of power used by Osiris and spells to prevent the monster Sui and the other crocodile gods stealing those words and the magical power associated with them.<sup>16</sup> Likewise the secret, magical names of the gatekeepers and the magical 'open sesame' phrases required were revealed to allow the deceased to pass through the gates,<sup>17</sup> and in chapter 24 the deceased is described receiving magical power to assist him in the rest of his journey through the underworld.<sup>18</sup>

Consequently, in Egyptian thought there was no clear distinction between magic and religion; these two approaches existed in a symbiotic relationship to each other.<sup>19</sup> Much of the practice of Egyptian 'religion' involved practices we might define as 'magic'.<sup>20</sup>

### The Practice of Magic

The ability to perform magic was often based upon knowledge of names and words of power, *voces magicae*.<sup>21</sup> As we have seen above, the deceased needed to learn words of power, and, in particular, names of various supernatural beings in order to reach the afterlife. The task of the magician was to discover these names so that he could compel the gods to act.<sup>22</sup> The correct pronunciation of these names was vital for the efficacy of the spell. This perfectionist attitude has been suggested as one of the important motivations behind the development of Coptic; the suggestion is that the Egyptian magician who was performing a Greek spell needed to make sure that the names of the Egyptian gods were said correctly, hence he combined Greek and Demotic letters in order to more closely render the Egyptian names.<sup>23</sup>

in P. W. Van der Horst, *Chacremmon, Egyptian Priest and Stoic Philosopher* (Leiden 1984) 13).

<sup>16</sup> The Theban recension of the *Book of the Dead* §§ 31, 32, in Faulkner (n 15); see also E. A. W. Budge, *The Book of The Dead* (London 1969) cx and civ.

<sup>17</sup> Papyrus of Ani, §§146, 147, pl. 11, in Faulkner (n 15).

<sup>18</sup> Papyrus of Ani, §24 in Faulkner (n 15) 115. These are simply representative examples – the whole of the *Book of the Dead* is replete with references to magic of various kinds. It is not, however, possible to include all of them here.

<sup>19</sup> See Pinch (n 12) 12-14.

<sup>20</sup> Pinch (n 12) 12-14.

<sup>21</sup> On the importance of names and words of power in traditional Egyptian magic, see Jan Assmann, *The Search for God in Ancient Egypt* (trans. D. Lorton; Ithaca 2001) 83-95.

<sup>22</sup> Pinch (n 12) 30-32, 68, 72, 87-88.

<sup>23</sup> See the comments of Edmund Meltzer, in Meyer and Smith (n 8) 20.

### Egyptian Multiculturalism

Under Greek and Roman hegemony some changes occurred in the practice of Egyptian religion, whilst at the same time a new synthesis of the dominant religious traditions of the land arose, the sources for which are embodied in the magical papyri, both Greek and Coptic. Importantly, the old priestly religion began slowly to decline.<sup>24</sup> While the attraction of Hellenistic ideas was no doubt a partial cause of this, a more proximate cause was the efforts by Egypt's Roman rulers to undermine the economic support base for the temples, particularly through the confiscation of temple estates and the resultant reliance upon state funds.<sup>25</sup> At the same time degeneration in ancient cultic practices can be seen. Thus mummies from the Roman period were not as well kept as previously, the religious ornamentation on caskets was misunderstood and the art of writing hieroglyphs degenerated.<sup>26</sup> A watershed moment came in the early 3rd century AD with the reforms of Septimius Severus, as the temples came under the economic aegis of local town councils, which showed less willingness or ability to support temples than had the imperial authorities.<sup>27</sup> It has been argued that whilst the older, priestly religion was declining 'superstition' was, it seems, on the rise, and syncretism was leading to a type of monotheism.<sup>28</sup> This is, however, a simplification and it is now acknowledged that much of the increase in the production of magical literature in Roman Egypt was caused by the changing fortunes of the temple priesthoods;<sup>29</sup> magical spells once preserved in inscriptions or oral tradition were performed committed to papyrus as a means of preserving beliefs and practices that were under threat with the closure of the temples.<sup>30</sup> Hence, the ideas of the pharaonic priestly religion were diffused to an even greater extent through Egyptian society and came into close contact with pagan Greek, Roman and Judaeo-Christian beliefs.

<sup>24</sup> Idris Bell (n 15) 65

<sup>25</sup> S. Davis, *Race Relations In Ancient Egypt: Greek, Egyptian, Hebrew, Roman* (London 1951) 62

<sup>26</sup> Davis (n 25) 64; Heike Sternberg el-Hotabi, 'Der Untergang der Hieroglyphenschrift', *Chronique d'Égypte* 69 (1994) 218-248; Sternberg el-Hotabi, *Untersuchungen zur Überlieferungsgeschichte der Horusstelen. Ein Beitrag zur Religionsgeschichte Ägyptens im 1. Jahrtausend v. Chr.* (Ägyptologische Abhandlungen, vol. 62, Wiesbaden 1999)

<sup>27</sup> Frankfurter (n 5) 198-200

<sup>28</sup> Davis (n 25) 65

<sup>29</sup> See Roger S. Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity* (Princeton 1993) 261-289. Cf. David Frankfurter's review of Bagnall, *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* 94.03.19 <<http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/bmcr/1994/94.03.19.html>>. Frankfurter has long argued that while the temples may have declined somewhat, the religion itself remained vital; see Frankfurter (n 5) 200-201.

<sup>30</sup> On the strong connection between the Egyptian pagan temple and the magical literature, see David Frankfurter 'Native Egyptian Religion in its Roman Guise', *Numen* 43 (1996) 311-12; and Frankfurter (n 5) 228-229

Yet within this syncretist magical religious scene Egyptian gods were recovering ground in the early Christian period. For example Osiris began to reassert his position over the Hellenistic syncretist cult of Sarapis.<sup>31</sup> Indeed the Osirian family (Osiris, Horus, Isis, Seth, Nephthys) as a whole was much more important in the field of magic than the Greek gods.<sup>32</sup> According to Betz there were two types of magicians. One was attached to the temples and was thus devoted to the 'purer' form of the ancient Egyptian religion, the other was the wandering, syncretist magician, often uneducated and superficial in his approach.<sup>33</sup> Yet it was this syncretist magician who was becoming more important as the old religion declined, and is represented in many of the magical papyri, and thus in popular religion. Moreover Betz argues that, in a time of decline and religious ferment, this corpus of syncretist magical papyri represents a whole new type of religion, a religion for which the underworld (and thus also its deities) was very important.<sup>34</sup> This typically Egyptian concern is well illustrated by the different aims of the cults of Isis and Osiris in Egypt and the rest of the Greco-Roman world. Whilst elsewhere the emphasis of the Isis and Osiris cults was on the living gaining contact with the divine, in Egypt the emphasis was on death and the powers of Isis and Osiris in relation to the needs of the deceased.<sup>35</sup>

### 'Christian' Magic?

There is little doubt that Egyptian Christians had contact with writings that were heretical; that is, writings that were gnostic or magical. Athanasius in his 39th festal letter of AD 367 warned against the reading of apocryphal works.<sup>36</sup> He had reason to do this, for there is evidence to suggest that gnostic texts were possibly still being read in the orthodox monasteries of Upper Egypt as late as the fifth century.<sup>37</sup> It is also possible that the Nag Hammadi codices were originally from a monastery, even though they contain references to an evil creator god, and extreme ascetic and docetic viewpoints.<sup>38</sup> At least one Coptic magical book has been discovered buried

<sup>31</sup> Davis (n 25) 66

<sup>32</sup> Aziz Atiya (ed.), *The Coptic Encyclopedia* VI (New York 1991) 1502

<sup>33</sup> H. D. Betz (ed.), *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation* (Chicago 1986) xlvi

<sup>34</sup> Betz (n 33) xlvi

<sup>35</sup> Siegfried Morenz, *Egyptian Religion* (trans. Anne E. Keck, Ithaca, New York 1973) 250

<sup>36</sup> Athanasius, *Epistula festalis* xxxix in Louis-Théophile Lefort, *S. Athanase lettres festales et pastorales en copte* (CSCO 151; Ser. copt. 20; Louvain 1955) 31-40

<sup>37</sup> D. J. Kyrtatas, *The Social Structure of Early Christian Communities* (London 1987) 174.

<sup>38</sup> For the most up-to-date summary of the debate see the updated edition of Philip Rousseau's *Pachomius: The Making of a Community in Fourth-Century Egypt* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1999) xix-xxv; see also Charles Wilfred Griggs, *Early Christianity in Egypt: From its Origins to 451 AD* (Leiden 1993) 176-180

under a monk's cell.<sup>39</sup> Likewise Besa, the biographer of Shenoute, records him making violent attacks on 'Greeks'. It has been suggested that these may, in fact, have been heretic Christians, as is suggested in the tale of Shenoute driving some Greeks from their 'church' and destroying it after discovering they had buried some magic books.<sup>40</sup>

### The Archangel Michael in the Magical Papyri: A Case in Point

The Judaeo-Christian archangel Michael plays a very important role in the magical papyri and a brief examination of Egyptian beliefs concerning him illustrates well the process of syncretism in the magical texts of early Christian Egypt.

In the magical material from the third and fourth centuries AD Michael is often mentioned along with the other archangels, Gabriel, Soutriel and Raphael. He usually takes the prominent position (except in *PGM* VII.1009-16 where Gabriel, unusually, seems more important) For instance in the fourth century spell, *PGM* XC, Michael is mentioned three times as a *vox magica*,<sup>41</sup> whilst the other angels are only mentioned once each.<sup>42</sup> Likewise in a love spell of attraction from the third or fourth centuries Michael is mentioned twice, along with another angelic name 'ABRIËL', as a *vox magica*.<sup>43</sup> So, too, Michael is mentioned in the fourth century spell, *PGM* IV.1716-1870, as a *vox magica* along with other angelic names, canonical and otherwise.<sup>44</sup>

There are at least eight other Greek magical papyri that use Michael as a magical name.<sup>45</sup> In *PGM* LXXXIII 1-20 Michael is mentioned once as an

archangel, and then later as a *vox magica* 'MIGAËL'.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, in *PGM* III.1-164 on line 149 he is mentioned first as a *vox magica* and then called "the god Michaël".<sup>47</sup> On a syncretist, probably Judaeo-Egyptian, amulet from the second century AD, which pictures Khnum the creator god on the front, the names MIXAHA (MICHAEL) and OYPIHA (OURIEL) appear on the back.<sup>48</sup> Likewise on an amulet also from the second century, IAO, the gnostic form of the Jewish God (attested at Nag Hammadi and Qumran)<sup>49</sup> appears fully armoured, standing above a scarab. Around the edge of the amulet Michael is joined with two other magical names to form AKPAMAXAMAPEIABAANAΘANAABMIXAHA (AKRAMACHAMAREIABLANATHANALBMICHAEL).<sup>50</sup>

Thus the figure of the archangel Michael passed from Judaism to the Egyptian popular magical tradition as a figure of great importance, Michael's name being regarded as a powerful form of magic. Indeed his name seems much more powerful than the names of the other archangels. In terms of its magical significance the name Michael can thus be compared to the Gnostic ABPAΣAΞ (ABRASAX), the letters of which added up to 365 according to the Greek system of gematria.<sup>51</sup> Unfortunately due to its Jewish origins the Egyptian use of Michael's name as a word of power cannot be explained by Greek gematria.<sup>52</sup> Why then is Michael's name regarded as such a powerful form of magic?

<sup>16</sup> *PGM* LXXXIII 1-20

<sup>47</sup> *PGM* III.1-164

<sup>48</sup> Erica Zwierlein-Diehl (ed.), *Magische Amulette und Andere Gemmen des Institutes für Altertumskunde der Universität zu Köln* (Köln 1992) 71-2

<sup>49</sup> Betz (n 33) 335.

<sup>50</sup> Zwierlein-Diehl (n 48) 65-66. Both are popular magical names usually invoked for beneficent purposes. ABAANAΘANAABA (ABLANATHANABA) probably being the most common of all the magical names, and also a palindrome (though not a complete palindrome in the case mentioned above); cf. Betz (n 33) 331 and 333. It is interesting to note that Michael and the other archangels appear with YHWH and YHWH epithets alongside pagan gods, such as Hermes, on Mesopotamian Jewish magic bowls, though never on Palestinian Jewish magic bowls, reflecting the pressure of syncretism faced by the Jews outside Palestine; Joseph Naveh and Shaul Shaked, *Amulets and Magic Bowls Aramaic Incantations of Late Antiquity* (Jerusalem 1985) 36.

<sup>51</sup> Gematria is the practice of finding numerological significance in words by treating the letters as numbers. Cf. Lucien Janssens, 'La datation néronienne de l'isopscopie', *Aegyptus* 68 (1988) 103-115 and Franz Dornseiff, *Das Alphabet in Mystik und Magie* (Leipzig 1980) 85.

<sup>52</sup> Although it is interesting to note that the names of the three canonical archangels add up to 900, as does the Greek Χριστός (Christos).

<sup>39</sup> Meyer and Smith (n 8) 270.

<sup>40</sup> The text is found in J. Leipoldt (ed.), *Simuthii Archimandritae Vita et Opera Omnia* (CSCO; *Scr. copt.* II. 2: Paris and Leipzig 1906; repr. Louvain 1951), §§83-84 (p. 41). See Griggs (n.38) 198 and James M. Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (New York 1990) 19. Note, however, that it has also been well argued that this incident referred to pagans, not Christians: see H. Behlmer, *Schenute von Atripe. De iudicio. Catalogo del Museo Egizio di Torino Serie Prima. Monumenti e Testi* vol. VIII (Torino 1996) LXXXIX-XCI.

<sup>41</sup> A magical word, designed to invoke supernatural power.

<sup>42</sup> *PGM* XC.1-13. All *PGM* references are found in the original languages in Karl Preisendanz, *Papyri Graecae Magicae. Die griechischen Zauberpapyri* (2 vols. Stuttgart 1973-1974) and in translation in Betz (n 33). Capital letters indicate *vores magicae*.

<sup>43</sup> *PGM* VII.973-80.

<sup>44</sup> *PGM* IV.1716-1870.

<sup>45</sup> Among them, *PGM* I.262-347, *PGM* III.187-262, *PGM* VII.593-619, *PGM* X.36-50, *PGM* XXVI.161-77, *PGM* LXXX.1-5 and *PGM* LXXIX.1-7 (identical spells).

Biblical notions of Michael as God's right-hand man were imported into Egypt along with his name. Thus Michael, in the fourth century spell *PGM* XIII 734-1077, is described as:

The great commander-in-chief Michael, lord, the great archangel of IEYO.  
 AĒ AIŌ EYAI IĒ. IĒ IŌA IĒIĒ AIŌ EĒ AIŌ.<sup>53</sup>

So, too, in *PGM* I.262-347 Michael is mentioned as a *vox magica* along with the other angels, the gnostic ABRASAX and the Hebrew-derived ADONAI. Here also he is described as the ruler of heaven's realm.<sup>54</sup> In *PGM* IV.1-25 Michael is described as the "mighty angel who is with God".<sup>55</sup> In the adaptation, moreover, of Jewish ideas to an Egyptian framework, confusion can be seen in the understanding of Michael's role as commander-in-chief in heaven and as psychopomp since sky deities and chthonic deities were not usually synonymous in either Greek or Egyptian cosmologies (Dionysus being a notable exception, although as a foreign deity introduced into Greece he was always seen as being outside the normal Olympic hierarchy).<sup>56</sup> Thus in *PGM* III.1-164 Michael is mentioned in a spell designed to conjure chthonic deities, such as Hermes, and possibly also DAMNAMENEU CHEU CHTHŌ[NIE]—or Zeu Chthonie, a syncretic deity, Mithras merged with Hades.<sup>57</sup> Yet, in the aforementioned *PGM* IV.1-25, when faced with a similar problem, as to whether Michael is a chthonic or sky deity, the writer decides he is of the sky and contrasts him with the usual underworld deity Sabaoth:

So let him who is in the underworld join him who is in the air bring unto me Sabaoth bring unto me Michael, the mighty angel who is with God.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>53</sup> *PGM* XIII.734-1077

<sup>54</sup> *PGM* I.262-347

<sup>55</sup> *PGM* IV.1-25

<sup>56</sup> Note however, some exceptions to this rule. For instance, Violet MacDermot, *The Cult of The Seer In The Ancient Middle East: A Contribution to Current Research on Hallucinations Drawn from Coptic and Other Texts* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1971) 66 argues that by the Saite period Osiris and Re were syncretised, thus providing some precedent within the Egyptian milieu for a figure that spanned the underworld and heaven. Yet this seems to me to indicate the ascendancy of Osiris over all the other gods and thus, according to ancient practice, they came to be seen as aspects of him, rather than Osiris actually becoming a solar god. There is also the case of the Anatolian deity 'Men' who was ruler of both the heavens and the underworld, a lunar god and ruled the growth of plants; Franz Cumont, *Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism* (New York 1956) 61. In spell 69 of the *Book of The Dead* Osiris is explicitly described assimilating with the other gods: see Faulkner (n.15) 71.

<sup>57</sup> *PGM* III.1-164

<sup>58</sup> *PGM* IV.1-25

Thus Michael's importance in the magical papyri came largely from Judaeo-Christian theological notions imported into Egypt; notions that were then adapted to a Greco-Egyptian framework. For Michael in the syncretist magical papyri was not the Michael of rabbinic Jewish theology. Michael exhibits the characteristics of an Egyptian deity and can be manipulated in the same way *PGM* VII 593-619 (a fetching spell for an unmanageable woman) contains an example of the gods being cynically manipulated by humans. Thus, in order to move the gods to act on behalf of the man in question he is told by the author of the spell to tell the gods of the evil slander that the woman he desires has spread about the deities:

for she has said: 'IAO does not have ribs.' [She, NN, has said,] 'ADONAI was cast out because of his violent anger.' [She, NN, has said,] 'SABAOTH emitted three cries.' She, NN, has said, 'PAGOURE is by nature a hermaphrodite.' She, NN, has said, 'MARMAROUTH was castrated.' She, NN, has said, 'IAEŌ was not entrusted with the ark.' She, NN, has said, 'MICHAEL is by nature a hermaphrodite.' I am not the one who says such things, master, but she, the godless NN. Therefore bring her to me, her inflamed with passion, submissive, let her not find sleep until she comes to me.<sup>59</sup>

St Michael plays a very prominent role not only in Egyptian magic but also in more mainstream Egyptian Christianity. Michael's name, in particular, has special power and can be invoked for all kinds of beneficent purposes.

There was a pre-existing biblical tradition concerning Michael and his possession of a particular name of power that may well have influenced Coptic Christians in their interest in the name 'Michael'. In the Ethiopic *Book of Enoch* (*1 Enoch*, 2nd or 3rd BC), the fallen angel Kasbeel asks Michael to give him the 'name', the name that is contained in the oath that governs creation. This name is the name of God that Michael and the other archangels bear (and the angel of the Lord bears in the Bible, *Ex* 23:21) and is thus the magical key to the maintenance of creation.<sup>60</sup> It is probable that Semjaza (which possibly means "he sees the Name"), the chief of the fallen angels in other sectarian Jewish literature, is the same figure as Kasbeel.<sup>61</sup> Thus in /

<sup>59</sup> *PGM* VII 593-619

<sup>60</sup> *The Ethiopic Book of Enoch*, 69.14; cf. 69.13-25, 67.8, 67. in Michael A. Knibb, *The Ethiopic Book of Enoch: A New Edition in the Light of the Aramaic Dead Sea Fragments II: Introduction, Translation and Commentary* (Oxford 1978). According to Gilles Quispel (cited in Jarl Fossum, *The Name of God And The Angel of The Lord: Samaritan and Jewish Concepts of Intermediation and the Origins of Gnosticism* [Tübingen 1985] 24) the principal angel is described throughout the apocryphal and mystical literature as possessing God's name; see also Quispel's comments on p. 258.

<sup>61</sup> Fossum (n.60) 257

*Enoch* (although the text is ambiguous) it is possible that Kasbeel was understood to be the former governor of creation, a role he lost to Michael, who gained possession of the name, and thus power over creation, when he defeated the rebellious Semjaza.<sup>62</sup>

Humans, too, could use St Michael's name. In his *Discourse on St Michael The Archangel*, Timothy, Archbishop of Alexandria<sup>63</sup> recommends that Christians use St Michael's name in a number of different magic-type ways. They should write the name of Michael on all four corners of their house, inside and out, and on the edge of their garments, on their food platters and on their cups, to prevent drunkenness.<sup>64</sup> Charitable deeds gave great merit when performed in the name of St Michael, even into the afterlife. Further on Timothy writes that if someone gives to the poor in the name of St Michael, makes an offering, lights a lamp, gives a loaf of bread or burns incense in Michael's name,

whether he be the greatest of sinners . . . [and he is borne to the places of] punishment he shall not feel the torture of the place of punishment wherein he shall be, because of the deeds of charity he did in the name of the archangel Michael.<sup>65</sup>

Likewise if someone, in Michael's name, makes a New Testament, and gives it to a church, or even keeps it, neither sickness, pestilence nor any ill will enter his house; nor shall he suffer problems with his crops and his children shall not suffer for up to four generations after this deed of generosity and piety.<sup>66</sup> So, too, Michael is described giving St John magic letters, which arranged in pairs and triads and placed in certain parts of the house protect the owner from danger and human enemies.<sup>67</sup>

Thus magical practices of varying sorts survived into the early Christian period in Egypt, even within the Church, beliefs about the spiritual power associated with the archangel Michael being a particularly germane example of this

<sup>62</sup> That both Michael and the chief of the fallen angels played (at different times) the same role is perhaps illustrated by the fact that the Orphites confused Samael (the serpent) and Michael saying that they were one and the same; Irenaeus. *Adversus Haereses* I xxx 9

<sup>63</sup> Budge attributed this text to Timothy I (AD 380-385); Michael van Esbroeck attributes the text to Timothy II (457-477), and his argument is supported by the text's anti-Chalcedonian leanings; see 'Michael the Archangel' in Atiya (n 32) 1616-1620.

<sup>64</sup> Archbishop Timothy of Alexandria, *Discourse on St Michael The Archangel* in E A W Budge. *Coptic Texts* V (New York 1977) fol 74a

<sup>65</sup> Budge (n 64) fol 72b-73a

<sup>66</sup> Budge (n 64) fol 73a

<sup>67</sup> Budge (n 64) fol 73a-b

### Transmission of ideas and the conversion of Egypt to Christianity

The question of the transmission of the veneration of Michael from Jewish to Egyptian Christian sources can now be examined; and based upon that case study, conclusions concerning the practice of magic and the conversion of Egypt to Christianity may be suggested.

St Michael's name was obviously used as a *vox magica* from an early period in non-Christian practice. The earliest dates are from the two second century A.D. Judaeo-Egyptian amulets, and thus pre-date the earliest truly Christian references by over two hundred years. The magical papyri that mention Michael, however, are from roughly the same period as the rise of orthodox Christianity.

The magical papyri are evidence, at least in part, of the survival in Egypt of pre-Christian traditions and practices. Moreover these are clearly both popular and elite practices and beliefs. The rise of Christianity in the Roman empire was long characterised as the triumph of popular over elite culture, the victory of the forces of the irrational over the rational.<sup>68</sup> Averil Cameron, among others, challenged this view, claiming that Christianity simply embraced and encompassed a greater range of the elements of Greco-Roman society than did elite pagan religion.<sup>69</sup> The evidence of the survival of popular magical beliefs within mainstream Christian discourse which has been presented in this article suggests that Cameron's view of Christianity as a religion prepared to include beliefs and practices from a wide range of socio-economic strata, both elite and popular, is more accurate than the view that sees the rise of Christianity as the victory of vulgar popularism.

Whilst the previous discussion has demonstrated that magical ideas and a magical cosmology continued to exist within the Egyptian Church, they were not, however, usually welcomed by the Church hierarchy. Indeed orthodox Christianity in Egypt obviously saw the magical tradition as a rival to its own position. See, for instance, Origen's attempts to distance Christ from his role as a magician by emphasising his eschatological and ethical roles.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Cf. Edward Gibbon. *The History of The Decline and Fall of The Roman Empire* (London and New York 1954) II 257 and III 146-47

<sup>69</sup> A. Cameron. *Christianity and The Rhetoric of Empire* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1991) 8. Cf. Alexander Murray. 'Peter Brown and the Shadow of Constantine'. *Journal of Religious Studies* 73 (1983) 192, who argues that Brown has also tried to go beyond the traditional notions of rise and fall (and the implication that the great pagan culture was falling as Christianity was rising) when discussing the period of the later Roman Empire

<sup>70</sup> See Morton Smith. *Jesus The Magician* (London 1978) 84; also Francis C R. Thee. *Julius Africanus and The Early Christian View of Magic* (Tubingen 1984)



Examples of negative depictions of magicians and magical practices abound in Coptic literature. For instance in the *Coptic Apocalypse of Paul* (4th century AD and probably written in Egypt)<sup>71</sup> magicians are depicted up to their knees in pools of blood in Hell.<sup>72</sup> In the *Martyrdom of St Mercurius the General* it is emphasised that after his torture by the emperor he is healed by St Michael, not by magic, for

The dealers in magical drugs and those who use enchantments and the worshippers of idols, are strangers unto Him.<sup>73</sup>

Such explicit treatment of magic indicates that it posed a challenge to the Church and lends credence to Betz's belief that it constituted a rival. Thus the age old conflict between 'high', moral religion and the 'low', popular, magical and thus amoral religion of the Egyptian people was still being played out in the Christian era in Egypt. Paradoxically, the only way that Christianity could establish what Cameron calls a "totalizing discourse",<sup>74</sup> in other words establish itself as the dominant cultural form of Egyptian society, was to allow popular magical practices to continue within a Christian context, even if the principles of Christianity and the magical tradition were often incompatible, for example in the belief that the utterance of a name of power could excuse sinners from damnation. Thus, although mainstream Christian writers and doctrine opposed magical practices, these practices nonetheless continued amongst Christian Egyptians.

In the individual case of the use of 'Michael' as a word of power it seems likely that this was an element of popular religion that was carried over into Christianity from pagan and Judaeo-Christian syncretist magical practices largely intact. This was due both to the inability of leading churchmen to resist what was probably a very popular piece of folk religion and to their unwillingness to jettison an element of folk religion that would predispose the common people to view Christianity, or, at least, Judaeo-Christian ideas, in a positive light. Thus the syncretist magical papyri could play dual, and contradictory, roles: on the one hand acting as a rival to Christianity, while on the other predisposing Egyptians to accepting Christianity by introducing to them its ideas and characters.

In the particular case of the archangel Michael it seems highly probable that Michael's name was first popularised among Egyptians as a word of power by gnostic-type Christians who were operating within a largely Jewish

religious scene. As Pearson pointed out, much of Gnosticism can be characterised as a reinterpretation of Jewish scripture, a reinterpretation that is largely negative.<sup>75</sup> Thus Pearson argues that Gnosticism quite possibly grew from groups of Hellenistic Jewish intellectuals reacting against orthodoxy. The notions of the "foibles and machinations" of the creator indicate a negative attitude to history,<sup>76</sup> quite in keeping with the probable mood of the Jewish community in Alexandria after AD 70 and, especially, in the disastrous revolt culminating in the events of AD 117.<sup>77</sup> Fossum calls this "protest exegesis".<sup>78</sup> The introduction of the name of a Jewish angel to Egyptian popular religion at a time when Gnosticism was probably in its active proselytizing stage is understandable for spiritual or angelic hierarchies acting as intermediaries between man and the divine are a characterising feature of Gnosticism.<sup>79</sup>

It must be recognised that the appearance of similar functions in both magic and Christianity indicates that both had to fulfil certain similar needs of their adherents. Working out of the same cultural milieu it is hardly surprising that they came up with similar solutions and borrowed from each other.<sup>80</sup> There were three main religious streams influencing Egyptian popular religion, cultic practices and thought in this period: 1) orthodox Christianity; 2) Jewish apocalyptic and sectarian literature; and 3) Gnosticism, all containing elements that allowed them to be absorbed into the framework of ancient Egyptian magic at a popular level. The mixture of these three streams in the material discussed above shows how difficult it is to differentiate Gnosticism and Orthodoxy in an Egyptian context (as they were of roughly equal importance in the conversion of Egypt to Christianity) and argues for an examination of late antique Egyptian popular religion in terms of the overwhelming power of ancient Egyptian forms and structures, in particular the ancient traditions of Egyptian magic.

<sup>71</sup> MacDermot (n 56) 170. Cf. Sozomen, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, vii 19.

<sup>72</sup> Budge (n 64) fol 13b

<sup>73</sup> Budge (n 64) fol 12b

<sup>74</sup> Cameron (n 69) 58. cf. 5

<sup>75</sup> Birger A. Pearson, *Gnosticism, Judaism and Egyptian Christianity* (Minneapolis 1990) 133-34. Fossum (n 60) 20. argues that Gnosticism largely grew from sectarian Judaism in particular Samaritan religion.

<sup>76</sup> Pearson (n 75) 133-34.

<sup>77</sup> Discussed by Cassius Dio LXVIII 32 1-3. Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* IV 2.2-5 and in the anonymous accounts of the revolt and the subsequent massacres of Greeks by Jews found in M. Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism* III (Jerusalem 1974) 26.

<sup>78</sup> Fossum (n 60) 12.

<sup>79</sup> See Michael Allen Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism: An Argument For Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton 1996) 107, 220-221.

<sup>80</sup> Cf. B. R. Rees, 'Popular Religion in Greco-Roman Egypt ii: The Transition to Christianity', *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 35 (1950) 86-100.

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## REVIEWS

Peter Charles Hoffer, *The Historians' Paradox: The Study of History in Our Time*, New York University Press, New York and London, 2008; xi + 213 pp.; glossary, bibliographical essay and index. ISBN 13: 978-0-8147-3714-9 (hb); \$62.00.

“How do we know what happened in the past? We cannot go back ... It is easy to demolish the very *idea* of historical knowing but impossible to demolish the *importance* of historical knowing” (Preface ix). For “(w)ithout history, a people have no identity, no present as well as no past” (1). This is the paradox: “history is impossible, yet necessary”. Accordingly Hoffer attempts a reconciliation, offering a practical, working philosophy of history for our time. The task is too important to be left to philosophers (5).

His specifications? Such a philosophy must *inter alia* accommodate the imagination, but not abandon analytical penetration or “narrative depth”; it must acknowledge mystery and uncertainty, incorporate humility, and have a place for faith (“not necessarily in organised religion”; 5). It is intended as a means of bringing the dead to life, of bridging the gap between present and past. The latter is the metaphor that he uses for the framework of the book. He proceeds to show us, chapter by discrete chapter, how to do the impossible, to sink the piers and lay the spans of this bridge. While the chapters are discrete, the argument is cumulative.

Hoffer begins with the thesis that history is always argument. So his philosophy must concern itself with logic. Historical argument must be free of fallacy, but Hoffer will explore how it might include “the loaded question, the imaginative fabrication, and the invisible linkages we call causation”. He examines it “in political discourse, in the marketplace, and in the realms of the literary and linguistic critics”. Finally, he asks whether history’s highest purpose is moral judgment.

Hoffer (H) is a professor of (American) history at the University of Georgia, and his book is quintessentially American, replete with examples and anecdotes drawn for the most part from American history from Revolutionary times to the present. It is quirky and entertaining, both readable and instructive. He includes a lively *Glossary* (no oxymoron here) and a sizeable (almost 20 page) *Very Brief Bibliographical Essay*. Key terms appearing in the *Glossary* are in bold type in the text.

Ch. 1, “It Would Be Logical to Assume ...”, after a brief prologue reminding us that it took some time for early modern historians to champion impartiality, embarks on the journey from certainty to scepticism, from