

The Magic ‘Crucifixion Gem’ in the British Museum

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THE WELL-KNOWN AND REDOUBTABLE mottled green and brown jasper, BM Inv. T 1986, 5-1,1, was first published in 1964 by Philippe Derchain and included shortly thereafter in his ground-breaking corpus co-authored with Armand Delatte.¹ Formerly in the collection of Roger Pereire (Paris), the gemstone was communicated to Derchain by the eminent archaeologist and orientalist Henri Seyrig, and acquired by the British Museum in 1986 from the scholar and antiquities dealer Jack Ogden. Subsequently, Simone Michel included it in her outstanding de luxe edition of the British Museum magic gems, with superb line-drawings, photographs, extensive bibliography, and discussion.² More recently, Jeffrey Spier examined the piece afresh in his detailed study and catalogue, *Late Antique and Early Christian Gems*, and again in his Kimbell Art Museum exhibition catalogue, *Picturing the Bible*, providing in both volumes descriptions, transcriptions, and invaluable historical discussions of the iconography of the Crucifixion in the context of such figures as that of the famous Palatine graffito and other later gemstone depictions.³ He was

¹ Ph. Derchain, “Die älteste Darstellung des Gekreuzigten,” in K. Wessel (ed.), *Christentum am Nil* (Recklinghausen 1964) 109–113, pls. 55–56; A. Delatte and Ph. Derchain, *Les intailles magiques gréco-égyptiennes* (Paris 1964) 287, no. *408.

² Simone Michel, *Die magischen Gemmen im Britischen Museum I* (London 2001) 283–284, no. 457; also her *Die magischen Gemmen. Zu Bildern und Zaubersformeln auf geschnittenen Steinen der Antike und Neuzeit* (Berlin 2009) 124–126.

³ Jeffrey Spier, *Late Antique and Early Christian Gems* (Wiesbaden 2007) 72,

also the first to read correctly in the first line of the obverse the letters YIE (υιέ, “O Son”), as opposed to earlier, inaccurate interpretations such as ἵς (= εἶς) / Πατήρ, “One / Father” Derchain) or .IE ([KYP]IE? Michel); see discussion below.

The gemstone, of unrecorded provenance, probably comes from Turkey, Syria, or at least the eastern Mediterranean, and dates to the late second-early third century C.E.⁴ It is conspicuous for being the earliest representation of the crucified Jesus, in any medium.⁵ But another noteworthy feature is the

no. 443; 73–75, where he also discusses the graffito discovered in 1856 in the slave’s quarters in the Imperial Palace on the Palatine: a horse- or ass-headed figure (cf. Tert. *Apol.* 16, *Ad nat.* 11) of a crucified person with a male on-looker, hand in prayer, with the inscription Ἀλεξαμενὸς σέβετε (= -ται) θεόν, “Alexamenos worships god” (on the translation note e.g. Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion* [Philadelphia 1977] 19); *Picturing the Bible. The Earliest Christian Art* (New Haven 2007) 228–229, no. 55 (see also 227, fig. 2, on the Palatine graffito).

⁴ There seems to be nothing specific about the gemstone’s provenance (personal communication, Jack Ogden), although most magic gemstones in the antiquities market come from Syria (or Turkey). In fact, probably 80–90% (if not more) of all magical gems in the world’s private and museum collections nowadays are from unreported sites, as gems, like coins, are easily transportable; see Richard Gordon, “Archaeologies of Magical Gems,” in C. Entwistle and N. Adams (eds.), *Gems from Heaven. Recent Research on Engraved Gem-Stones in Late Antiquity* (London 2011) 39–49; Gideon Bohak, “A Note on the Chnoubis Gem from Tel Dor,” *IEJ* 47 (1997) 255–256. There is no reason to question the British Museum gem’s authenticity, however, as seemingly suggested in a recent SBL Report, as mentioned in James Davila’s PaleoJudaica blog (10 December 2016): Peter M. Head, “Depiction of Crucifixion” (http://paleojudaica.blogspot.com/2016_12_04_archive.html#1598160219912334593). The gem’s fabric, composition, style of lettering, engraving, and drilling technique all point to ancient workmanship. For examples of modern forgeries, which are fairly easy to identify, see Hanna Philipp, *Mira et Magica. Gemmen im Ägyptischen Museum der Staatlichen Museen* (Mainz am Rhein 1986) 123–126, pls. 201–207. For a representative list of magic gemstones from known find-spots see Roy Kotansky, “The Chnoubis Gem from Tel Dor,” *IEJ* 47 (1997) 257–260.

⁵ Derchain, on stylistic and historical considerations, correctly concludes that the gem is hardly later than the beginning of the third century, and

fact that the gem is covered with a series of seemingly magical invocations and words, on both front and back, along with an opening Trinitarian-like formula, which makes it an unusual specimen of the early appropriation of the image of Jesus on the cross as an apotropaic device. As Jeffrey Spier and Felicity Harley write: “The large bloodstone intaglio preserves the earliest extant depiction of Jesus crucified. The style of carving, material, and inscription are all typical of the large group of Greco-Roman magical amulets originating in Egypt and Syria during the second and third centuries. The appearance of the Crucifixion on such an amulet, however, is unique.”⁶ They further describe the Crucifixion scene on the obverse:

Jesus is portrayed as a nude, bearded man with long hair, his arms stretched out beneath the horizontal bar (*patibulum*) of the T-shaped cross and attached to it by two short strips around his wrists. His elbows and hands fall loosely as a result. Jesus’s upper body is upright against the vertical shaft of the cross, his head turned sharply to the left. The flat, strictly frontal presentation, with the erect carriage of the head and torso, is comparable to the crucified figure in the Palatine graffito ... which must be roughly contemporary with this amulet. Jesus’ legs are shown in profile, bent at the knee and hanging open loosely, as though he is seated on a bar or peg. The starkness of this position, emphasizing Jesus’s nudity, is wholly antithetical to the triumphal symbolism of the crucified Christ seen in subsequent represen-

probably earlier. Spier and Michel assign it generally to the late second-third century. Morton Smith, *Jesus the Magician* (San Francisco 1978) 61, assigned the date to “about A.D. 200.” It could be at least as early as the last decades of the second century, ca. 170–190. The gem thus antedates the Palatine graffito, which belongs to the third century, although some date it earlier. The only earlier depiction of any crucifixion is that of the Puteoli graffito, possibly of Trajanic-Hadrianic date (thus no later than ca. 140), but this is not of Jesus; see John Granger Cook, “Crucifixion as Spectacle in Roman Campania,” *NT* 54 (2012) 68–100, esp. 92–98. A further problem with the gem is that the style of writing on either side differs (see below).

⁶ J. Spier, with Felicity Harley, in *Picturing the Bible* 228. We emphasize that this kind of mottled jasper is typically used for magic gemstones.

tations in Christian art. The nudity is not used in accordance with the Greco-Roman concept of nakedness as a means to denote divinity nor is it a strictly narrative device, referring to the historical process of crucifixion. Here it may be regarded as affirming Jesus's spiritual power, witnessed in the fact that he overcame the brutality of the cross and thereby defeated evil powers.⁷



Figure 1.a-b: BM jasper gemstone, obverse/reverse

In this study we present a new reading and analysis of this important gem, based on detailed color photographs kindly supplied electronically by Dr. Spier (*fig.* 1.a-b). In addition to

⁷ *Picturing the Bible* 228. They continue: “The image of the crucified Christ may, however, have been employed by a pagan magician, who borrowed what he perceived as a symbol of great power.” The authors rightly hypothesize that so early a depiction of the Crucifixion may have depended upon images that were once more widespread. We suggest, rather, that the gem with its image was the product of a pre-orthodox Christian group who used for their own purposes names and ciphers not in the usual repertoire of magic words. A comparable, albeit different, kind of borrowing is found in second-century Gnostic groups who share certain magic names with those of the standard magic literature (see below).

confirming his reading of the vocative $\nu\acute{\iota}\epsilon$ in the first line, we have been able to make a number of additional improvements in the deciphering of the text, both front and back, and to offer some new insights and interpretations overall on the gemstone's invocational language in the context of early Christian groups, whether they be quasi-Gnostic or 'heterodox'. Further, by recognizing a new cipher among a set of what would appear to be traditional magical syllables, and in identifying a pattern of iambic meters in the whole of the obverse inscription, we can anchor the context of the obverse text within its originally baptismal, or liturgical, setting. In this manner, we can see that the text as a whole may be less magical than usually understood in respect of the standard canon of magical gemstones and more of a hymnic relic from a second-century Christian group that sought redemption by invoking the soteriological power of the cross and its image. To this unique and powerful design on the obverse, a secondary, more traditionally magical inscription seems to have been appended on the reverse side, at a later date. Written by a different hand and engraved, indeed, with a different drill, this inscription, we argue, was added to the blank reverse by a carver more familiar with the repertoire of traditional magical gemstone texts.

The gemstone's current measurements are approximately h. $3.0 \times$ w. $2.5 \times$ th. 0.58 cm. The obverse with the Crucifixion scene, which is the gem's somewhat larger surface because of the beveled edge, has been badly chipped all around the edge. Only the clean curve at the top and a smaller curved edge, left of the horizontal cross-bar, preserve the original rim. The reverse, whose edge at the bevel is more intact, has a large chip at the upper left side of the surface and a smaller one just below that. The bottom edge is also badly damaged. The chipped, bottle-cap appearance of the edge may have been caused by the stone's being filed down to poorly fit into an original gold-casing or finger ring—or, conversely, damaged while being removed from it. In either case, its original setting has not been found.

Obverse

YIE
 ΠΑΤΗΡΙΗ
 COYXPICTE
 COAMNΩA
 5 ΜΩΑΩΙΑ
 ΕΗΙΟΥΩ
 ΑΡΤΑΝΝΑ
 ΛΥCΙΟΥ
 [Ý]I[ΟΥ]

Υίέ, / πατήρ, Ἰη/σοῦ Χριστέ, / σοαμ νωα/μ, ωαωι, α/εηιουω, /
 ἀρτάννα / λυσίου / [v]i[ou].

O Son, Father, O Jesus Christ, *soam nōam, ḡaḡi, AEĒIOYŌ*, O
 cross(-beam) of the Redeeming [S]o[n]!

1 υίέ Spier; .IE (KYP)IE? Michel; ἴς (= εἶς) Derchain 4 σοα/μ; i.e.
 σωα/μ? 5 ΜΩΑΙΑ(Ω) Michel 5-6 Kotansky; α/σηιουω gem;
 α/σηιουω Derchain; A/.CHIOYΩ Michel 7 i.e. ἀρτάνη; αρτανη (“le
 lien de suspension”) Derchain; .APTANNA Michel 8 Kotansky; υσιο
 Derchain; ..YCIOY Michel; YCIOY Spier 9 Kotansky; ι Derchain; ..
 I... Michel

Reverse

IΩE
 EYAEYII
 [1-3] IOYICYE
 [I]IAΔHTOΦΩ
 5 ΘΙΕCCTCKHE
 ΨΜΑΝΑΥΗΛΑ
 CΤΡΑΠΕΡΚΜΗ
 ΦΜΕΙΘΩΑΡ
 ΜΕΜΠΕ
 10 [.]...[.]

Ἰωε / ενα ευη / [...]ιουι, σὺ ε/[ἴ] Ιαδητοφω/θ Ἰεσεβτεκη
 Έ/<μ>μαναυηλ Ά/στραπερκμη/φ Μειθω Αρ/μεμπε/ ...

Iōe eua euē(?) [1-3]ioui, you a[re] Iadētophōth Iesebtekē E<m>manauēl
Astraperkmēph Meithō Armempe ...

2 ευι: leg. ευη; ευου Derchain 3 .ιουισυξ Derchain; NOYICYE
 Spier; .IOYICYE Michel 3-4 σὺ ε/[ἴ] Kotansky 4-5 [B]αδητοφω/θ
 Derchain, Spier; .ΑΔΗΤΟΦΩ/Θ Michel (i.e. Βαδητοφωθ) 5 leg.

ιεσεβτεκη; ιεσσετ/ισκη Derchain; IECCECTCKHE Michel, Spier 5-6
 leg. E/<μ>μανουηλ; E/μμαναηλ Derchain, Spier 6-7 Kotansky;
 α/στραπ στ κμη/φ (ἀστραπ(ή)(?) and Κμήφ) Derchain;
 Ἀ/ΣΤΡΑΠΕΤΚΜΗ/Φ Spier; A/CTPAICTKMH/Φ (i.e. Σατραπερκμηφ)
 Michel 9-10 πιμπε / .. Derchain

Commentary

Obverse

1–3 Υἱέ, πατήρ, Ἰησοῦ Χριστέ: properly, three vocatives, although the nominative πατήρ is used in lieu of the vocative—a common occurrence. As noted in the apparatus, the new reading (“O Son ...”) is based on Jeffrey Spier’s transcription. The three elements Son–Father–Jesus Christ present a somewhat unusual and unorthodox Trinitarian formula. The initial Son–Father pairing would seem to show primacy and perhaps harks back to a Johannine-type Father–Son Christology (cf. Jn 3:35, 5:18–27, 17:1, etc). The third element, “O Jesus Christ,” would then appear to allude to the historical figure of Jesus as the Messiah (“Anointed One”), in contradistinction to the more intimate relationship of Son–Father in the heavenly realm.⁸ The element “Christ,” as already in Paul’s writings, serves to

⁸ Atilio Mastrocinque, *Les intailles magiques du département des Monnaies, Médailles, et Antiques* (Paris 2014) 194, sees in this invocation a reference to Monarchianism and translates “unique père Jésus Christ.” Monarchianism was an anti-trinitarian belief associated in the third century with the figure of Sabellius (hence Sabellianism). Monarchianism (called Patripassionism in the West) held that it was the Father who suffered on the cross. But Mastrocinque’s view requires the older misreading of Υἱέ as εἶς (despite awareness of Spier), a reading that is no longer defensible. And although he eruditely introduces a reference to Pope Callistus (217–222) to the effect that “the Logos is the Son, who is called Father” (Hippol. *Haer.* 9.12.16), one would now have to interpret υἱέ-πατήρ as a kind of hyphenated name, since the “singularity” is no longer present—a prospect difficult to defend. Further, Monarchianism spread in the third/fourth centuries, too late for this gem. The new reading with Υἱέ makes a reference to a Trinity inevitable, whether or not it carries any Gnostic overtones (see below), and the power of the cross belongs solely with the redeeming Son, whose name stands alone at the top.

designate, however, a kind of second name. This suggests, overall, a broader grouping of the three names (expressed with four words), whereby Son + Father could be seen as a pre-existent pair on a more cosmological scale, and Jesus + Christ be seen as the earthly, incarnate figure of the historical redeemer who dies on the cross. It is this redemptive work of the Son, borne out by the rest of the gem, that brings the whole soteriological drama of the Christ-event into sharper focus, especially in view of the new reading, discussed below, referring to the cross “of the redeeming Son” (λυσίου υιοῦ). The Son, from his heavenly origins with the Father, has come to earth in the form of an historical, redemptive figure. This short formula thus captures in the briefest of terms the same kind of cosmic event that we might witness in the early NT Christological hymns, such as those found in the Prologue to John (Jn 1:1–18), the Colossians Hymn (Col 1:15–20), and the celebrated Philippians Hymn (Phil 2:6–11)—not to mention the early Gnostic hymns.

We also note that the traditional sequence Father-Son, in the typical formula “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” (e.g. Mt 28:19), is subverted by the sequence Son-Father. Although the familial role is still present, the invoking of the Son shows not only a sequential preference, but the presentation of the three letters Y I E spread wide across the top of the gem, as well as above the earthly crucified figure of the Savior, gives precedence to the naming of the Son. It also symbolically situates the crucified figure’s sonship in his pre-existent, heavenly realm. The subsequent invocation of Ἰησοῦ Χριστέ will then serve, in encapsulated form, to exalt the power of the redemptive death of the pre-existent Son, in the historical figure of Jesus Christ (the Anointed One).

4–5 σοαμ νωα/μ: here the gem initiates a sequence of apparent magical syllables (*voces magicae*), culminating in lines 5–6 with a vowel series. A further set of vowels follows on the reverse, with additional magic names. Such names of power are common on magic gems and other incantatory media (papyri, curse-tablets, and metal phylacteries). They also occur fre-

quently in the Gnostic literature of the period, especially in the Sethian material (see below). The *voces* here, which are rhyming, can thus be easily divided into the two ‘words’. However, unlike most names on the reverse (*Iadetophōth*, *Satrapekmēph*, *Emmanuēl*), these have not been previously attested; they may thus represent something other than the usual *nomina barbara*. If they are read as a single sequence, σo-αμνω-αμ, one can identify in the middle the Greek word for “lamb” in the dative, ἄμνῳ. There is nothing otherwise grammatically Greek discernible here. Is it possible, though, that the entire sequence of letters preserves a cipher of sorts relative to the word for lamb? Indeed, if the whole were seen as a set of scrambled letters, σoαμνωαμ might contain just the characters required to constitute a jumbled, coded phrase in Greek, one seemingly appropriate to the gem’s immediate Christian context. That is, σoαμνωαμ can be taken as a viable scramble for the alliterative phrase ἄμνὸς ἄμω(μος), “unblemished lamb.” Here each letter of the jumble, if used once, with the allowance for supplying the final -μος of ἄμωμος a second time from the bank of existing letters, provides us with the phrase in question. That phrase, though in the genitive, occurs in 1 Peter 1:18–19:

Realizing that you were redeemed (ἐλυτρώθητε) not with corruptible things, such as silver or gold, from that vain manner of living of yours handed down from your fathers, but by the precious blood of Christ, blood like that of a lamb unblemished (ὡς ἄμνοῦ ἀμώμου) and without spot.

These verses stem from a plausible baptismal context.⁹ They directly link Jesus’ death on the cross (without naming the Crucifixion as such) as a sacrificial act that redeems (ἐλυτρώθητε) the true believer. The same link is presupposed on the

⁹ The hymnic material, for example, in 1 Pet 3:18–22, with its emphasis on the Passion of Christ, is directly linked to baptism at 3:21. This has led scholars to argue plausibly that the language of baptismal hymns can also be detected in 1:3–5, 1:18–21, 2:21–25, and 5:5b–9: see Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York/London 1997) 709 n.12.

gem, with its mention of the Redeeming Son (λυσίτου υιοῦ), discussed below. Its invocation must have served as a kind of secret (or magic) formula, known only to the Christian ‘initiate’ who, in so using it, is seen to be calling upon the power of the cross for its redemptive force. The use of the formula might be likened to the early Christian use of the acrostic ΙΧΘΥΣ, both “fish” and the well-known anagram Ι(ησοῦς) Χ(ριστός) Θ(εοῦ) Υ(ιός) Σ(ωτήρ). Here, the atoning sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, depicted on the gem as a redeeming and healing act, could have been empowered further by jumbling the phrase ἀμνός ἄμω(μος), giving a hidden sense: as a secret formula, it is a phrase of known meaning available only to the insider (an ‘emic’ formula). To the outsider, on the other hand, it becomes a rhyming pair of words that has a mysterious and magical force (thus, an ‘etic’ formula). Although the noun ἀμνός also occurs in the same sacrificial sense in John 1:29, 36 (cf. Acts 8:32), only here in 1 Peter do the noun and adjective appear together in the NT. It is thus possible that the alliterative formula ultimately derived from the text of 1 Peter 1:19, although it could also have arisen independently based on the pairing of the two words that is frequent in the LXX (e.g. Ex 29:38, Lev 12:6, 14:10, 28:18, Num 6:14, 28:3, etc.).

Curiously, the two other known early Crucifixion gems, albeit of the mid-4th century, provide a basis for comparison with the British Museum gem. The Constanza gem, a small carnelian (1.05 × 1.35 cm.) probably used as a personal seal, pictures Jesus crucified on a T-shaped cross amidst the twelve disciples. Although the figure is actually standing, he is also depicted nude and has his arms held loosely from the cross-beam as if tied, just as on our gem. Stretched across the top of the Constanza gem—again much in the manner of the Y I E of the British Museum gem—appears the acrostic ΙΧΘΥΣ, a symbolic name that, albeit known to inner Christian groups, could have here served as a kind of mysterious, or at least secret, magic formula. A second piece, in the German Archaeological

Institute in Rome and of similar composition to that of the Constanza gem, survives only in the form of a plaster cast.¹⁰ It too pictures the outstretched arms of Jesus, again amidst the twelve disciples, but with a crudely spelled inscription EHCO X/PECT/OC (“Jesus Christ”) between Jesus’ hanging arms and the heads of the apostles (with the final two letters written in the exergue). In between these last two letters, at the bottom of the gem, stands the figure of a solitary lamb. This lamb, no doubt the same sacrificial lamb alluded to in our gem’s word-play, is thought to represent Jesus’ atoning sacrifice on the cross: we appear to have a pictorial representation of the very “unblemished lamb” that the British Museum gem seems to be referring to in its COAM NΩAM formula.

5 ωαωι: seemingly vowels only, common enough in the magical papyri and gems; however, if they are read right-to-left, in the manner of ancient Hebrew, then it is plausible to see here a reference to the holy Tetragrammaton, יהוה (*YHWH*), whereby the *iota* becomes the initial *yodh* of the Divine Name in Hebrew, with the two *omega*’s representing the Hebrew *he*’s, etc. This would be in accordance with a rough representation of the letter-forms of the Tetragrammaton in archaic Hebrew. An excellent example of such an archaic form of the Tetragrammaton is on a Greek silver *phylaktērion* containing a Solomonic exorcism to cast out a wicked spirit from Allous daughter of Annis.¹¹ The archaic letters are engraved inside a signet ring meant to represent the Seal of Solomon. The publication provides numerous examples, with illustrations, of magic gems and *lamellae* containing various permutations of the divine Tetragrammaton using archaic Hebrew letter-forms, which in Greek assume various shapes, such as a barred Z, representing an archaic *yodh*, or a sequence, on gems, of a reversed EXE (ΞΞΞ),

¹⁰ See Felicity Harley in Spier, *Picturing the Bible* 229, no. 56 (for both items), with photographs, discussion, and further references.

¹¹ Roy D. Kotansky and David R. Jordan, “A Solomonic Exorcism,” in *P.Köln* VIII 338 (pp.53–69 and Taf. V).

a stylized Greek version of הוה(י).¹² In these examples, the archaic *he*, which looks like a reversed, slanting E (Ǝ with a tail), can in many alphabets be rotated so that III becomes a Greek *omega* (Ω on our gemstone).

5–6 α/εηιουω: the interpretation of these letters as a group here is new. The *epsilon* was written without its middle horizontal bar, so it has always been transcribed as *sigma*; thus previous editions have not recognized that we have the simple sequence of seven vowels. This sequence is commonly found in magical and Gnostic texts and has usually been thought to represent the Sun, the Moon, and the five planets.¹³ But here the seven vowels may have another significance. We present two possibilities.

In the Sethian Gnostic *Gospel of the Egyptians* III 44,1–9, the seven vowels are said to represent a hidden name of God,¹⁴ a thought that is also echoed by Eusebius: “For they [sc. the Hebrews] say also that the combination of the seven vowels contains the enunciation of one forbidden name, which the Hebrews indicate by four letters and apply to the supreme power of God.”¹⁵ In this instance, our gemstone would be

¹² See esp. *P. Köln* VIII pp.65–69, figs. 3–12 (on fig. 4 the captions for *yod* and *waw* should be switched).

¹³ Cf. Preisendanz on *PGM* XIII.557–558 (a permutation of the vowels called τῶν ζ' ἀστέρων, “of the seven planets”). In general on the vowels see Franz Dornseiff, *Das Alphabet in Mystik und Magie* (Leipzig 1925) 11–16; David Frankfurter, “The Magic of Writing and the Writing of Magic: The Power of the Word in Egyptian and Greek Traditions,” *Helios* 21 (1994) 189–221, esp. 199–205.

¹⁴ “he whose name [is] in an [invisible] symbol. [A] hidden, [invisible] mystery came forth iiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii[iii] eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee[ēē o] oooooooooo uu[uuu]uuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee aaaaaaa [aaaa]aaaaaaaaa ὀδδδδδδδδδδ[δδ]δδδδδδδδδδδδ” (transl. A. Böhlig and F. Wisse, in J. Robinson [ed.], *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*⁴ [Leiden 1996] 210); see also Frankfurter, *Helios* 21 (1994) 202.

¹⁵ *Praep.Ev.* 11.6.36; transl. E. H. Gifford (Oxford 1903) 257; Eusebius goes on to quote an epigram to the same effect that the seven vowels tell of the name of the Mighty God. Cf. Clem. Alex. *Strom.* 6.16.141; Frankfurter,

citing the seven vowels not in the sense typically found in magical spells, but rather as a secret invocation of God the Father, who is already named on the gem.

The other possibility, supported also from the magical papyri and early Gnostic sects (e.g. the Marcosians, discussed below), is that the seven vowels represent the seven heavens, each of which produces its own sound, the first, A, the second E, and so on.¹⁶ Related to this would be the notion that the seven vowels stand for the harmony of the seven musical scale-tones, and therefore the harmony of the heavenly spheres themselves.¹⁷ In this respect, the vowels are to be chanted or sung aloud, perhaps hymnically, as suggested by the obverse inscription as a whole (see below). The presentation of the seven vowels right after the naming of the Son and before the mention of the cross might point to the *descent* of Jesus from the seventh heaven to meet his incarnational obligations on earth.¹⁸ But on our gem, it seems more likely that the vowel-series represents a secret name of God, and, like Eusebius'

Helios 21 (1994) 200–201 (with n.73 on the Coptic liturgy London MS. Pr. 6794.40–42).

¹⁶ Irenaeus *Haer.* 1.14.6 = 1.8.8 pp.142–143 Harvey. Citations are to the *Ante-Nicene Fathers* transl. and then the edition of the Greek/Latin by W. W. Harvey—both accessible at www.textexcavation.com/irenaeusahl.html#.

¹⁷ As in *PGM XIII.628–629*: ἐπικαλοῦμαι σε, κύριε, ᾠδικῶ ὑμνῶ ὑμνῶ σου τὸ ἅγιον κρ<ά>τος· ἀηιουωωω, “I call upon you, lord; I hymn your holy power in a musical hymn, AEĒIOYŌŌŌ”; transl. M. Smith, in H. D. Betz (ed.), *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation*² (Chicago 1986) 187, with n.104.

¹⁸ Cf. *PGM I.26–29*: α εε ηηη ιιι οοοοο υυ[υυυ]υ ωωωωωωω ἦκέ μοι, ἀγαθὲ γεωργέ, Ἀγαθὸς Δ[αί]μων ... ἦκέ μοι, ὁ ἅγιος Ὠρίων, κτλ., “A EE ĒĒĒ III OOOOO YYYYYY ŌŌŌŌŌŌŌ, come to me, Good Husbandman, Good Daimon ... come to me, O holy Orion,” etc. (transl. E. N. O’Neil, in *The Greek Magical Papyri* 3–4). But here the vowels are formed in a ladder-like structure (called a κλίμα), by which the god is thought to descend to earth in order for the practitioner to enjoy direct communion with him; cf. Frankfurter, *Helios* 21 (1994) 202.

pairing of the Hebrew letters of the Tetragrammaton with his Greek vowel-series, our text's seven vowels can be paired with the same holy four letters that appear alongside the vowels.

7 ἀρτάννα: for ἀρτάνη, with gemination of the *nu* and $\alpha < \eta$. Derchain already recognized the possibility of reading ἀρτάνη (“le lien de suspension”) and saw it in reference to the “fetters” that are shown binding Jesus to the cross. Derchain incorrectly read the second *nu* as an *eta*, owing to a fine diagonal crack in the stone. Nonetheless, ἀρτάνη is to be read, although it is fairly uncommon, occurring only in Aeschylus and Sophocles, where it is usually given the meaning *rope*, *noose*, or *halter*.¹⁹ As such, this could match Derchain's idea of suspension or binding ropes, were it not for the fact that the noun here is in the singular and such “ropes” would focus on too small and insignificant an aspect of the whole Crucifixion scene to seem a meaningful referent.

The principal meaning of ἀρτάνη is “*that by which something is hung up*” (so LSJ), deriving from ἀρτάω, “hang/suspend.”²⁰ Broadly, its sense is that of a “hanger/suspender.” Thus, to match our gem's depiction it is possible to look for an additional, more specific meaning for the noun than “rope” or “noose.” It cannot, however, refer to the *act* of hanging, or crucifixion itself, since feminine nouns in -ανη are always instrumental nouns.²¹ We need, rather, something *by which* Jesus

¹⁹ LSJ s.v., in reference to women's suicidal hangings: of Clytaemnestra (unrealized) in Aes. *Ag.* 875–876, πολλάς ἀνώθεν ἀρτάνας ἐμῆς δέρης ἔλυσαν, “many nooses/hangers from on high they have loosed from my neck”; of Jocasta, Soph. *Ant.* 54, πλεκταῖσιν ἀρτάναισι, “plaited ropes/hangers”; *OT* 1266, κρεμαστήν ἀρτάνην, a “rope/hanger for hanging,” referring back to “plaited nooses” (πλεκταῖσιν αἰώραισιν) of 1254. LSJ also cite *Ag.* 1091, but this is an improbable emendation. In these translations we have added the sense of “hanger/s,” as argued below.

²⁰ LSJ s.v.: “*fasten to or hang one thing upon another; hang*”; pass. “*to be hung upon, hang upon*”; cf. Hsch. ἀτάρνη (leg. ἀρτάνη): βρόχος (“noose/slip-knot”). Latin *antenna* (< **artenna*), “sail-yard,” may be etymologically related.

²¹ C. D. Buck and W. Petersen, *A Reverse Index of Greek Nouns and Adjectives*

is hung that is neither a noose nor a rope for hanging. As a noun that etymologically can refer to *any* kind of suspension device, ἀρτάνη on our gemstone will most naturally intend the very *suspension-beam*, *hanging-beam*, or *cross-beam* of the cross itself: it must refer to nothing less than the *patibulum* or “horizontal bar of the T-shaped cross” (Spier) from which Jesus is shown suspended. By metonymy, ἀρτάνη (“suspension-beam/cross-beam”) will of course have come to refer to the whole instrument of the cross (σταυρός, *crux*).²²

A compound form of the verb ἐπαρτάω (“to hang over/hang from above”) provides a very close parallel to the putative sense of ἀρτάνη that we propose here. This verb in the perfect passive, when articulated as a neuter noun, gives us τὸ ἐπηρτημένον, “the elevated part of a beam,” in Arist. *Mech.* 850a23 (κουφότερον γὰρ τὸ ἐπηρτημένον [sc. ζυγοῦ], “because the *elevated part of the beam* is lighter [sc. than the beam of the balance]).” This term comes especially close to the meaning of ἀρτάνη on our gem in the sense of a *suspension beam*, referring essentially to the same kind of object.

Since the root sense of ἀρτάνη is not “rope” or “noose,” but rather “instrument of hanging/hanging mechanism,” which in

(Chicago 1949) 288, who cite, e.g., δρέπω “pluck” > δρεπάνη “sickle,” εἶργω “enclose” > ὀρκάνη “fence,” σκάπτω “dig” > σκαπάνη “digging tool,” ἔχω “hold” > ὀχάνη “holder of shield,” etc. (cf. 261 on -ανος, for origin). Here we have ἀρτάω “fasten to, hang one thing upon another” > ἀρτάνη, “instrument of hanging/suspension.” From compound forms of the verb (ἀναρτάω, ἀπαρτάω, ἐξαρτάω, ἐπαρτάω) we get a host of relevant nouns: ἀνάρτησις “suspension,” ἀπαρτής “raised up,” etc., ἀπάρτησις “hanging from,” ἐξαρτηδόν (μετὰ τοῦ ἐκκρεμάσθαι, Hsch.), ἐξάρτημα “that which is suspended from,” ἐξάρτιος “for suspension,” ἄρτημα “hanging ornament (sc. earring)/cord for suspension.”

²² The noun σταυρός, properly speaking, is an “*upright pale or stake*” (so LSJ), presumably from ἵστημι, “to stand (upright),” that secondarily—principally in the NT—came to denote the T-shaped cross as an infamous instrument of execution. As further suggested (below), our ἀρτάνη would seem to derive from a non-biblical designation for the cross.

the scant literary examples extends to a noose (of twisted rope) for hanging, it is best to take our noun as a reference to the whole mechanism by which Jesus is suspended—the *beam*, to which he is also fastened by the visible *ropes* depicted on the gem (i.e., not nailed), as well as the whole *cross* upon which he is suspended. That the gemstone seems to show these exaggerated suspension cords only serves to emphasize the depiction of the Crucifixion as a hanging event. That nails are not depicted or even implied, and that we find in the New Testament what might be called ‘non-standard’ references to the death of Jesus as a “hanging on the wood,” in contradistinction to what we usually find in the Gospel passion narratives, points to an origin of the gemstone’s depiction that is not especially Gospel-based.²³ Further, the common gospel

²³ Luke-Acts, for instance, seems to have a penchant for avoiding mention of the Crucifixion, replacing Mark’s “and he delivered [Jesus] to be crucified” (καὶ παρέδωκεν ... ἵνα σταυρωθῆ, Mk 15:15) with “he delivered [him] up to their will” (παρέδωκεν τῷ θελήματι αὐτῶν, Lk 23:25); omitting all of Mk 15:16–20a (the mocking by the soldiers); omitting again at Lk 23:26 (“and they led him away”) the mention of crucifixion in Mk 15:20b (“and they led him out to crucify him”); at Lk 23:32 replacing “they crucify” (σταυροῦσιν, Mk 15:27) with “to be put to death” (ἀναιρεθῆναι), in reference to the two robbers/ criminals; and at 23:39 replacing Mark’s “those crucified with him” (οἱ συνεσταυρωμένοι, Mk 15:32b), in reference to the same criminals, with “those who were *hanged*” (τῶν κρεμασθέντων). This last Lucan reference to the Crucifixion as a “hanging” event, plus the absence of nails anywhere in the synoptic Gospels (nor of the *scourging*, for that matter, in Luke 23:25) may reflect a genuine historical recollection in Luke of a crucifixion that had to do with a *hanging* by ropes to the wood rather than a *nailing* to the cross. Acts 5:30, 10:39 (cf. 13:29) refers to the Crucifixion as a “hanging on the tree/ wood” (κρεμάσαντες ἐπὶ ξύλου; cf. 1 Pet 2:24). The source of the wording of Gal 3:13, κρεμάμενος ἐπὶ ξύλου, quoted by Paul as if Scripture (cf. LXX Deut 27:26, 21:23), is highly problematic (cf. H. D. Betz, *Galatians* [Philadelphia 1979] 151–152), so that the LXX can hardly be the source for Luke’s odd use of προσπήγνυμι (“to fix [to]”) which may imply nails (Acts 2:23). The only reference to a “nail” (ἦλος) in the NT occurs in the post-Resurrection account at Jn 20:25, a verse (and passage) fraught with historical and textual problems. All said,

and Pauline word for the cross, *σταυρός* (a word of much cultural shame and opprobrium in antiquity), is not referred to on the gem, which also suggests that the gem's noun derives from among educated, Hellenistic groups: *ἀρτάνη* is a poetic word, and, as discussed below, the phrase in which it is imbedded, if not the whole invocation itself, scans as reasonably good meter.

8–9 *λυσίου* / [υ]i[οῦ]: the reading is new. The right diagonal of the *lambda* is plainly visible in enlarged photos, but only the very right edge of it. The adjective *λύσιος* (“releasing, delivering, redeeming”) is not an epithet of Jesus in the NT, although several cognates do occur,²⁴ and the sense is particularly appropriate here: the adjective was used primarily of the so-called *λύσιοι θεοί*, gods “who deliver from curse or sin.”²⁵ The import of this adjective in describing the Son is that the cross provides the means of redemption for the wearer of the gemstone and, presumably, for the original invocers of the whole

the image of the crucified figure on the gem may hark back to a genuine historical reminiscence of the Crucifixion that knew of Jesus having been tied to the cross by suspension ropes. For “hanging” (i.e. “binding”) in crucifixions as opposed to “nailing” cf. Hengel, *Crucifixion* 24–25, 71–72, 76–77.

²⁴ E.g. *λύτρον* “price for redeeming” (Mk 10:45); *λυτρόω* “redeem” (1 Pet 1:18); *λύτρωσις* “ransoming; redemption” (Lk 1:68, 2:38, Heb 9:12); *λυτρωτής* “redeemer” (Acts 7:35); *ἀντίλυτρον* “price of redemption, ransom” (1 Tim 2:6).

²⁵ LSJ s.v. cite Pl. *Resp.* 366A, and the salvific god Dionysus Lysios, of his “releasing rites.” A verbal form is also used of Dionysus on a pair of the Orphic gold *lamellae* from Pelinna, <ε>ἰπεῖν Φερσεφό<ναι σ> ὅτι Βά<κ>χιος αὐτὸς ἔλυσε, “Tell Persephone that the Bacchic One released you”: Fritz Graf and Sarah Iles Johnston, *Ritual Texts for the Afterlife. Orpheus and the Bacchic Gold Tablets*² (London/New York 2013) 36–37, with discussion 145–147 on Dionysus Lyseus, etc.; and Fritz Graf, “Dionysian and Orphic Eschatology: New Texts and Old Questions,” in T. H. Carpenter and C. A. Faraone (eds.), *Masks of Dionysus* (Ithaca 1993) 239–258, esp. 243–244, 252–253. An affinity between Jesus and Dionysus has long been known.

vocative prayer contained on the obverse.²⁶ It proves to be the very capstone for the whole prayer, as it were, at least on the obverse side, providing the healing and redemptive function of both invocation and image. The fact, too, that it is not the “redeeming Christ” but rather the “redeeming Son” who is associated with the cross brings into focus the initial invocation of the Son as that redemptive figure who resides initially with the Father in his pre-existent, heavenly abode.

Reverse

The inscription on the reverse is by a different hand.²⁷ Although there are some vague similarities between the texts of both sides of our gem (e.g. the name *Emmanuel* may point to a Christian context), the two inscriptions do not communicate well with each other. The words on the reverse, for the most part, are standard magical names, whereas those on the ob-

²⁶ No verbs of protection or healing are on the gem, such as usually found on amulets (see n.35 below). Here the sense of redemption, λύσις, must imply for the wearer a generalized deliverance. A 4th-century magical papyrus formulary, *P.Berol.* 17202, preserving *inter alia* a Christian liturgical exorcism, using credal formulas with versicles and responsories, also contains a verse referring to God, or Jesus Christ, as “he who, having freed/redeemed the one being punished,” τ[ὸν] κολαζόμενον ὁ λύσ[ας] [pap. γύσ]: William Brashear and Roy D. Kotansky, “A New Magical Formulary,” in P. Mirecki and M. Meyer (eds.), *Magic and Ritual in the Ancient World* (Leiden 2002) 3–24, esp. 15 for parallels.

²⁷ The letters are smaller and more squat than those on the obverse, which are taller and more elongated, with the strokes ending in fine, tapered points; the ends of the letters on the reverse are all quite blunt. This has been caused by the use of a different drilling instrument, which shows visible striations within the grooves of each letter. But even some of the letter-forms themselves differ. *Rho*'s on the reverse are mostly rounded, but on the obverse angular, with straight top-horizontals; *eta*'s on the reverse are sometimes wider than they are tall; and *tau*'s have shorter cross-bars. The right diagonal strokes of the *alpha*'s on the obverse are all quite long and extend well beyond the body of the letter, whereas the *alpha*'s on the reverse are closer in shape to *delta*. There are evidently two hands here, although there are no traces of re-graving.

verse are not; furthermore, the words on the obverse also include hymnic and metrical verses (see below), a Trinitarian-like formula, and explicit references to and imagery of Jesus and the cross. The differences between the two sides are all the more enhanced in that different engravers were involved. This can readily lead to the conclusion that the reverse may have been engraved at a later date than the obverse. What we hypothesize here is that the gem was originally carved only on the larger, beveled side carrying the Crucifixion and invocation. At some later date, a second engraver decided to write a different set of magical names and formulas on the back, perhaps to enhance the value and power of an heirloom gem that was already venerated for its potency.²⁸

1–3 Ἰωε / εὐα εὐι / [...]ιοῦι: we have a series of vowels of undetermined sense (see on obv. 5–6), although permutations of the divine Tri- and Tetragrammaton cannot be ruled out.

²⁸ It is common to find magic gems engraved on only one side of the stone. This can occur for any number of reasons, but one cause might have been that if the stone were set into a ring (or even a brooch with a metal backing), it would be otiose to have the back side engraved. This is not to say that ancient gems engraved on both sides of the stone could not be worn as finger rings or in necklaces, for they surely must have been from time to time; we just do not have enough surviving examples with their original settings. What we can say, however, is that our gemstone is beveled, so that the side that carries the Crucifixion scene and hymn is the larger surface—the obverse. If the gem had been set into a ring, this is the side that would have been visible; the back of the ring, which we assume was at one time blank, would have remained hidden from view. Perhaps it was the second engraver who also had to forcibly remove the gem from its original setting (thus causing the damage we now see). For examples of gems set in their original finger rings, also engraved on only one surface, see Philipp, *Mira et Magica* 56–57, no. 58, Taf. 15 (a bronze ring); 92, no. 135, Taf. 35 (iron); Mastrocinque, *Les intailles magiques* 21, nos. 1–2; 95, no. 232; 112–113, no. 286–287; 161, no. 430 (gold rings, one silver, with only the obverse visible; 95, no. 233, a gold ring with both sides visible; cf. the pendants 96–97, nos. 236, 240; 144, no. 378; 148, no. 393 [one side]; 203, no. 564; 238, no. 686). Such stones do not appear as if they could have been easily removed from their settings.

The second word, εὐα, may be articulated as the Greek word for “Eve” (Εὐα), although this may be a mere coincidence. For the third ‘word’ one should probably read εη (the crossbar of the *eta* was apparently omitted).

3 σὺε/[.]: these letters, which are evidently not part of the vowel-series, suggest the plausible restoration σὺ ε/[î], “you are”—a reference to the following lists of names. The acclamation may refer to the crucified Son on the obverse, or may originate from an independent context. The presence of the biblical *Emmanuel* below, used of Jesus at Mt 1:23, may suggest the former, but the different hand of the reverse, which points to a later addition, would support the latter. One way or another, it is possible that the pronoun “you” meant, secondarily, to refer to the crucified figure and that the whole group on the reverse may represent secret names of Jesus. Since the reverse of the gem is probably a later addition, it could simply be that the ‘magician’ (or scribe) responsible for the engraving of the reverse is building upon the older tradition of Jesus-material he has inherited from the obverse. In this case we have the appropriation of Jesus-traditions by pagan magicians, seemingly the exact opposite of what we find with the gem’s original depiction and inscription.²⁹

4–5 Ιαδητοφω/θ: the spelling of this common magical word (of unknown meaning) is usually Βαδητοφωθ, but a *beta* cannot be read at the beginning. It forms part of a longer formula, the *Bakaxichych-logos*, which although occurring on gems, is more commonly found on curse-tablets: see Michel, *Die Magischen Gemmen* 220–221, 483, 496, s.v.

²⁹ On this kind of borrowed pagan use of Jesus’ name in magic see the excellent analysis of Graham H. Twelftree, “Jesus the Exorcist and Ancient Magic,” in M. Labahn and B. J. Lietaert Peerbolte (eds.), *A Kind of Magic. Understanding Magic in the New Testament and its Religious Environment* (London/New York 2007) 57–86, esp. 78–81; cf. Pieter W. van der Horst, “The Great Magical Papyrus of Paris (*PGM IV*) and the Bible,” in *A Kind of Magic* 173–183.

5 Ἰεσεβτεκη: it is apparent here that the scribe did not ‘cross’ his *epsilon*’s, a phenomenon common in the engraving of magic gems. The word is of unknown derivation; cf. Ἰεσσεβις in Michel, *Die Magischen Gemmen* 507 s.v. If Hebrew, and a name of Jesus, then the initial element Ἰεσεβ- might suggest the common Talmudic, etc., spelling of Jesus, ישׁוּ = *Yeshu*, with the usual inscriptional pronunciation of *waw* as *h*. τεκη is unexplained, unless it contains some form of τίκτω, “beget” (e.g. τέκη, ἔτεκεν).

5–6 Ἐ/ψμωναυηλ (prior editors’ Ε/μμωνουήλ cannot be confirmed): a common epithet of Jesus (“God is with us”) in Christian magic, from Mt 1:23 and Isaiah 7:14. On gems, cf. Mastrocinque, *Les intailles magiques* 186, no. 514 (with references), 196 no. 540; Michel, *Die Magischen Gemmen* 501 s.v. The name is formed like an angel-name. Here we suggest the appropriation of Christian elements into pagan magic. The fact that the name, otherwise known in Christian circles, was badly spelled (or not corrected from its model), suggests a non-Christian writer for the reverse.

6–8 Ἀ/στραπερκμη/φ: this common magic name is usually spelled Σατραπερκμηφ; cf. Michel, *Die Magischen Gemmen* 519 s.v. Here the initial *sigma* and *alpha* have switched, yielding (perhaps intentionally) a kind of stellar name Ἀστρα-. The name *Satraperkmēph* has been explained as Egyptian “great satrap Kmeph”: William Brashear, “The Greek Magical Papyri: An Introduction and Survey,” *ANRW* II.18.5 (1995) 3598.

8–9 Μειθω Αρμεμπε/ [...]: or Μειθωαρ Μεμπε, etc. If syllabified as Αρμεμπε one can think of Coptic/Egy. HOR-MNFE / HAR-MENFE (*Hr-mn-nfr*, “Horus-firm-and-beautiful?”), but this would be one of any number of possibilities. The element Μειθω is unknown.

The Meter

The presence of the poetic word ἀρτάνη should alert us to the metrical possibilities of the gemstone’s final invocation on the obverse. Indeed, ἀρτάνη λυσίου υἱοῦ, yields a trimeter of three syncopated iambs, that is, an iambic metron (× – ∪ –)

whose initial element is suppressed. Apparent hiatus after the final syllable of *λυσίου* might be typical in less skilled meter such as that commonly found in later Christian writing, were it not for the fact that it can be readily explained as the result of an original digamma before *ϕυϊοῦ* (the usual diphthong must be read with a diaeresis, on which see below). The metrical shape of this verse may thus explicate the choice of the relatively rare noun *ἀρτάνη* for the usual biblical *σταυρός*, but there are conceivably other reasons as well.

Even though much of the invocation on the obverse is composed of names and of apparent magical words and vowels, it remains a distinct possibility that the rest can be analyzed for possible metrical structure, as well. The first line, as divided below, seems to give us a reasonably good iambic trimeter. The first metron with three short syllables resolves, in accordance with standard lyric meter, into a longum. The only violation is treating the final syllable of *Ἰησοῦ* as short, but this sort of license is commonly found in later, if not unskilled, Greek verse composition, and is particularly admissible with personal names, in any period. Further, the vocative *υἱέ* must be read with a diaeresis, and not the usual diphthong.³⁰ The *σοαμ*, as was suggested in the apparatus, may also have to be understood with long *omega* rather than *omicron* to match the paired word that follows.³¹

The second line is composed wholly of magic names and vowels. Nevertheless, the writer seems to have composed, with

³⁰ *υἱός* is metrically inconsistent, even in Homer (see LSJ s.v. *ad fin.*), where the first syllable is sometimes short; and elsewhere when the form *ῥις* is to be scanned as two short syllables (e.g. Ael. Herod. *GG* III.2 322.26). Cf. the diaeresis on the cognates *ῥιδοῦς* “grandson,” *ῥιδιον* dim. of *υἱός*.

³¹ This analysis, however, might appear to contradict the interpretation that *σοαμ*, as written, may disguise the possible *ἀμνός* cipher. In this case, however, we can retain the short *ο* and resolve the two *breve*'s as a *longum* and read the final metron as a choliamb (∞ – –). Thus, the metrical analysis, as given below, could be composed of 2 choliambic trimeters + 1 synco-pated iambic trimeter.

limited liberties, a kind of pseudo-verse made up of a choliambic trimeter: two iambic meters, with a third ‘limping’ scazon, whereby the final foot ends abruptly with long syllables. Here the only license is in treating the -ου- of the vowel series as a diphthong. The result of the whole is a nice, independent hymnic strophe of reasonable, if not entirely skilled, metrical shape:

υῖέ, πατήρ, Ἰησοῦ Χριστέ, σωα μνω

αμ ωαωι α ε η ι ου ω

ἀρτάνη λυσίου υἱοῦ

- υ υ υ - υ - υ - υ - υ - ~	(3ia)	= iambic trimeter
υ - υ - υ - υ - υ - -	(2ia+ chol)	= choliambic trimeter
- υ - - υ - - υ -	(3^ ia)	= syncopated iambic trimeter

Depending on how one divides the last magic syllable of the first line (*σωα μνω/αμ* or *σωαμ νω/αμ*), we may have a bridge with three iambs, as opposed to an independent trimeter. Since the syllables here and at the beginning of line 2 are not Greek, it is immaterial how the syllables are to be divided as meaningful words. Suffice it to say that the whole constitutes a kind of strophic pattern, as opposed to a strictly stichic arrangement, that lends itself to being read as a brief song, or some kind of chanted composition, an invocational song that may have derived from a particular early Christian environment, as opposed to a mere magical incantation.³² What kind of cultic

³² For examples of Christian iambic incantations used over doorposts, lintels, etc., see Christopher A. Faraone, “Stopping Evil, Pain, Anger, and Blood: The Ancient Greek Tradition of Protective Iambic Incantations,” *GRBS* 49 (2009) 227–255, esp. 231, with reference to a Christian lintel-inscription from near Halicarnassus, *σταυροῦ [παρόντος] οὐδὲν ἰσχύει Φθόνος* (“As long as the cross is present Phthonos is not in the least powerful”), and to two additional examples (L. Robert, “Échec au mal,” *Hellenica* XIII [Paris 1965] 265–272, at 265) which Faraone has “tweaked” to yield, individually, choliambic and iambic trimeters. Faraone rightly suggests that these Christian examples are modelled after earlier Hellenistic pagan iambic verses, which he discusses in detail, including one alluding to

setting this may have been (baptismal, eucharistic, or other), is difficult to say, given the paucity of information we have on such compositions. Further, how seemingly mystical words and secret slogans have come to be incorporated with good, poetic ones is a scenario that is relatively easy to account for.³³ That Christians used magic in their healing and salvific practices is evident not only from the Greek magical papyri, but also from the large body of Christian magical texts in Coptic.³⁴ Gnostic Christian groups, as well, employed a welter of standard magical names (*nomina barbara*) in their treatises, especially, for example, in *The Books of Jeu*, the *Pistis Sophia*, and elsewhere. But more can be said about the cultural-historical implications of finding a hymnic invocation, along with magical syllables,

apotropaic ritual gestures associated with the Anthesteria (232–234). Although the several Christian doorpost examples are clearly house incantations and allude to the cross in a protective manner, they differ from our gem in being only single trimeters and in targeting specific prophylactic situations. The longer gem text, as mentioned above, has no apotropaic language, and its use of a set of three trimetric verses points more towards the preservation of a hymnic chant, rather than to a simple protective incantation. Faraone gives many additional examples of iambic trimeters used in protective incantations, which he suggests stem from oral traditions. To his discussion one can now add Michael Zellmann-Rohrer, “Protective Iambic Incantations on Two Inscribed Octagonal Rings,” *GRBS* 55 (2015) 250–255; see also David R. Jordan, “Choliambic for Mary in a Papyrus Phylactery,” *HThR* 84 (1991) 343–346. For the use of iambic trimeters generally in “ritual chants and formulae” note M. L. West, *Greek Metre* (Oxford 1982) 146–148.

³³ The presence of non-Greek magical names and even vowels that scan in metrical hymns is fairly common in the magical papyri, so its occurrence here should come as no surprise; see *PGM* II 237–266 (“Hymnen”), esp. 238 Hymn 3.6 (hexameters); 241–242 Hymn 5.14–17, 22, 23, 26 (hexameters); 244–245 Hymn 10.9–12 (hexameters); 245–246 Hymn 11.29, 34, 40 (hexameters); 250–251 Hymn 17.48, 59 (iambic trimeters); 263 Hymn 25.14–16 (iambic trimeters).

³⁴ See e.g. Marvin W. Meyer and Richard Smith, *Ancient Christian Magic. Coptic Texts of Ritual Power* (Princeton 1999).

vowels, and divine names, accompanying an early, detailed representation of Jesus on the cross.

Discussion

With the new reading of the inscription, the question whether the British Museum gem represents an early appropriation—or misappropriation—of the image of Jesus' Crucifixion for use among magic groups, or vice-versa, can be answered more affirmatively in the direction of the latter: some Christian group is representing on a gem a genuinely early Crucifixion image along with the invocation of an unorthodox Trinitarian formula, a 'secret' anagrammatic soteriological slogan, mystical and vocalic names of God, and a non-biblical acclamation of the very cross upon which the redemptive figure of Jesus is shown to be hanging. The producers of this gem are not drawing upon the standard prayers, healing formulas, or *voces magicae* of the magical papyri or their kindred gemstones, at least not on the obverse side.³⁵ By demonstrating that most of its formulas are actually more hymnic and invocational than magical, we can perhaps more securely reflect upon the conceivable origin of this important gem within more specific early Christian contexts.

The so-called Marcosians, whose founder, Marcus the mage, was according to Irenaeus³⁶ a disciple of the early Gnostic Valentinus, were said to use "Hebraic-sounding" magic words in their ceremonies along with other magic spells and incantations. Marcus' followers had adopted an unorthodox

³⁵ In typical amulet gemstone inscriptions we find specific prayers for salvation or help, using verbs cast in the singular or plural, often with the specific maladies, diseases, or spirits named. Here we find only vocatives with no specific plea at all mentioned, a fact that further underscores the non-magical, or borderline magical, character of the invocation; see e.g. Roy Kotansky, "Incantations and Prayers for Salvation on Inscribed Greek Amulets," in C. A. Faraone and D. Obbink (eds.), *Magika Hiera* (New York/Oxford 1991) 107–137.

³⁶ *Haer.* 1.13–21 = 1.7–14 pp. 115–145 H.

Trinitarian formula which, while not the same as that of our gem, provides a good starting-place to situate the kind of non-traditional groups that may have composed this invocation:³⁷

The same Irenaeus powerfully exposed the bottomless pit of the system of Valentinus with its many errors, and unbarred his secret and latent wickedness while he was lurking like a reptile. Furthermore he says that there was in their time another named Marcus, most experienced in the magic arts (μαγικῆς κυβείας ἐμπειρότατον), and he writes of his initiations, which could not initiate, and of his foul mysteries, expounding them in these words: “Some of them construct a bridal chamber, and celebrate a mystery with certain invocations (μετ’ ἐπιρρήσεών τινων) on their initiate, and say that what they do is a spiritual marriage, according to the likeness of the unions above; others bring them to water and baptize them with this invocation: ‘To the name of the unknown Father of the universe, to Truth, the mother of all things, to him who descended into Jesus’ (εἰς ὄνομα ἀγνώστου πατρὸς τῶν ὅλων, εἰς ἀλήθειαν μητέρα τῶν πάντων, εἰς τὸν κατελθόντα εἰς τὸν Ἰησοῦν) and others invoke Hebrew words (Ἑβραϊκὰ ὀνόματα ἐπιλέγουσιν), in order to more fully amaze the initiate.”

Trinitarian formulas, like that found here and in Mt 28:19 (note “*Baptizing* them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”), tell us that the hymn on our gem could have also similarly originated in a baptismal context. The Marcosian baptismal invocation “unto the one who descended into Jesus” will no doubt have in mind the “Son” himself, although he is surely not first on the list, nor even named as such. Still, the formula of Marcus’ followers is distinctly familial, with a Father (“unknown”), a Mother (“Truth”), and an unnamed one who descends, incarnationally, into the earthly Jesus. The Valentinians were not as prone to adopt magical words and

³⁷ Eus. *HE* 4.11.3–5 (transl. Lake) = Irenaeus *Haer.* 1.21.3 (1.14.2 pp. 174–185 H.) = Epiphanius *Panar.* 34.20. On this passage see also Frankfurter, *Helios* 21 (1994) 201; Dornseiff, *Das Alphabet* 126–133.

names in their invocations as were the Sethians;³⁸ nor were they as docetic as were many of the later Gnostic groups. But their surviving literature mentions more than most of these others the Crucifixion and the Passion of Christ, borrowing, perhaps much in the same way as our text, the incarnational and soteriological emphases of the Fourth Gospel.³⁹

The second century was a period of tremendous diversity among fledging Christian groups. Competing congregations of ‘heterodox’, semi-magian, and proto-Gnostic groups vied with more ‘orthodox’ groups, who themselves remained ill-defined. The early second-century “heresies” (lit. “sects”) that Irenaeus and others describe in figures like Marcus the Magian, Saturninus, Basilides (fl. 132–135), and sectarians like the Simonians, the Carpocratians, the Cerinthians, or even the Nicolaitans, may have represented what was once but the tip-of-the-iceberg of a welter of proto-Gnostic groups that used arcane words and mystical invocations.⁴⁰ Although there is nothing specifically

³⁸ See Howard M. Jackson, “The Origin in Ancient Incantatory ‘Voces Magicae’ of Some Names in the Sethian Gnostic System,” *VigChr* 43 (1980) 69–79.

³⁹ See Michael Makidon and Dan Liroy, “The Passion of Christ in the Valentinian Sources from the Nag Hammadi Library, and its Relationship with the Fourth Gospel,” *Conspectus* 19 (2015) 65–77. There is a tendency, however, to explain away, or ‘spiritualize’, within the Valentinian system, their clearly anti-docetic treatment of the Crucifixion and Passion of Jesus. Cf. *Apocryphon of James* (NHC I 2) 5.33–35, “Remember my cross and my death, and you will live!” (transl. F. E. Williams)—also with much noted Johannine, Father-Son typology; *Gospel of Truth* (NHC I 3 and XII 2) 18.24, “He was nailed to a tree” (cf. 20.11–14, “Jesus was patient in accepting suffering ... since he knows that his death is life for many”); 20.25–21, “he was nailed to a tree; he published the edict of the Father on the cross” (transl. H. W. Attridge and G. W. MacRae); cf. *Gospel of Philip* (NHC II 3) 68.27–28, 74.20.

⁴⁰ It is of course Simon Magus who is considered by Irenaeus as the forerunner of all Gnostic systems (*Haer.* 1.23.1–4 = 1.16.1 pp.190–195 H.), and, based on the account in Acts (8:9–13), he says practiced magical arts, exorcisms, incantations, love-charms, etc., a charge leveled at many of the

Gnostic about the text of the British Museum gemstone, it does share with early gnosticisms a veneration of Christ and a use of quasi-magical invocations and formulas. Some of these early groups, like the Basilidians, thought that the historical figure of Jesus was not the one who was crucified, even if a name like that of *Abrasax*, common in magic literature, does occur among them.⁴¹ With the caveat that one person's (etic) magic may be another person's (emic) religion, we can better position our understanding of this unique gem within the context of such proto-heretical groups as those that the early Apologists condemned, without having to appeal directly to the Marcosians or any other specific sect, proto-Valentinian or other. It suffices to say that the image on our gemstone, with its early depiction of the crucified Jesus, was from the beginning indelibly connected with secret, if not borderline-magical invocations, by which the Son, the Father, Jesus Christ, and redeeming cross were called upon for deliverance and salvation. The gemstone's obverse, however, can hardly be viewed as the product of some later, magical group appropriating the powerful image of the

others (his successor Menander, for example). Both Saturninus and Basilides, of whom only the latter has any approximate dates, are said to follow in the footsteps of Simon, followed by Carpocrates (describing their use of magic), Cerinthus, the Ebionites, and the Nicolaitans, etc. (1.23–26). Of these, the Nicolaitans, first attested in Rev 2:6, 15, will conceivably be as early as ca. 90.

⁴¹ Iren. *Haer.* 1.24 = 1.19.1–4 pp.199–203 H.: Simon of Cyrene is said to have replaced Jesus at the Crucifixion; *Abrasax* is named as the ruler over the 365 heavens; and *Kaulakaua* is given as the name under which the Savior is said to have descended and ascended. Cf. Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures* (Garden City 1987) 422–425, with note m. Despite, however, what Irenaeus and others say about proto-Gnostic groups using incantations and magic, the *voces magicae* in the Nag Hammadi codices are not used for specifically magical purposes—for example, for the writing of amulets. Similarly, the arcane words found on the British Museum gem may not have had a specific amuletic purpose, but may have been secret names that were invoked for their power to redeem, just as the invoked cross itself carried that power.

Crucifixion for its own apotropaic or exorcistic uses; it must be seen as an invaluable historical by-product of a nascent Christian group that was aware of an early depiction of the Crucifixion and who attached to it arcane and mysterious formulas, along with non-biblical, poetic language (ἀρτάννα, λύσιος), to invoke the soteriological power of the cross. By drawing upon this undoubtedly earliest of depictions of Jesus' hanging, whose iconography betrays a lack of acquaintance with the orthodox version of the Crucifixion, we can best imagine some early Christian group preserving for us a text and image whose source derived from a tradition unaware of the canonical Gospels, which at this time may not have been in wide circulation. Our gem, in other words, must stem from a period before the Passion Narratives were readily available in written form.⁴²

March, 2017

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⁴² Cf. Roger S. Bagnall, *Early Christian Books in Egypt* (Princeton 2009), who effectively argues for the practical non-existence of Christian books in the second century.

I would like to thank Jeffrey Spier and Christopher A. Faraone for reading earlier drafts of this paper, and especially the reader for *GRBS*, none of whom can be held responsible for the contents of this paper.