

## From Torture to Triumph

### *The Crucifixion of Jesus in Early Christian Lived Religion*

A tenth-century CE Coptic magical handbook self-titled “The Praise of Michael the Archangel” (P.Heidelberg Kopt. 686) prescribed a healing ritual involving water and oil to stop various kinds of sufferings, ailments, and demonic attacks of an envisioned client.<sup>1</sup> Although this parchment handbook falls outside the temporal parameters of this study, one of its sections usefully highlights several aspects of Jesus’s crucifixion that we will discuss over the course of this chapter. Beginning on page 12 of this parchment codex, we find the following words:

I adjure you today by the image of the cross upon which you were lifted up for the salvation of the whole race of humankind, which is what has obliterated all the power of the devil and all demons, who attack the children of humankind. I adjure you today by the first tear that came forth from the eyes of the father, and came down over the head of your holy son Jesus Christ, at the time when he was hanged on the cross for the salvation of all humankind. I adjure you today by the crown of thorns that was placed upon your head, and the five nails that were driven into your body, and the spear thrust that pierced his side, and his blood and water that came forth from him upon the cross. I adjure you today by the three breaths that you blew into the hands of your father upon the cross, which are Elōei Elemas Abaktani Sabaōth. I adjure you today by the three days that he spent in the tomb and his resurrection from the dead, and the cloth with which he was covered, Jesus Christ, the son of god in truth. I adjure you today by your holy resurrection, and the three breaths of life that you blew into the face[s] of your holy apostles. Come to me today, O Lord Jesus Christ, in the flesh that you have borne, and bless the water and the oil that are before me, and breathe down on them, filling them with the holy spirit, so that all the suffering that is [in] his body may come out of N. child of N.<sup>2</sup>

This portion of the spell includes several remarkable details. For instance, the practitioner invokes the *image* (*typos*) of the cross, which seems to be either a cross or a crucifix. In either case, this “image” is framed in triumphal terms: “[it] has

obliterated all the power of the devil and all demons, who attack the children of humankind.” Yet, the spell immediately turns from triumphal imagery to the suffering and death of Jesus upon the cross: we find, for example, references to “crown of thorns” (*klam ešanti*) placed upon Jesus’s head (l. 197); the “five nails [*nibt*]” that were driven into Jesus’s body (l. 198); the “spear” (*lonkhi*) that punctured Jesus’s side (l. 199); and the blood and water that came from the crucified Jesus (l. 200).<sup>3</sup> The practitioner’s enumeration and recitation of the details from the crucifixion story seem to have been designed to reconstruct mythically that event for the client’s benefit. As anthropologists from different regions of the world have shown, the enumeration of parts in ritual contexts often has the effect of reconstruction.<sup>4</sup>

For this tenth-century CE practitioner, the crucifixion of Jesus represented an event that, once vividly recalled, provided a means for healing a client. The ostensible “power” of this event, however, was not framed in abstract terms; the spell was thought to work by drawing the potential client into a narrative world.<sup>5</sup> The various details of Jesus’s crucifixion are connected with the suffering (*hisi*) of the client through book-ending: references to the suffering of the potential client occur immediately before and immediately after this section (l. 189; l. 210). Consequently, Jesus’s suffering and death, which “obliterated all the power of the devil and all demons,” provides a specific analogical precedent for combating Satan’s attacks on the potential client.<sup>6</sup>

The twin emphases on triumph and suffering presented in this tenth-century CE Coptic handbook align with two approaches to the crucifixion found on earlier artifacts from diverse regions of the Mediterranean. In this chapter, I focus on such artifacts. I argue that the objects reflect these two diametrically opposed ways of using Jesus’s crucifixion, which likewise gesture toward developments in the visual representation of the crucifixion in early Christianity. On the one hand, like P.Heidelberg Kopt. 686, some objects deployed the crucifixion as a mythic precedent for their god’s eventual triumph over the domain of death, which could be applied through analogical reasoning to the client’s immediate concerns. On the other hand, the crucifixion could be understood as an event that relegated Jesus to the category *bi(ai)othanatoi* (i.e., those who had died violently) and therefore made him particularly susceptible to the manipulation of the practitioner. These objects not only testify to the diverse ways the crucifixion was understood in antiquity; they also disclose historical developments in late antique magical practice and complicate simplistic understandings of magical/ritual “power.”

#### JESUS’S CRUCIFIXION AS A TRIUMPHAL MYTHIC EVENT

Although the extent to which early Christian visual culture engaged with triumphal connotations with the cross remains a matter of scholarly dispute (see discussion below), early Christian *writers* could frame Jesus’s crucifixion as a triumphal event. Of course, it is difficult to overstress the importance of Constantine—as well as his mother and his biographers—in spreading the idea that the cross and

Jesus's crucifixion were symbols of triumph.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, there were in fact pre-Constantinian writers who tried to frame the cross and Jesus's crucifixion in a more positive light. Operating within the nascent Jesus movement, the Apostle Paul, for instance, "boasts" (cf. *kauchaomai*) in the cross and uses it as a symbol of the new creation (Gal 6:14).<sup>8</sup> It is unsurprising, therefore, that Paul places imagery of the crucified Jesus at the center of his message to the Corinthians (1 Cor 2:2).

Other writers whose texts were subsequently collected in the New Testament likewise stressed a triumphal approach to the crucifixion—or at least to his death. Hebrews 2:14 reads:

Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who had the power of death, that is, the devil. (RSV [slightly modified])

The Gospel of Matthew highlights several preternatural events that took place at the moment of Jesus's death, including the dead coming out of the tombs (Matt 27:52–53).

This triumphal dimension to the crucifixion continued in subsequent generations among certain followers of Jesus. The *Epistle of Barnabas*, written in the early second century CE, includes a story that resonates with the concerns in chapter 3, whereby Moses and the people of Israel were aided in victory every time Moses configured his hands and body to form the shape of the cross.<sup>9</sup> Melito of Sardis, writing later in the second century CE, drew particular attention to this triumphal aspect of the crucifixion of Christ, which was simultaneously framed by a supersessionist history of Israel (see Chapter 2).<sup>10</sup> As part of his treatise, Melito emphasized the triumphal element of Jesus's crucifixion:

It is he who, coming from heaven to the earth because of the suffering one, and clothing himself in that same one through a virgin's womb, and coming forth a man, accepted the passions of the suffering one through the body which was able to suffer, and dissolved the passions of the flesh; and by the Spirit which could not die he killed death the killer of men.<sup>11</sup>

Melito's words here highlight the irony—already present in the biblical texts—that Jesus's death killed death (cf. "he killed death the killer of men").<sup>12</sup> He also structures his statements into a quasi-creed; Melito tersely captures in seriatim fashion significant elements pertaining to Jesus's soteriological mission: the preexistence of Jesus; his incarnation; and his death. But Melito was not alone in seeing crucifixion as a killer of death. In his *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, Cyril of Alexandria likewise picks up on the biblical irony associated with the crucifixion: through Jesus's death, death itself is destroyed.<sup>13</sup>

The belief in the capacity of Jesus's cross to conquer death was likewise applied to situations in the here and now. As part of his criticism of those who turn to coins that have been repurposed as amulets<sup>14</sup> as well as to other amuletic objects used for curative purposes, John Chrysostom highlights the healing quality of the

cross, whose power conquers death, hell, and the power of the devil.<sup>15</sup> The cross, in this reading, renders the pursuit of healing via amulets and ritual formulae foolish and wicked.

But Chrysostom betrays a level of ignorance regarding the extent to which devotion to the cross overlapped with amuletic practice; objects such as P.Heidelberg Kopt. 686 imply that the intimate thanatological and soteriological relationship between Jesus and his followers fostered by the cross also impacted rituals and ritualized objects for healing, demonic struggle, and the like. The mythic blurring of the events at Calvary with concerns of clients stands at the heart of many of the references to the crucifixion on amulets and other magical objects from late antiquity. In short, the crucifixion was considered to be a rather potent myth for quotidian life. As David Frankfurter has usefully noted about the role of myths for concerns in the here-and-now: “not only through *historiola* but also through talismanic iconography and scripture quotations a ‘myth’ might convey power to present human situations.”<sup>16</sup> In this section, I especially attend to a particular Coptic spell, in which Jesus’s crucifixion figures as a triumphal event that could be applied to the immediate needs of a client.

A Coptic exorcistic spell that can be probably dated to the early seventh century CE constitutes what is arguably the most extensive reflection on Jesus’s crucifixion in a late antique magical context.<sup>17</sup> Like P.Heidelberg Kopt. 686, this earlier spell was designed to apply to a potential client the paradigmatic power of Jesus’s triumph over death and the devil. Despite this practitioner’s emphasis on the crucifixion, however, his evocation of the crucifixion myth transcends the pages of the “Bible,” making use of various traditions that are presented on both visual and verbal registers.

This spell, Brit. Lib. Or. 6796 (4), 6796, was written across two sheets of papyrus—the first measuring 34.5 × 24 centimeters, the second measuring 34.5 × 25 centimeters (see fig. 10)—and consists of sixty-five lines of text. It was likely part of a collection—or, as Marvin Meyer called it, a “portfolio”—of four spells, now all housed in the British Library.<sup>18</sup> This lengthy spell for exorcism has several sections that directly reference the crucifixion of Jesus.<sup>19</sup> For instance, the text begins with a prayer spoken by the crucified Jesus:

The prayer of Jesus on the cross “Elōei [Elōei La]m[a Saba]ktani Marmarimari,” that is “God, my god, why have you abandoned me?” Some of them [s]aid, “Elias,” others, “Jeremias.” One of [t]hem took a sponge and dipped it in vinegar, and he [Jesus] took a taste. He said, “My father, all things have been com[plet]ed,” and at once he gave up the spirit. Heaven opened, the earth quaked, and the bo[n]es of those who had d[i]ed arose. In their bodies they went to Jerusalem, and they went [back] into the tomb.<sup>20</sup>

The balance of this prayer seems to have been taken from the canonical gospels, especially the passion account from the Gospel of Matthew (cf. the heavens opening, the earthquake, the resuscitation of the dead in Jerusalem [cf. Matt 27:51–53]).<sup>21</sup> This is not to say that all the elements derive from Matthew’s version of the



FIGURE 10. Second page of a Coptic spell with images of the crucified Jesus and the two criminals. Courtesy of the British Library Board. Brit. Lib. Or. 6796.

Passion: the reference to the words of abandonment (cf. LXX Ps 21:1) could come from either Matt 27:47 or Mark 15:35; “Marmarimari” (as well as its cognates) appears on several spells from late antique Egypt;<sup>22</sup> the juxtaposition of “Elias” and “Jeremias” is reminiscent of the reference to Elijah and Jeremiah in Matthew’s version of Peter’s confession of Christ (Matt 16:13); the sponge with vinegar can



be found in all four gospels (Matt 27:48; Mark 15:36; Luke 23:36; John 19:29); the reference to completion does not correspond to any specific gospel passage, but it might allude to the words of the crucified Jesus in John 19:30 (“It is finished”) or Luke 23:46 (“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit”).

Of course, one must be sensitive to the possibility that these elements were not taken directly from the Bible—whether through written or oral communication—but came to the practitioner through an intermediary source (e.g., another amulet, the liturgy, or other textual, oral, or performative context). Nevertheless, the lack of a close parallel to this particular juxtaposition of biblical traditions makes the unmediated relationship between this spell and the Bible the most likely scenario.<sup>23</sup>

The practitioner’s likely use of biblical literature notwithstanding, it should be stressed that not all crucifixion references align so closely with the biblical tradition. We have already seen the use of the name “Marmarimari,” which is most likely imported from contemporary magical practice.<sup>24</sup> In addition, the practitioner includes a conversation between the crucified Jesus and a “unicorn” (*papitap nouōt*):

I [Jesus] looked down and saw a unicorn, who was lying on a golden field, the one [the unicorn] who is named Sappathai. He spoke to me, saying, “Who are you? If thus you stand in this body or this flesh, you have not been given into my hand.” I spoke to him saying, “I am I[sra]ēl Ēl, the force of Iaō Sabaōth, the great power of Barbaraōth.” So he hid himself from before me.<sup>25</sup>

In this conversation, the crucified Jesus rebukes the one-horned beast, thus suggesting that this animal is his enemy. It is possible that the selection of the “unicorn” for this combative role was occasioned by the presence of unicorns in LXX Ps 21:22–23, which reads: “Rescue my soul from the sword, and from a dog’s claw my only life. Save me from a lion’s mouth, and my lowliness from the horns of *unicorns* [Greek: *monokerōtōn*; Coptic: *nanitap<sup>e</sup> nouōt*].”<sup>26</sup> It should be recalled that the practitioner has already engaged with the incipit of this particular psalm (via the Gospel of Matthew), when he proclaimed the words, “Elōei [Elōei La]m[a Saba]ktani Marmarimari”—that is “God, my god, why have you abandoned me?” (ll. 2–3).

The practitioner also notes in a subsequent section of the spell that the father spoke over the head of the crucified Jesus. We read, “By the power of the six other names that the father uttered over the head of his beloved son when he was hanged upon the cross, saying, ‘My true name is Pharmen, Eiboubar, Sikh, Takh, Saba, Khirinou’” (ll. 23–26).<sup>27</sup> In this case, the practitioner has invented a scene in which the father plays a direct role in Jesus’s crucifixion—a fact that might have brought a certain theological resolution to the abandonment motif inherited from Matthew’s citation of LXX Ps 21:1.

In what is arguably the most interesting aspect of this spell, the practitioner draws the crucifixion scene with the two thieves and various names written in “ring script” around the scene (see fig. 10).<sup>28</sup> An extended discussion of this drawing is in order given its intricacy and its significance for tracing the visual history of the magical use of Jesus’s crucifixion. As one might expect in light of the other

sections of the spell, Jesus is visually highlighted in the center of the scene. Jesus's cross is drawn according to the *crux immissa* (i.e., Latin cross) form, with vertical (a.k.a., *stipes*) and horizontal (i.e., *patibulum*) rectangular beams wide enough to include, respectively, the drawings of his body and his arms with hands inside (see discussion below). Jesus has a circular head with what seems to be hair, the crown of thorns, or a nimbus around it.<sup>29</sup> The practitioner has drawn Jesus without a beard (though there are a series of dots around his jawline) and has connected the vertical line of his nose to his eyebrows.<sup>30</sup> As we will see below, this latter feature is something that Jesus shares with one of the crucified criminals at his side. Above his head is a crown with the first three vowels of the Greek/Coptic alphabet (*aeē*). As Robert Yelle has observed, the progression of sounds from alpha to omega moves physically from the lips to the throat—a ritual feature, interestingly, that ancient Mediterranean magic seems to have shared with Tantric mantras.<sup>31</sup> There is thus reason to think that the repetition of vowels in sequence, which was ubiquitous in ancient magical practice,<sup>32</sup> represented divine speech and even mimicked the act of speech or communication itself.<sup>33</sup>

Although notions of divine speech were probably operative in Brit. Lib. Or. 6796(4), 6796, I think we can gain more specific insight into the meaning of the vowels for this particular practitioner by examining his thoughts on the vowels on the other spells from the “portfolio.” We learn from one of the other spells that the vowels empowered the father's creation of the sea (Brit. Lib. Or. 6796[2], [3], [1], ll. 65–69) and are tattooed on the father's chest (Brit. Lib. Or. 6794, ll. 40–42).<sup>34</sup> It is likely that such connotations informed his or her usage of the vowels. The practitioner has also inscribed in the upper portion of the *stipes* the title “the King” (*prro*), presumably referring to the moniker (“king of the Jews”) given to him in the canonical gospels (cf. Matt 27:37; Mark 15:26; Luke 23:38; John 19:19–22).

Jesus's body consists of a rectangle (i.e., the torso) placed in the *stipes* with two arms formed by rectangles, which are placed inside the *patibulum*. Of particular significance is the manner in which Jesus is crucified; in contrast to a gem that I will discuss in the next section, Jesus's wrists are depicted as both tied and pierced (with two holes).<sup>35</sup>

The practitioner behind Brit. Lib. Or. 6796(4), 6796 apparently made a mistake when drawing Jesus's legs; in this drawing, the bottom portions of the cross and Jesus have been transposed: Jesus's body transitions into the plinth of the cross and his legs protrude from the right and left sides of the *stipes*. Accordingly, Jesus's legs are not pierced, but instead extend outward. By all indications, Jesus is depicted naked in the drawing—an apparent reference to the gospels' citation of LXX Ps 21:19 (cf. Matt 27:35; Mark 15:24; Luke 23:34; John 19:23), portions of which, as we have seen, figure prominently in this spell. In presenting Jesus as naked, the practitioner departs from his other drawing of Jesus in Brit. Lib. Or. 6795, in which Jesus is clearly clothed.

The two crucified criminals reside, respectively, at the right and left of Jesus. There are several differences between the depiction of Jesus and that of the two criminals. The crucified criminals are considerably smaller than Jesus. Furthermore, both criminals are depicted with their arms protruding from their necks and extending circularly to their hips, whereas Jesus's arms were drawn straight and fixed to the *patibulum*. Although the images of the hands are a bit difficult to decipher in detail, it seems that the practitioner depicted the criminals' hands untied and without piercings. Again, such a depiction stands in contrast to the image of Christ. Furthermore, in apparent contrast to Jesus, the practitioner seems to have clothed the criminals and has drawn three circles on the lower portion of their garments. Finally, the practitioner did not make the same transpositional error with the depictions of the criminals as he or she did with that of Jesus; the clothed legs of the criminals are clearly distinguished from the plinths of their crosses. It should also be noted, however, that, as with Jesus, the criminals' legs are not tied or pierced, but extend outward.

The criminals also differ from one another. Although their heads and hair are similar, their eyes, noses, and mouths differ considerably from one another. Perhaps most importantly, the line indicating the nose of the figure on the viewer's right is connected to his eyebrows (like Jesus); by contrast, the nose on the face of the figure on the viewer's left is disconnected from his eyes. In addition, the figure on the viewer's left is lower than the figure to the viewer's right. The facial variations and respective positioning of these figures is likely related to their personas. In this vein, it is significant that above each of the two figures is a name: the figure on the viewer's left is named *Gēstas*; the figure on the viewer's right is labeled *Dēmas*.

The canonical gospels do not provide the names of the criminals; the Gospel of Luke, which offers the most extensive account of the criminals, does not name either individual, but it does note that one of them derided Jesus and the other repented:

One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him [Jesus] and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? We indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man [Jesus] has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He [Jesus] replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." (Luke 23:39–43; NRSV)

It is unlikely that "Luke" was aware of the names of these figures and simply decided to leave them out; the names are probably a later tradition. In either case, it seems clear that, for the writer/redactor of the third gospel, the names were not as important as the fact that one of these figures recognized the true identity of Jesus and repented during his final moments.

The tradition about the criminals expanded during late antiquity. *Gos. Nic.* provides an interesting parallel to the account given in *Brit. Lib. Or.* 6796(4), 6796. For



instance, *Gos. Nic.* reads: “and let Dysmas and Gestas, the two criminals, be crucified with you [Jesus].” *Gos. Nic.* 10:2 integrates these characters into the narrative structure of Luke’s Gospel:

one of the criminals [i.e., Gestas] . . . said to him, “If you are the Christ, save yourself and us.” But Dysmas responded [to Gestas] . . . “have you no fear of God? . . . We deserve our fate, for we are being punished appropriately for our actions. But he did nothing wrong.” And he [Dysmas] said to Jesus, “Remember me, Lord, in your kingdom.” And Jesus said to him [Dysmas], “Truly, truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

The use of the similar names Gestas and Dysmas in *Gos. Nic.* clearly indicates that this text stands in either a direct or indirect traditional relationship with Brit. Lib. Or. 6796(4), 6796.<sup>36</sup> This relationship also helps explain the facial similarities between the repentant Dēmas and Jesus (in contrast to unrepentant Gēstas) and the positioning of the two criminals on the exorcistic spell (i.e., the image of Dēmas is both higher and closer to Jesus than that of Gēstas).<sup>37</sup>

But the details that extend beyond the canonical accounts are not limited to the drawings. Encircling the upper portion of the crucified Jesus are a series of names written in ring script: Jesus Christ, Bēth Bētha Bētha, Iaō Sabaōth Adōnai Elōeiu, Michaēl, Gabriēl, Raphaēl, Suriēl, Asuēl, Raguēl, and Saraphuēl. The significance of these names is known from earlier sections of this spell or through references in other spells from the practitioner’s portfolio. Thus, we have already encountered the name Iaō Sabaōth in Jesus’s conversation with the “unicorn” (ll. 21–22): “I am I(sra)ēl Ēl, the force of Iaō Sabaōth, the great power of Barabaraōth.”<sup>38</sup> Accordingly, Iaō Sabaōth is the name of the father. The use of Elōeiu after Iaō Sabaōth Adōnai might *prima facie* appear to stand in a relationship with the words of abandonment found in LXX Ps 21:1 (via Matt 27:47). Yet, this same clustering of names occurs in Brit. Lib. Or. 6796(2), (3), (1), l. 39: “O true hidden god, hear me today . . . They fear [his holy name, which] is Iaō Sabaōth Adōnai Elō[e].”<sup>39</sup> Elōeiu is, therefore, best understood as one of God’s names. The sequence Bēth Bētha Bētha most likely refers to the names of the twenty-four presbyters from Revelation (cf. Rev 4:4, 10–11; 5:8–14; 11:16–18; 19:4).<sup>40</sup> In Brit. Lib. Or. 6796(2), (3), (1) we find the following invocation: “by the power of the 24 presbyters, whose names are Bēth, Bētha[a], Bēthai . . .” (ll. 43–44).<sup>41</sup> Finally, the practitioner requests in a prior section of Brit. Lib. Or. 6796(4), 6796 that the seven archangels come with Jesus to the client’s aid: “I adjure you, father . . . that you send me Jesus Christ and the seven archangels, whose names are Michaēl, Gabriēl, Suriēl, Asuēl, Raguēl, Raphaēl, Saraphuēl” (ll. 40–45). Thus, these angels work alongside Jesus in bringing about the efficacy of the exorcistic ritual.

The sudden shift in script, however, also demands attention. In a prior venue, I have argued that this shift was a way of including the named entities and angels into the visual scene of the crucifixion without having to draw them.<sup>42</sup> In support

of this thesis, I pointed to the visual function of *charaktêres*, which are closely related to this ring script;<sup>43</sup> the concerted effort on the part of the practitioner to place the names in ring script close to the crucified Jesus, as is evident from crowded positioning of the names (esp. the writing of Saraphuêl); and the bleeding of verbal elements into visual elements on another spell from the practitioner's portfolio (Brit. Lib. Or. 6794). In accordance with my earlier thesis, it is also worth noting that the practitioner drew rings on the left and right corners of the upper portion of the *stipes* and on the upper and lower corners of both the left and right sides of *patibulum*. The inclusion of rings on the cross thus connects this drawing visually with the names written in ring script around the crucifixion scene.

Despite the emphasis on the death of Jesus, the crucified Christ is presented in a rather triumphal way. This triumphal dimension is evident in various parts of this spell. The practitioner reproduces the Matthean detail, in which the moment of Jesus's death is coterminous with several preternatural events (e.g., the opening of heaven, an earthquake, and the raising of the dead in Jerusalem). Jesus's death, therefore, signifies for this practitioner a triumph over death itself. As we have already noted, this triumphal motif was well grounded in several "Christian" contexts by the seventh century CE. This triumphal motif is also reiterated in Jesus's communication with the "unicorn" (*papitap nouôt*). In this section (ll. 10–23), the crucified Jesus deems himself the "force" (*dynamis*) of Iaô Sabaôth and the "great power" (*tnoq 'nqom*) of Barbaraôth. This self-proclamation even has the ability to cast away the "unicorn"—presumably an emissary of the devil. What is more, the Father proclaims six names, which are said to possess power (*qom*), over the head of the crucified Jesus.

In conclusion, the practitioner behind Brit. Lib. Or. 6796(4), 6796 has creatively engaged with the crucifixion story, incorporating and adapting prior aspects of this tradition while simultaneously inventing new dimensions to this story. Thus, this practitioner exemplifies the fact that conceptions of the crucifixion in late antique magical practice were shaped in dialogue with various traditions—biblical and otherwise.<sup>44</sup> We have also seen that for this practitioner Jesus's death clearly represents a triumph over death; his death not only affects nature; it also causes the dead of Jerusalem to come out of their graves.

Although many magical objects do not specify the presumed interpretation of Jesus's crucifixion, it is likely that this triumphal understanding of the crucifixion was relatively widespread.<sup>45</sup> Such a widespread understanding of the triumphal dimension of the crucifixion would help to explain how a triumphal interpretation of the crucifixion tradition could find its way onto the Jewish-Babylonian-Aramaic incantation bowl from Iraq (Moussaieff 163), which I discussed in chapter 2.<sup>46</sup> As we have already seen, this incantation bowl included the following formula: "In the name of I-am-that-I-am YHWH Sabaôth and in the name of Jesus [ 'yšw] who pressed the height and the depth by his cross and in the name of his exalted father and in the name of the holy spirits/his holy spirit for ever and ever" (lines 29–30).<sup>47</sup> Shaul Shaked argued that the inclusion of the crucifixion tradition and the

Trinitarian formula on this bowl were occasioned by the religious identity of the cursed—a certain Isha son of Ifra Hurmiz.<sup>48</sup> Shaked contended that Isha's non-Iranian name supports the idea that he was in fact a Christian. As a result, the deployment of Christian language on this bowl was designed to turn Isha's god against him.<sup>49</sup> While Shaked's hypothesis on this particular bowl is reasonable, it should be noted that subsequently published Jewish-Aramaic incantation bowls have demonstrated that many of the bowls' practitioners put a great amount of stock in Jesus as a healer and miracle worker.<sup>50</sup>

Whatever reason led to the appearance of the crucifixion motif on this particular bowl, the particular interpretation of the crucifixion is what interests us for the present discussion. Moussaieff 163 explicitly recalls that Jesus "conquered" or "pressed" (cf. the verb *kvs*) the height and the depth by his cross. For this presumably "Jewish" practitioner,<sup>51</sup> therefore, Jesus's death signified victory over pernicious elements, including most probably astrological and demonic threats.<sup>52</sup> Despite its provenance, this bowl's presentation of Jesus's crucifixion resonates with the message found in the Coptic spell—and in the early Christian writers—mentioned above.

While a triumphal understanding of the crucifixion played an important role in Brit. Lib. Or. 6796(4), 6796—as it did in several Christian literary texts—it was not the only way of invoking the death of Jesus. In the discussion that follows, we will see that practitioners could have a radically different view of the meaning and significance of Jesus's death for protection in this life. The comparative portrait that emerges from the analysis of these objects testifies to the range of ways that (Christian) people might engage with Jesus's (untimely) end in their lived practices.

### JESUS'S DEATH AS TORTURE

The prominence of a triumphal dimension to the crucifixion in certain contexts should not distract us from the broader negative connotations the crucifixion—and, by extension, Jesus's death—might have had in antiquity. In this section, I argue that the negative association with Jesus's crucifixion also made an impact on the magical evidence. In particular, I contend that an artisan who worked on an early gem most likely would have understood the crucified Jesus as falling squarely within the world of "restless dead."

Although, as we have seen, the crucifixion could possess connotations of triumph in certain early Christian contexts, early followers of Jesus also had to contend with the negative connotations associated with their Lord's manner of death.<sup>53</sup> Paul of Tarsus conceded that Jesus's crucifixion constituted a "stumbling block" for Jews and a sign of "foolishness" for gentiles (1 Cor 1:23).<sup>54</sup> Probably writing sometime in the second century CE,<sup>55</sup> Ignatius of Antioch reiterated this association: "My spirit is a sacrificial offering bound to the cross, which is a scandal to those who do not believe but salvation and eternal life to us."<sup>56</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that the early apologists had to spill considerable ink justifying



FIGURE 11. Jasper gem with an image of the crucified Jesus. BM 1986,0501.1. Courtesy of the British Museum. ©The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved.

to their (imaginary) “Jewish” and “pagan” opponents and interlocutors why their Lord died on a cross.<sup>57</sup>

Fortunately, recent scholarship on crucifixion has begun to consider the presentation of crucifixion and crosses on so-called magical objects.<sup>58</sup> Among the most important objects discussed in this burgeoning area of study is a green and reddish-brown jasper gem, which was formerly part of the private collection of Roger Pereire, but, as of 1986, has been housed in the British Museum (BM 1986,0501.1; fig. 11). Philippe Derchain originally published this amuletic gem in 1964,<sup>59</sup> and it

has found its way into several important collections and analyses of gems in subsequent years.<sup>60</sup> Although the provenance of the gem is unknown, it likely originates from somewhere in the eastern Mediterranean (probably Turkey or Syria).<sup>61</sup> The gem measures approximately  $3.0 \times 2.5 \times 0.6$  centimeters, and scholars have reached a general consensus that it should be dated to the late second or early third century CE.<sup>62</sup> If this dating can in fact be maintained, the gem would preserve the earliest extant visual depiction of the crucified Jesus.<sup>63</sup>

The text on this jasper gem consists of various inscriptions around (and on the reverse side of) an image of the crucified Jesus. The deciphered inscriptions include: (obverse) "O Son, Father, Jesus Christ"; the seven Greek vowels;<sup>64</sup> a misspelling of *artanē* ("suspension[-beam/rope]");<sup>65</sup> (reverse) *Iōē*; a version of Emmanuel (*Emanauēl*); and variants of known *voces magicae*,<sup>66</sup> such as *[I]adatophōth* (cf. *Badētophōth*)<sup>67</sup> and *[A]straperkmēph* (cf. *Satraperkmēph*).<sup>68</sup> The crucified Jesus appears on this amuletic gem affixed to a tau-cross—also known as the T-cross or *crux commissa*—with his hands outstretched and suspended below the *patibulum*. He is bound with two vertical lines per hand (presumably indicating rope or other kind of binding material).<sup>69</sup> In terms of his physical features, Jesus is depicted in profile, bearded, naked, and with long hair. Furthermore, his bent feet are not attached to the *stipes*, but extend out from this vertical beam. As several scholars have noted, the positioning of Jesus's legs on the gem implies the presence of a bar or seat—known as a *sedile*—upon which he would have sat.<sup>70</sup>

As one might expect, the depiction of the crucified Jesus on this early object has received considerable scholarly attention. Scholars, especially Felicity Harley-McGowan, have noted the extreme brutality associated with Jesus's death on the gem. For instance, she underscores that the implied *sedile* would have in actual crucifixions "increased the naked victim's pain and humility, and prolonged his death."<sup>71</sup> Although Brit. Lib. Or. 6796(4), 6796 likewise presents Jesus as unclothed, the specific positioning of Jesus's legs on the gem draws particular attention to his nudity. Harley-McGowan stresses that the gem's anomalous preoccupation with nudity "emphasizes Jesus's subjection to a brutal death."<sup>72</sup> This brutal and shameful presentation of Jesus's nudity works alongside the depiction of his hands, which, as Simone Michel has noted, are displayed in a powerless position.<sup>73</sup> In fact, the limpness of Jesus's arms might even indicate that he is depicted here as already dead. In either case, Jeffery Spier and Felicity Harley-McGowan seem to be on the right track when they stress, in a coauthored analysis of this gem, that the presentation of Jesus (especially the position of his legs and his nudity) "is wholly antithetical to the triumphal symbolism of the crucified Christ seen in subsequent representations in Christian art."<sup>74</sup>

Quite surprisingly, therefore, several scholars have understood this image as gesturing toward the theme of Jesus's bravery and, ultimately, his victory or triumph. Commenting on the gem's "magical function," Harley-McGowan concludes that Jesus was "upheld for his magical prowess in defeating evil powers and



overcoming the brutality of the cross”<sup>75</sup>—an interpretation reiterated in Harley-McGowan’s and Spier’s joint analysis of the gem.<sup>76</sup> According to this line of scholarship, the crucifixion of Jesus here metonymically evoked the entire story of the cross, in which Jesus eventually “overcame a horrific death.”<sup>77</sup>

This interpretation of the gem has made a considerable impact on subsequent scholarship.<sup>78</sup> For instance, Roy Kotansky takes this triumphal interpretation as the basis for his reconstruction and interpretation of the gem’s text: he postulates a reconstruction of the word *lusiou* in l. 8 of the obverse and proposes that it should be translated as “redeemer”;<sup>79</sup> he also attempts to situate this gem within a liturgical or baptismal performative context (specifically within a Marcasian Christian context).<sup>80</sup>

The impact of the triumphal interpretation of the crucified Christ has also extended to research on the social role of the cross in early Christianity. This gem has functioned as a central piece of evidence for the contention that Christians did not shy away from visual depictions of the crucifixion in the pre-Constantinian period—a position that stands in opposition to conventional scholarly wisdom about early Christian depictions of Jesus’s death.<sup>81</sup> Indeed, Harley-McGowan—as well as scholars like Bruce Longenecker, who have followed her lead—relies in large measure on this gem to support the claim that Christian devotion to the crucified Jesus as a *visual* symbol of triumph, victory, or pride proliferated in the pre-Constantinian period.<sup>82</sup>

But some have begun to question the triumphal interpretation of this gem and, consequently, its place in the history of early Christian art. Most importantly, Allyson Everingham Sheckler and Mary Joan Winn Leith have countered Harley-McGowan’s contention that the brutality on the gem should be understood as an affirmation of Jesus’s power, arguing instead that “the legs of the frontal nude figure splay painfully open over the vertical upright of the cross and call to mind emasculation by impalement.”<sup>83</sup>

Sheckler’s and Leith’s skepticism toward the gem’s triumphal presentation is not necessarily novel; a non-triumphal interpretation lurks in the background of the original edition of the artifact. Although Derchain emphasized the brutality of the crucifixion<sup>84</sup>—and, accordingly, drew a connection between the object’s efficacy and its presentation of violence (*Gewalt*)<sup>85</sup>—he did not assign a triumphal quality to this brutality. Instead, he mentioned in passing that the presentation of the crucifixion of Jesus on the gem is best situated within the context of ancient magical rituals that invoke those who had died violently.<sup>86</sup> Unfortunately, his hypothesis has not received the scholarly attention that it deserves.<sup>87</sup> Indeed, in my judgment, Derchain’s hypothesis makes the best sense of the evidence.

In this section, I will outline a more sustained argument for Derchain’s claim that Jesus was invoked by the creator of the gem as one who died violently. In particular, I will situate this gem within its social and visual contexts, taking into consideration both ancient Mediterranean perceptions of crucifixion and analogous pictorial representations of crucified individuals—especially Jesus. In so

doing, I will also expose problems with an undifferentiated notion of “*late antique magic*”—with an emphasis on the temporal adjective “*late antique*”—and undermine this gem’s role in support of the scholarly claim that a triumphal view of the crucifixion was common in pre-Constantinian Christian art.<sup>88</sup>

*BM 1986,0501.1 and “Late Antique” Magic*

In support of her triumphal interpretation of the British Museum gem, Harley-McGowan claims that such an understanding of Jesus’s crucifixion was operative “in magical circles in Late Antiquity.”<sup>89</sup> In one sense, she is absolutely correct. In addition to Brit. Lib. Or. 6796(4), 6796, several late antique gems and related material objects depict images of the crucified Jesus in a way that suggests their makers understood his death in triumphal terms.<sup>90</sup> Notable in this regard are two carnelian gems, which might date as early as the mid-fourth century CE and which depict Jesus with his twelve apostles on either side.<sup>91</sup>

But the phrase “late antiquity” is misleading in this regard. It is worth noting that Brit. Lib. Or. 6796(4), 6796 serves as Harley-McGowan’s principal exemplar for her claim that a victorious version of Jesus’s crucifixion was common in “late antiquity.”<sup>92</sup> Although a triumphal understanding of the crucifixion of Jesus was certainly prominent in post-Constantinian ritual practice, it is less clear that it played a major role in earlier periods of “late antiquity” (especially in the late second or early third century CE). This point should not be surprising since late antique ritual practice underwent several important transformations from the late second/early third century CE to the mid-fourth century CE and beyond.<sup>93</sup> In addition to the cessation of crucifixion as a form of execution during the reign of Constantine, the locus of ritual expertise over this period increasingly shifted toward the overlapping environments of monasteries, churches, and shrine complexes (see discussion in chapter 1).<sup>94</sup> These new contexts would no doubt have altered the significance of Jesus’s crucifixion for healing, exorcism, and the like. In other words, the mere identification of “magical circles” during “late antiquity” does not adequately reflect the radically different social contexts in which the Coptic spell, on the one hand, and the Greek gem, on the other hand, circulated. On Brit. Lib. Or. 6796(4), 6796, the practitioner’s use of Coptic and his considerable knowledge of the gospel material (and presumably apocryphal traditions) strongly suggest he was a Coptic priest or monk (or at least someone with some ecclesiastical or monastic training). Although the British Museum gem may very well have been created by a follower of Jesus,<sup>95</sup> there is no clear indication of its derivation from a Christian priest—and it is unproductive to talk about full-fledged monasticism in the late second/early third century CE.<sup>96</sup>

It is unsurprising, therefore, that the British Museum gem does not display any of the key biblical or parabiblical features found in Brit. Lib. Or. 6796(4), 6796, which would clearly demonstrate to us that its creator understood the crucifixion of Jesus in triumphal terms. To be sure, these objects do share certain basic

similarities—for instance, the depiction of Jesus as crucified; the use of Jesus’s name; the vowels; and the hanging of Jesus’s and the thieves’ legs.<sup>97</sup> Nevertheless, given their disparate temporal, regional, and linguistic contexts—and, presumably, their considerably different social understandings of crucifixion—we cannot necessarily conclude that even these basic elements would have carried the same connotations or associations for their respective practitioners. An important question, therefore, naturally poses itself: how did ritual practitioners operating within the environs of the pre-Constantinian Mediterranean principally understand those who had died by crucifixion?

### *Jesus among the Restless Dead*

In order to address the question of crucifixion in pre-Constantinian Mediterranean contexts, we need to consider the larger context of the restless dead (i.e., those who had suffered violent deaths [*bi[ai]othanatoi*], untimely deaths [*āōroi*], or who did not receive funeral rites [*ataphoi*]).<sup>98</sup> These overlapping groups of restless dead played considerable roles in rituals for healing, protection, cursing, and divination. As Sarah Iles Johnston has properly noted, “the marginal status of *aōroi* and *biaiothanatoi* would both facilitate interaction with the living and make them easier prey for the practitioner—they were neither impeded nor protected by the walls of the Underworld.”<sup>99</sup>

Traditions about the restless dead penetrated numerous ancient material and literary contexts.<sup>100</sup> For instance, this idea finds expression in the extant magical record. The restless dead—including, but not limited to, those crucified—are explicitly incorporated into spells from the so-called Greek Magical Papyri.<sup>101</sup> In addition to the image of the *akephalos* (a headless entity associated with violent death) in PGM II. 166,<sup>102</sup> this corpus includes a spell that is self-titled “Spell of Attraction of King Pity over any skull cup” that adjures Helios in order to grant the adjurer power over the spirit of a “man who died a violent death [*biothanatou*].”<sup>103</sup> Another spell from the Greek Magical Papyri attributed to King Pity (PGM IV. 2145–2240) explicitly lists “a criminal who has been executed [*sphagenti hapsamenos*],” into whose “wound” (*plēgē*) the adjurer might insert an iron lamella inscribed with select Homeric verses. In addition, PGM V. 73–74, a spell for catching a thief, includes an arcane reference to “criminal wood [*panourgikon xylon*],” which some scholars have reasonably interpreted as referring to the wood from a *patibulum*.<sup>104</sup>

The close relationship between crucifixion—as a particular form of violent death—and magical praxis is also clear in the literary record. For instance, Pliny the Elder knew about the use of crucifixion nails in the healing of those plagued by a quartan fever (*quartanis*)—a type of malaria also referred to in many of the extant amulets.<sup>105</sup> Apuleius evokes a broader Latin poetic tradition—which includes the likes of Lucan—when he underscores that the workshop of the Thessalian witch Pamphile boasted not only “metal tablets with undecipherable inscriptions” (*ignorabiliter laminis litteratis*)<sup>106</sup> but also “nails from the crucified, flesh still clinging to them” (*carnosi clavi pendentium*).<sup>107</sup> The belief in the power of *ousia* related to

crucified individuals even made its way into the traditions attributed to tannaitic rabbis. We learn that at least some Jews ascribed special healing properties to crucifixions, using crucifixion materials (e.g., nails) as *materia magica* in their rituals (*m. Šabb. 6:10*).<sup>108</sup>

Given the widespread belief in the power of the restless dead, we should not be surprised that at least some self-identifying Christians were aware of the ritual use of these poor souls—and, accordingly, used this social knowledge to support their rhetorical invective against the heterodox. The redactor behind the so-called Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions* recounts Simon Magus's confession that he manipulated the soul of a child who was violently slain to help him complete his "magic art" (*arte magica*).<sup>109</sup> Tertullian underscores the ritual use of the restless dead, reproducing what seems to be common tropes that "sorcerers" (*magi*) invoke spirits and cause apparitions of the dead to be made manifest and that they "kill children to make an oracle speak."<sup>110</sup> Although the slanderous claims of the Pseudo-Clementine writer and Tertullian are largely a rhetorical fiction, the basic connection they draw between the souls of the dead—including those who experienced untimely and violent deaths—and ritual practice reflects broader social assumptions and supports what we find in the material record.

The social relationship between ritual practice and crucified criminals, in particular, no doubt also worked in conjunction with broader negative associations with crucifixion in the pre-Constantinian Mediterranean world. Attention to other extant Roman depictions of crucified criminals makes this point crystal clear. One of the most famous depictions of a crucified entity was discovered in a room on the Palatine Hill (near the Circus Maximus)—the so-called Palatine or Alexamenos graffito.<sup>111</sup> This graffito is particularly interesting since the figure on the tau-cross has a donkey head in left profile (cf. the image of Jesus on the British Museum gem), with an inscription below that might be translated as "Alexamenos worships [his] god."<sup>112</sup> Scholars have interpreted these details alternatively as a direct mockery of the "Christian" crucified god or as reflecting a "pagan" caricature of Jewish and Christian devotion to an alleged donkey god.<sup>113</sup> In either case, this caricature of a crucified person—which has visual parallels to the British Museum gem—is clearly meant as a mockery (presumably of Jesus). Accordingly, this object brings into sharper relief the shameful connotations of crucifixion in the ancient Mediterranean world.

Indeed, crucifixion was not merely a painful and violent death; it was also considered a particularly shameful form of death, especially during the pre-Constantinian period in which it was implemented. Commenting on the humiliating and protracted spectacle of ancient Roman crucifixion, Kathleen M. Coleman writes:

Crucifixion [which involves] a lingering death that lasts hours if not days, does not offer the same spectacular appeal as the other "aggravated" death penalties that were commonly imposed: burning and beasts. But the actual moment of death may be relatively insignificant in relation to the satisfaction spectators derived from witnessing preliminaries that culminated in the hoisting of the body onto the cross.<sup>114</sup>

Cicero famously claimed that even the word “cross” itself (*nomen ipsum crucis*) was so shameful that Romans and free men should remove it from their “thoughts . . . eyes . . . and ears.”<sup>115</sup> It is no wonder, therefore, that Celsus emphasized that Jesus’s death by crucifixion implies that he was “punished to his utter disgrace” (Origen, *Against Celsus* 6.10).

The manifest nakedness of Jesus on the British Museum gem should draw our attention to the sexual connotations associated with this form of ancient punishment. Drawing cross-culturally on instances of torture in Latin America during the 1970s and 1980s, David Tombs has argued in several essays that sexual humiliation—and perhaps even physical sexual abuse—played a key role in the construction of public shame in ancient Roman crucifixions.<sup>116</sup> In addition to the canonical gospels’ emphasis on the stripping of Jesus’s clothes—which, to be sure, largely derives from MT Ps 22:18—other ancient authors allude to the sexual abusiveness of ancient crucifixion.<sup>117</sup> For instance, Seneca notes that some forms of crucifixion in Bithynia involved the impalement of genitals (*alii per obscena stipitem egerunt*).<sup>118</sup> We can attend to the function of sexual humiliation—especially, the forced removal of clothes—within the overall semiotics of spectacle in Roman crucifixion. This form of execution conveyed a strong social message of shame to Mediterranean viewers, whose patriarchal contexts promoted male sexual power and domination—the antithesis of the naked crucified man.<sup>119</sup> As Tombs notes, the sexual shame associated with ancient crucifixion would have even reverberated after the victim’s death and could serve as a kind of *damnatio memoriae*.<sup>120</sup>

To be sure, as we have seen, select writings of early Jesus followers framed the cross in heroic or triumphant terms or imply that believers venerated the cross as a symbol of their faith.<sup>121</sup> Yet, as Robin Jensen has recently noted, the early Christian veneration of the cross—as a visual symbol—by and large applied to plain crosses (i.e., not to those with brutal images of the suffering Jesus).<sup>122</sup> Moreover, the *texts* of certain early followers of Jesus could even ground their Christology in dialogue with the shameful connotations of the crucifixion; the scribe behind the *Coptic Apocalypse of Peter* clearly interprets the crucifixion of the substitute for the “living Jesus” as an act of shaming him. The relevant portion of the crucifixion story in this text reads:

I [Peter] said, what do I see, Lord? Is it really you they are seizing, and you are holding on to me? And who is the one smiling and laughing above the cross? Is it someone else whose feet and hands they are hammering? The Savior said to me, “the one you see smiling and laughing above the cross is the living Jesus. The one into whose hands and feet they are driving nails is his fleshly part, the substitute for him. They are putting to shame [*eueire ʿmmofʿnsrah*] the one who came into being in the likeness of the living Jesus. Look at him and look at me.”<sup>123</sup>

Given the shameful connotations with the crucifixion that persisted even among some followers of Jesus, it is perhaps no surprise that the *Martyrdom of Pionius*



reports a tradition in which certain Jews claim that Jesus died as one violently slain (*hōs biothanēs*).<sup>124</sup> Although we should approach the claim of such a Jewish tradition with a degree of skepticism, this text makes it abundantly clear that at least some early Christians recognized that Jesus's particularly brutal form of punishment could relegate him to the realm of the restless dead within then-contemporary social imagination.

The presentation of Christ in a third- or fourth-century CE Greek spell for "releasing from bonds" (PGM XIII. 288–295) might provide another piece of direct evidence that this social understanding of Jesus and his crucifixion made its way into early "late antique" magical practice. In the GMPT, Morton Smith translated the opening of this spell as follows: "For release from bonds: Say, 'Hear me, O Christ [*Chrēstos*], in torments; help, in necessities, O merciful in violent hours [*en hōrais biaiois*] . . .'"<sup>125</sup> His translation of this spell was based on the work of editors such as Karl Preisendanz, who interpreted the adjective *biaios* ("violent") as modifying *hōrais* ("hours") and therefore "corrected" this adjective to read *biaiois*.<sup>126</sup> Eleni Pachoumi, however, has recently argued that *Chrēstos* ("Christ") is most likely the antecedent of *biaios*.<sup>127</sup> According to Pachoumi, the adjective *biaios* should be understood as framing Jesus within the context of the restless dead.<sup>128</sup> Pachoumi's translation of this opening phrase thus reads, "Releasing from bonds. Say, 'Hear me, Chrestos, in tortures, help in necessities, pitiful in times (throughout the years), who died violently [*biaios*] . . .'"<sup>129</sup> With this revised version of the spell in mind, Pachoumi concludes that Jesus's violent manner of death was not an incidental detail, but played an important role in releasing "the prisoners from their iron bonds."<sup>130</sup> Although the text of this spell poses many challenges to editors and translators, Pachoumi's interpretation of *biaios* has the significant advantage of not requiring an emendation to the original text. Consequently, this spell seems to offer further support for my broader contention that many people—including ritual practitioners—who were near contemporaries of the artisan behind the British Museum gem would have understood the violent crucifixion of Jesus in connection with the restless-dead tradition.

To state the matter in reverse: few late second- or early third-century CE Mediterranean people would have used a vivid image of a person, who experienced the brutality and sexual humiliation of crucifixion, to convey triumph for healing, protection, and the like. In light of the ubiquity of the restless-dead motif during this period, many—if not, most—people operating within a ritual context would have probably understood such an image as depicting a soul particularly susceptible to manipulation. In my estimation, the carver of the British Museum gem was not an exception to this rule. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that a variant of *astraperkmēph*—one of the gem's *voces magicae*—is likewise found in a spell from the Greek Magical Papyri, which calls on a soul of one who died prematurely.<sup>131</sup>

In sum, I have attempted to develop Derchain's passing claim that the creator of the British Museum gem most likely approached Jesus's crucifixion with an eye

toward the restless dead motif. This interpretation is supported by the gem's visual emphases on Jesus's nakedness and his brutal crucifixion, as well as its dating to the early part of "late antiquity." Consequently, although the British Museum gem is an important artifact for understanding the early imagery of Jesus, this object's depiction of the crucified Jesus does not lend support to the contention that pre-Constantinian followers of Jesus used visual imagery of his crucifixion in a triumphal way; nor does it justify textual reconstructions of the gem, which highlight the soteriological qualities of Jesus's death.

### CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, we have witnessed two completely different visions of the crucifixion of Jesus from the period generally referred to as "late antiquity." In addition to contributing to our understanding of biblical reception in lived religion more generally (see the book's conclusions), these two perspectives highlighted two possibilities for how Jesus's crucifixion could figure into rituals deemed magical: as a triumphal precedent for demonic struggle in the here and now and as a mechanism for manipulating an entity who was subjected to a painful, humiliating, and untimely death. These differing visions of Jesus's death carry implications for a range of broader issues in the study of late antique lived religion. For instance, the comparative approach to the two artifacts at the center of this analysis reveals important developments in the visual history of the crucifixion: the visual presentation of the suffering Jesus in the late second-/early third-century CE gem in the British Museum was part of a well-established restless-dead motif that penetrated several contexts typically labeled "magical," especially in the period before Constantine outlawed crucifixion; by contrast, the British Library spell reflected a later context in which the domain of ritual practice had largely shifted to monastic and ecclesiastical contexts and in which actual crucifixion was a distant social memory. Accordingly, the two objects undermine an undifferentiated notion of both "late antiquity" and ritual/magical "power."<sup>132</sup> Although both ritual artifacts supported ritual efficacy with visual references to the crucifixion of Jesus, they crafted that authoritative tradition in dialogue with fundamentally different ideas about that mythic event. This manifest difference ought to prevent scholars who engage with (late) ancient magical texts from assuming, among other things, that common expressions like "ritual power" or "magical power" constitute sufficient explanations in and of themselves for a given ritual practice. They also demonstrate the complex ways early Christian traditions could be mapped onto preexisting traditions: Jesus's crucifixion on spells, such as Brit. Lib. Or. 6796(4), 6796, did not merely replace ancient classical ideas about the crucifixion-magic relation; they added an entire set of theological, textual, visual, and ritual layers to this long-standing relationship.