

# EVALUATING THE HEALING MIRACLES OF VESPASIAN AND JESUS

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**Abstract:** One criticism that is often brought by those questioning the messianic status of Jesus posits that his healing miracles are not uncommon enough in his first century context to be useful for proving either his messianic status or any divine attributes. Those who bring this claim often point a bevy of figures in the pre-modern world that were reported to have performed similar miracles. By way of directly engaging this criticism, this paper finds one individual who had characteristics similar to Jesus and was sourced from a near-contemporaneous situation. Vespasian, who would become the first Flavian Emperor of Rome in AD 69, is one figure who fits a criterion of similarity for comparison to Jesus. Jesus and Vespasian have miracle healings attributed to them by their biographers which carry many common attributes. In order to both delimit the number of Jesus' miracles and provide the most reputable healings, specific attention in this paper will be paid to those healing miracles that are generally seen as authentic. To accomplish this, scholars such as Gerd Theissen, Walter Funk, and Graham Twelftree, among others, will guide the inquiry into Jesus' healing miracles of Peter's mother-in-law (GMk 1:29ff); the leper (GMk 1:40-45); the paralytic (GMk 2:1-12); the hemorrhaging woman (GMk 5:24b-34); the blind man of Bethsaida (GMk 8:22-26); and Blind Bartimaeus (GMk 10:46-52.) By laying these well-attested healing miracles alongside the reported healing miracles of Vespasian, the conclusions drawn will ultimately demonstrate that there is more authenticity behind Jesus' healing miracles than even his most viable contemporary counter-example.

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As one encounters the many mythical gods and humanly heroes in the literature of antiquity there is an abiding concern that some of these figures stand as counter-examples, or at least informers, for the Gospel writers in their framing of Jesus as Messiah. Though any number of these figures might serve as helpful comparative studies with Jesus Christ, for the purposes of this brief inquiry, Vespasian will be the singular focus. Having come to political power from a family without social position, Vespasian would rule Rome from CE 69 until 79. Though details of his rule are ambiguous some of the events leading up to his enthronement are compelling. Within these events, the purported healing miracles performed by Vespasian while in Alexandria in 68 are quite remarkable. As a means of considering the overarching claim against the uniqueness of Jesus' miracles, this paper will consider the recorded healing miracles of Vespasian against the healing miracles of Jesus and evaluate whether they offer a compelling counter-narrative which might help frame the mythical context of Jesus' first followers as they formed the early Gospel testimonies concerning Jesus' own miracles. In conducting this discussion, consideration will be given to the historical recordings of the primary healing miracles, followed by an evaluation of how the healing miracles of Vespasian fare in comparison with those of Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup>

## VESPASIAN'S HEALING MIRACLES

Most of the information for the life of Vespasian comes from the classical texts of Tacitus, Suetonius, Dio Cassius, and Flavius Josephus. Of these four primary sources all but

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1. This paper was initially prepared as part of the Miracles seminar at Liberty Theological Seminary under the supervision of Dr. Gary Habermas in the Doctor of Philosophy in Theology and Apologetics program at the seminary. Dr. Habermas' comments and evaluation have helped shape this paper and refine its content. The author is appreciative for his help and the thoughts of the seminar participants in strengthening this research endeavor.

Josephus attribute healing miracles to Vespasian. Having no familial or political claim to become emperor of the Rome, Vespasian ascended to power during the vacuum created following Nero's suicide in a period known as "The Year of Four Emperors."<sup>2</sup> As he solidified his claim to rule, and outlasted his competitors, Vespasian's healing miracles became a key part of his campaign. What makes Vespasian's healing miracles compelling is that, first, there is no record of a Roman emperor prior to Vespasian conducting such works<sup>3</sup> and, second, the records of the healings parallel the Gospel accounts in terms of eyewitness testimony and historical proximity to the event.<sup>4</sup>

Vespasian had been a successful military leader in Britannia, Carthagina, and Judaea, suppressing revolts and bringing effective administrative rule to the regions. Through these exploits Vespasian positioned himself well and controlled the region from Alexandria to Antioch along with a portion of central Europe.<sup>5</sup> During this time Vespasian traveled to the city of Alexandria in order to wait out the stormy season of the Mediterranean.<sup>6</sup> While in Alexandria he

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2. The civil war that followed Nero's death engulfed the entire Roman Empire and threatened its end. Vespasian's rise to power was solidified by the signs and wonders attributed to him during his rule in Alexandria. This is excellently discussed in several works P. A. L. Greenhalgh, *The Year of the Four Emperors* (New York, NY: Barnes & Noble Books, 1975). Gwyn Morgan, *69 A.D.: The Year of Four Emperors* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006). and Barbara Levick, *Vespasian* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999).

3. Trevor S. Luke, "A Healing Touch for Empire: Vespasian's Wonders in Domitianic Rome," *Greece and Rome* 57, no. 01 (2010). 78

4. The three accounts listed above all fall within one hundred years of Vespasian's miracles. The specific dating of the Tacitus, *Histories*, circa 100-110, Suetonius, *Twelve Caesars*, circa 120, and Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, circa 225. Though the Dio Cassius entry is substantially later, by nearly one hundred and fifty years, it is still fairly proximate to the event in comparison to other claims of messianic or miraculous works. The dating issues will be discussed more fully below. For more information on dating see Wendy Cotter, *The Christ of the Miracle Stories: Portrait through Encounter* (Peabody, MA: Baker Academic, 2010). 40-42

4. Luke, "A Healing Touch for Empire: Vespasian's Wonders in Domitianic Rome."

5. Tacitus, 4.81

performed several wonders which, as they are recorded, add credibility to his status as a divinely sanctioned Roman leader.<sup>7</sup> While these other events are intriguing, the healing miracles attributed to Vespasian are more germane to the task herein. Out of these three primary sources one can critically reconstruct much of the events around Vespasian's healing miracles.

As Vespasian visited Alexandria, two individuals approached him for healing.<sup>8</sup> There is some variance in the accounts of these three biographers. In Tacitus and Dio Cassius, two men, one blind and another with a diseased hand, came requesting healing. According to Suetonius, a blind man came followed by one with a lame leg. These accounts record the men coming and appealing to a cultic figure, Serapis, who had led them to make these requests. In all three accounts, spittle is the requested means of healing the blind man. As to the second individual, regardless of his affliction, the accounts of Dio Cassius and Suetonius request that the foot, or heel, of Vespasian be used to bring healing to the limb which was damaged. Tacitus and Suetonius record the initial refusal of Vespasian in healing these two individuals, though for differing reasons. In Tacitus, Vespasian mocks the two men while in Suetonius, Vespasian's initial denial is due to a lack of faith in his abilities. Once Vespasian is prevailed upon to attempt a healing both Tacitus and Suetonius mention that it is before a large crowd of supporters.

Between the initial appeals and the eventual healing, Tacitus records that Vespasian appealed to medical authorities as to the possibility of healing either individual. Once assured that a cure was possible "within the reach of human skill," and after a brief discussion of options

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7. As related by Dio Cassius, upon Vespasian's entry in the region the Nile River overflowed its banks by a mark only recorded once before. This appears in Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 65.8. Another wondrous sign was, after clearing the Temple to Serapis, a man named Basilides who appeared and offered gifts to confirm Vespasian's rule. This scene appears in Tacitus, *Histories* 8.42 and Suetonius, *Lives of the Twelve Caesars: Divine Vespasian* 7.2.

8. The following is a compilation of the stories as related from the three sources given above. It is also described in Levick, 68-69.

on how to proceed, Vespasian acted as requested and healed the two individuals in front of a large crowd. In Suetonius' account, after the initial refusal, some of his companions convinced Vespasian to proceed and the cure was affected before a large crowd. Dio Cassius provides the means of cure, using the requested spittle and then stepping on the damaged limb. Across all three accounts there are some features which appear to be central to the healing story: there were two men, one was blind, the other had a damaged limb, both came after receiving counsel from the god Serapis, and Vespasian healed both men through employing spittle and touching the wounded limb before a crowd.

All three biographers appear to point out that through this healing miracle, coupled with the other wondrous occurrences, Vespasian's claim to be emperor of Rome was given validation. When considering the larger contexts of all three writers, it appears that these healing miracles were the means by which Vespasian secured the divine endorsement of his rule.<sup>9</sup> In a time where there were several individuals aspiring to the throne of Rome, the divine sanction on one over the others would have been an authorization that would have brought that individual to the forefront of consideration. Also, in the often tumultuous political environment of Rome, any divine support for one's rule would have been an effective deterrent to challenges and conspiracies. As the accounts of Vespasian's healing miracle are crafted, they seem to provide support in all of these areas.

For Vespasian's miracle accounts, it is vital to note that prior to them no other emperor had been depicted as having such abilities, nor actually engaging in such miracles, during their lifetime. Following Vespasian at least four of the next eight emperors would have miraculous

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9. Eric Eve, "Spit in Your Eye: The Blind Man of Bethsaida and the Blind Man of Alexandria," *New Testament Studies* 54, no. 01 (2008). 5-6

acts ascribed of them.<sup>10</sup> To quote Trevor Luke: “The development of the story of Vespasian’s wonders during the reign of Domitian was critical in ensuring that, in spite of Domitian’s personal unpopularity, post-Flavian emperors could also be conceived as wonder-workers.”<sup>11</sup> There is something compelling about the nature of Vespasian’s miracles as they relate to the establishment of the Flavian dynasty in Rome. While initially the use of such miracle claims secured the imperial throne for him, their continued facilitation by his successors perpetuates the mythic characteristic of their employment.<sup>12</sup> As subsequent Flavian Emperors utilize claims to wondrous works, they do so in a manner to retain control of the Empire. As a result, an entire segment of biographical literature becomes aligned with retelling and recasting these stories to bolster the imperial profile of the Flavian dynasty originating in Vespasian.

Additional issues arise when one studies these accounts closely. One of the first concerns how the individuals who desired to be healed approached Vespasian. In the more descriptive account provided by Tacitus, as these men approach Vespasian he initially spurns their request. Tacitus characterizes Vespasian’s actions as “ridiculing” the men and “repulsing” them. Suetonius notes the initial hesitation by Vespasian, though he attributes this reticence to Vespasian’s own lack of confidence in his ability to heal and the efficacy of his healing. Tacitus confirms that one of the reasons for the continued refusal was Vespasian’s own concern for the results of a failed healing attempt. However, after an initial refusal, Vespasian commits to proceeding with the healing once he overcomes the doubts concerning his own ability and the prodding of his supplicants. In Tacitus’ account one additional layer of encouragement is

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10. Trevor S. Luke, "Ideology and Humor in Suetonius' Life of Vespasian 8," *Classical World* 103, no. 4 (2010). 511

11. Luke, "A Healing Touch for Empire: Vespasian's Wonders in Domitianic Rome." 78

12. M. P. Charlesworth, "Flaviana," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 27, (1937). 55-56

provided by a group of physicians who, after being consulted by Vespasian, reported that the first man was not entirely blind and that the limb of the other might be able to be useful if appropriate “healing influences” would be applied. The other accounts neglect these details. Vespasian, bolstered by these encouragements, then moves to conduct his healing.

When he does heal, Vespasian does not retreat to more private environs, opting to conduct the healing before an assembled crowd. Tacitus notes that the healings were done in this way so to permit testimony from any individuals assembled as to what Vespasian accomplished. He is the only one of the three ancient biographers to add this rationalization in his account. All three of the accounts affirm the divine blessing of the healing which raised the profile of Vespasian among the Alexandrians.

One additional query relates to the position of the cult of Serapis within the story. Why would Vespasian, a Roman Emperor, seek the sanction of a non-Roman deity? Eric Eve suggests that a political motivation is behind this action. Given the turmoil of the time, Vespasian needed to retain the allegiance of the two Roman legions stationed in Alexandria. Without this support his quest for the throne of Rome might be squelched.<sup>13</sup> Though these soldiers would not have been highly aligned with the mystical elements of an Egyptian cult over a Roman cult, they would have been intrigued by a leader seen as quasi-divine. By affirming a local cultic figure Vespasian would have aligned himself with a major administrative city in a region which continued to fortify his position among his three challengers. Ultimately, the point here is that the cult of Serapis, as recounted in the biographies, appears to be inserted in stories as a means of recounting how Vespasian was given divine kingship.<sup>14</sup> There was a mutual benefit obtained by

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13. Eve, "Spit in Your Eye: The Blind Man of Bethsaida and the Blind Man of Alexandria." 6

14. This seems to be reinforced in Suetonius' opening of the account where he points out



both Vespasian and the followers of Serapis' cult in the recognition of this kingly identity.<sup>15</sup>

Vespasian's use of either standing on a hand or touching with his heel indicate an attachment, or at least a visualization, of the divine qualities like a divine figure.<sup>16</sup> There is a bit of propaganda being deployed in the three accounts, of course more specifically in Suetonius and Tacitus, that seeks to use this miraculous healing as a sanction and authorization of the Vespasian to rule.

Finally, it should be of interest around the Vespasian story is that his own court historian, Josephus, fails to recount the miracle among his record of the visit to Alexandria.<sup>17</sup> This peculiar given that, a) Josephus prominently speaks to Vespasian's divine claim to the throne of Rome and nearly equates Vespasian to the Messiah,<sup>18</sup> and b) if the story as noted by Tacitus carries as heavy a propaganda, style Josephus would have been aware of the story.<sup>19</sup> Josephus' failure to include the healings casts a question across their portrayal by others. What is notable about Josephus' lack of citation of Vespasian's healing miracles is that elsewhere Josephus records

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“Vespasian as yet lacked prestige and a certain divinity, so to speak, since he was an unexpected and still new made emperor; but these were given to him.” Suetonius. 7.2. Also within Tacitus' account there is an acknowledgement of the significance of these acts, “...many wonders occurred which seemed to point him out as the object of the favour of heaven and of the partiality of the Gods.” Tacitus. 4.18

15. Levick. 79

16. Albert Henrichs, "Vespasian's Visit to Alexandria," *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 3, (1968). 68-70 Henrichs gives several possible answers to the puzzling scene and rests on drawing conclusions based in the representation of divine figures throughout the Roman world that would have a sandal off their right foot and thus indicate some sort of divine healing function.

17. Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*. 4.656

18. Josephus, *Jewish War* 3.399-404 and 6.310-315

19. Eve, "Spit in Your Eye: The Blind Man of Bethsaida and the Blind Man of Alexandria." 7 For a discussion of Josephus' understanding of miraculous claims see also Eric Eve, *The Jewish Context of Jesus' Miracles* (London, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002). 24-33

miraculous events of others. Specifically, Josephus cites Eleazar the Exorcist,<sup>20</sup> who is found to be casting out demons in Vespasian's presence, and Onias,<sup>21</sup> who brought rain to end a severe drought through his prayers. Both of these miracle stories lack any additional reporting in literature of the period. Yet Josephus adds them into his historical accounts. If Josephus was reticent about adding any miracle stories it would be easy to dismiss his non-inclusion of Vespasian's healings. With these two examples standing against that conclusion, it becomes difficult to explain why Josephus adds two, fairly marginal, miracle stories of others, including one done in the presence of Vespasian, and does not validate Vespasian's healing miracles. Notwithstanding this absence in one of the more notable historical texts of the day, the primary source data of the other three biographers there is sufficient testimony to establish the key elements of the healing episodes and their impact on Vespasian and his role in Rome.

### JESUS' HEALING MIRACLES

In comparison to Vespasian's healing miracles of these two men in Alexandria, his near contemporary, Jesus Christ, has a number of healing miracles which might be considered. Since the scholarly community is divided as to veracity of many of the Jesus' miracles it is reasonable to consider those healing miracles which even the most skeptical of critical scholars would accept. Gerd Theissen has noted that of the many questionable issues around the historical Jesus, "There is no doubt that Jesus worked miracles, healed the sick and cast out demons..."<sup>22</sup> In

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20. Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*. 8.45-48 (using the Whiston translation here)

21. Ibid. 14.22-24

22. Gerd Theissen, "The Historical Intention of Primitive Christian Miracle Stories," in *The Historical Jesus in Recent Research*, ed. James D. G. Dunn and Scot McKnight, Sources for Biblical and Theological Study (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005). 351 It is important to quote the entire sentence to obtain the proper understanding of Theissen's point: "There is no doubt that Jesus worked miracles, healed the sick and cast out demons, but the miracle stories

limiting this study to the most historically veracious healing stories, the list provided by the Jesus Seminar will suffice as a common ground for inquiry.<sup>23</sup> Jesus' healing miracles which are to be considered herein include the healing of: Peter's mother-in-law (GMk 1:29ff);<sup>24</sup> the leper (GMk 1:40-45); the paralytic (GMk 2:1-12); the hemorrhaging woman (GMk 5:24b-34); the blind man of Bethsaida (GMk 8:22-26); Blind Bartimaeus (GMk 10:46-52.)

Each of these healing miracles bear unique aspects of the Markan development of the historical Jesus. For the healing miracle of Peter's mother-in-law (GMk 1:29ff,) after having left the synagogue in Capernaum, Jesus goes into the house of Simon and Andrew accompanied by James and John. Upon entering this presumably small, one-room house,<sup>25</sup> the entourage encounters the sick mother-in-law of Simon Peter. After being informed of her infirmity by his hosts, Jesus goes to her and, after taking her hand, lifts her up. Upon standing, her fever dissipates and she immediately begins to serve the group. Twelftree says that this healing miracle demonstrates that Jesus is successful as a healer.<sup>26</sup> Collins finds the description a bit dubious, noting that Mark's presentation is troubling since he posits that a fever can enter and leave someone like a demon.<sup>27</sup> Yet in the end, Mark presents a concise healing miracle where Jesus'

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reproduce these events in an intensified form.”

23. This list is provided by Robert Walter Funk, *The Acts of Jesus: The Search for the Authentic Deeds of Jesus*, 1st ed. (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998). Each of these healing miracle claims are deemed “pink” or a likely action of Jesus.

24. Since the Gospel of Mark is seen by most critical scholars to be the most authentic, and often earliest, Gospel account for relating these miracles it is helpful to use it as the primary source herein. The other Synoptic Gospels will also be reference where helpful.

25. Joel Marcus, *Mark 1-8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 1st ed., The Anchor Bible (Yale University Press: New Haven, CT, 2000). 196, Marcus helpfully provides some context for this observation.

26. Graham H. Twelftree, *Jesus the Miracle Worker: A Historical & Theological Study* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999). 60

27. Adela Yarbro Collins and Harold W. Attridge, *Mark: A Commentary*, Hermeneia - a

healing is done by touch without any word which is unique to Jesus.<sup>28</sup>

Following this episode, the narrative briskly moves along to find the group casting out demons and preaching. A leprous man approaches Jesus and asks him for healing (GMk 1:40-45.) Jesus is moved with compassion for the man and, in reaching out to touch him, speaks that he, Jesus, is willing for the man to be healed.<sup>29</sup> The leprosy immediately leaves the man and Jesus warns him to not say anything, but to remain silent about the healing, as he goes to present himself to the priest for cleansing. The man does leave, but tells others throughout the town about who healed him. As a result, Jesus has to leave the area because of the widespread acclaim about his work. Twelftree believes it is this fame that draws in the next healing miracle of a paralytic man being brought by his friends.<sup>30</sup> Though there are difficulties with the story, due in part to the textual variants and unique language that Mark selects against the Matthean and Lukan traditions,<sup>31</sup> the story is still considered to be authentic due to its multiple attestation.<sup>32</sup>

As Twelftree alludes to above, the next episode is the healing of paralytic man (GMk 2:1-12) who is brought to a home in Capernaum where Jesus was preaching. As the story records, the man's friends carried him up to the roof of the house and, after removing part of the roof, lower

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Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007). 174

28. Gerd Theissen and John Kenneth Riches, *The Miracle Stories of the Early Christian Tradition*, 1st Fortress Press ed. (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1983). 63-64

29. Cotter. 19-22, Cotter points out that this miracle is likely a Markan redaction of an existing story. However, the use of the priestly cleansing ritual aids the placement of the story and its veracity.

30. Twelftree. 63

31. Marcus. 206

32. Funk. 62, the scholars of the Jesus Seminar found this to be a likely event, designating it the pink reference point, and note the man likely had Hansen's disease. They do find the commission to go to the priest to be unlikely at this point.

him down in front of Jesus.<sup>33</sup> Jesus, seeing the faith of the man's friends, speaks to the paralytic and tells him that his sins are forgiven.<sup>34</sup> After a disputation with some scribes, Jesus tells the paralytic to stand, take up his mat, and go back home, and the man obeys. Bultmann finds the editorial work to be disqualifying to the story,<sup>35</sup> however Cotter point out that the narrative elements are not essential to the story.<sup>36</sup> The Jesus Seminar, weighing the additional Synoptic parallels and some corroborating archeological data about homes in this period, affirms the central elements of the healing story but find the quibble with the scribes to be uncertain.<sup>37</sup> What remains central is that the man is brought by friends and, when presented, Jesus performs a healing miracle by speaking to the man, who is cured of his paralysis.

A bit later in Mark, the next healing miracle arises where Jesus is touched by a woman who was suffering from a persistent vaginal hemorrhage (GMk 5:24b-34.) Though Jesus is in the midst of a throng of people, she is able to touch his robe as she is reported to believe that is sufficient for healing.<sup>38</sup> By touching Jesus' robes the woman is instantly healed.<sup>39</sup> Jesus stops and turns to the crowd, inquiring as to who touched his robes. After a few moments of silence, the

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33. Marcus. 220, it is helpful to note that in the narrative the man's affliction is two-fold, he is paralyzed, but also is unable to go to Jesus because of the fame of Jesus' ministry in the region.

34. Twelftree. 64, the object here being the faith of the friends in the ability of Jesus to heal their friend.

35. Rudolf Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1963). 14

36. Cotter. 81

37. Funk. 64-65

38. Twelftree. 74, notes that this set of stories, combined with the story of Jarius' daughter, are crafted to demonstrate the theme of faith leading to healing. This touching of Jesus' robes is also present in healing scenes of GMk 3:10 and 6:56.

39. Though Collins believes this statement might have eschatological significance if the meaning of "her flow of blood ceased" is meant to demonstrate that she became menopausal. Collins and Attridge. 282

woman comes forward and confesses to Jesus her intent and what had happened. Jesus addresses her as "Daughter," a declaration of familial affection,<sup>40</sup> and commends her faith. A statement Witherington understands as restorative for her place in the community.<sup>41</sup>

The final two episodes of healing which are affirmed by critical scholars, are the restoration of sight to two blind men. The first is found in Bethsaida (GMk 8:22-26) and is the beginning of a major section on the restoration to sight as a motif of Jesus' cure for spiritual blindness for Marcus.<sup>42</sup> Here, a blind man is brought to Jesus, likely by the disciples, for healing. Jesus takes the blind man and leads him away from the village. After spitting in the man's eyes and laying hands on him, Jesus asks if he can see anything. The man replies, "I see people - they look like trees walking" an indication that the healing is not complete.<sup>43</sup> Jesus then touches the man again, where after he is able to see completely. As Jesus leads the healed blind man away he instructs him, as before, to be silent about the healing. Bultmann finds this story to be a true healing miracle, in line with the two-fold healing of a deaf man in GMk 7:32-37.<sup>44</sup> While Collins is not as supportive, suggesting the story is only a symbolism for spiritual blindness,<sup>45</sup> the Jesus Seminar approves the healing citing its dual character of being clandestine and compelling the man to silence.<sup>46</sup> In the second episode of a blind man being healed, Jesus encounters a man named Bartimaeus on the way to Jericho (GMk 10:46-52.) Bartimaeus cries out for Jesus who is

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40. Marcus. 360

41. Ben Witherington, *The Gospel of Mark a Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub., 2001). 190

42. Joel Marcus, *Mark 8-16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009). 573

43. Twelftree. 84-85

44. Bultmann. 213

45. Collins and Attridge. 394

46. Funk. 103

passing by, using Messianic language,<sup>47</sup> imploring Jesus to heal him. Jesus has the man come to him and asks Bartimaeus what needs to be done. Praising Jesus as "Rabbouni!" Bartimaeus requests the restoration of his sight.<sup>48</sup> Jesus speaks healing words to him and Bartimaeus has his vision restored. Jesus and his disciples continue on the road with Bartimaeus following.<sup>49</sup> Of the stories above, this is the only story where someone is explicitly named.<sup>50</sup> Because of this, the Jesus Seminar finds this healing miracle particularly strong when coupled with the naming of an individual.<sup>51</sup>

Considered together, each of the six healing miracles has a corresponding individual who interacted with Jesus concerning their own affliction. These healings are unique events in the recordings of Jesus' earthly ministry and are often understood as a validating sign of his Messianic identity. Each healing miracle describes Jesus as the agent bringing the healing. No other outside agent is consulted to approve of the healing. These six miracles range from brief descriptions, almost afterthoughts, as in the healing of Peter's mother-in-law, to rather descriptive accounts in the healing of Blind Bartimaeus.

There are several points of congruency among Jesus' healings. For all the accounts the healing is instantaneous. Likewise, in all but one, Jesus is sought out by the individual or brought by friends.<sup>52</sup> Several of the healing miracles record Jesus' recognition of the faith of the

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47. Collins and Attridge. 509-510

48. Cotter. 64, Cotter believes the praising of Jesus as "Rabbouni" is an attempt by a beggar to laud plaudits on their possible benefactors to receive a blessing.

49. Twelftree. 91 That Bartimaeus follows Jesus after being sent away, or released from any obligation to follow his healer is certainly worth noting.

50. Peter's mother-in-law is indeed a citation of someone, but this identification of someone, by name and attached to a locale is unique among the healings above.

51. Funk. 119

52. The exception here is the healing Peter's mother-in-law (GMk 1:29ff) where Jesus

individual, or their friends, being central to the episode. In the episodes with Bartimaeus, the hemorrhaging woman, and the paralytic, Jesus' speaks of how their faith is central to allowing the healing. Four of the healing episodes have a private aspect, where Jesus conducted his work without groups or crowds of onlookers.<sup>53</sup> The private, or at least the attempt to be private, aspect of Jesus' healing miracles indicates that he desired no public adulation or spectacle for himself. Even when Jesus was sought out by an individual in a public forum, Jesus retreats with the individual to a less public place and performs the healing. These distinctions surrounding Jesus' own miraculous healings are examples of the unique nature of his early attestations.

By using Mark's Gospel as the textual basis for these miracle claims, one is able to establish that several points about the authenticity of these accounts.<sup>54</sup> In the instance of Blind Bartimaeus having his sight restored, given that this is the only miracle where an individual is named, it is likely this was an early story circulating with the oral tradition of the churches.<sup>55</sup> Also, for the healing of the blind man of Bethsaida, the two part healing would have been likely censored out in editing by more critical redactors, yet its inclusion speaks to its authenticity.<sup>56</sup> There is some avoidance by the Synoptic authors in ascribing Jesus' healing miracles, or any miracles at that, as "signs and wonders." The miracle works of Jesus across the Synoptics are not

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enters the residence possibly without knowledge of the illness or any intent on healing. Since the record of the healing does not include this kind of specificity it is left out.

53. The exceptions are the healing of the hemorrhaging woman and the paralytic man. In both of these episodes Jesus' is in public, or semi-public, settings and is approached for healing in a manner that does not allow for a retreat to more private environs.

54. Specifically one considers the discussion by Craig Evans that Mark's Gospel is written as a contra-imperial narrative. This is worked out in Craig Evans, "The Beginning of the Good News and the Fulfillment of Scripture in the Gospel of Mark," in *Hearing the Old Testament in the New Testament: McMaster New Testament Studies*, ed. Stanley E. Porter (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2006).

55. Cotter. 74

56. Twelftree. 294



wondrous events serving an auxiliary function within his ministry, but are instead vitally tied to the totality of his ministry.<sup>57</sup> Jesus' authority and Messianic status is not inaugurated in his miracles but they are displays of this position as Messiah.

In considering the healing miracles of Jesus, several key issues stand out. The first is the proximity of Jesus' life with his earliest biographers. Each of the Gospel accounts is dated to an era of the late first generation of his earliest followers. In the case of the Gospel of Mark, it is usually dated between AD 65-70.<sup>58</sup> Other Gospels date well within fifty years of Jesus' life and ministry, even the Gospel of John is considered by most to be within the end of the first century. Mark is the earliest Gospel account that is written within thirty to thirty five years of Jesus' death. This proximity is uncommon for many individuals of this era. Also, the development of such sophisticated stories of miraculous healing often took decades and generations to fully form in the followers of a leader. Yet this early devotion to a healing figure is more of an attestation to the authenticity of these healing stories.<sup>59</sup> Another matter, which is unique to Jesus' healings, concerns how Jesus received the individuals which approached him about healing. Each scenario depicts Jesus as being a welcoming presence who healed the person before him without hesitation. Along these lines, Jesus never inquires with any other person about the nature of the individual's ailment or whether it is truly an infirmity.<sup>60</sup> The healings of Jesus are instantaneous

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57. Ibid. 343

58. For a concise, yet detailed, discussion of the most recent discussions of dating see Robert H. Stein, *Mark* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008). 12-15 Even the most critical scholars cannot place Mark's Gospel beyond AD 70, especially with the influence of Papias' fragment describing the nature of authorship which is dated to the early second century.

59. Larry W. Hurtado, *How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God?: Historical Questions About Earliest Devotion to Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2005). 25-30

60. Most of the discussion about the nature of the healing miracles in Jesus Seminar discussions leave these healings as appealing to a psycho-somatic disorder rather than a true infirmity. However, some detailed scholarship by other critical scholars has called into the

and, seemingly, efficacious to remove all infirmity from the one who has sought out Jesus for healing.

One last point about the healings of Jesus, which is worth exploring, is the nature of the eyewitness testimony. Those who are recounting these healings in the later Synoptic Gospels are relying on testimony from direct witnesses to Jesus' healing. As these testimonies function, they link together the fabric of the stories which fill in the picture of Jesus known to the Gospel authors and their early audiences.<sup>61</sup> The multiple attestation of the miracle claims, and specifically the six considered herein, bolster the veracity of the healing. Though some details concerning elements surrounding these six healing miracles can be challenged, the reality is that in these six healing miracles, which are granted by even the most critical scholars, there appears to be more textual evidence bolster claims to the veracity of their accounts and the authenticity of their occurrence. Jesus' six healing miracles above stand well in light of critical scholarship, but the question of their relation to Vespasian's miracles still remains.

#### EVALUATING THE HEALING MIRACLES OF VESPASIAN AND JESUS

To begin this evaluation, the areas of congruency should first be established. It is evident that both Jesus and Vespasian have healing miracles which are attested to them within forty years of their deaths. It is uncommon in the ancient world to have two individuals with such closely attested works. So, Jesus and Vespasian are unique parallels to consider. A second area

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question the default response of attributing all the healing to being simply psycho-somatic. For a brief interaction with this see Timothy McGrew and Linda McGrew, "The Argument from Miracles: A Cumulative Case for the Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth," in *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*, ed. William Lane Craig and James Porter Moreland (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009). 595-602

61. Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2006). 490-508

of alignment between Vespasian and Jesus is the actual nature of the healing taking place in these miracles. Both use spittle and touch in their healing episodes, though not uniformly with Jesus. These acts bring about healing to the infirm individuals that request their help.<sup>62</sup> Using a hand or spitting on the eyes was a practice that was prominent in healing episodes in antiquity. It is not surprising that these two functions would appear in the healing stories of Jesus and Vespasian. A third area of seeming congruity between Vespasian and Jesus' healing miracles is that the healing is instantaneous for the infirm individual. There is no need to go and wash additionally, or even present themselves to someone else for completion of their healing.<sup>63</sup> Instead, each is a complete, single act healing. Finally, in the accounts of Vespasian and Jesus, it is either of these individuals who accomplishes the healing by themselves with the aid of no other person. Had there needed to be additional assistance, a secondary healing agent, the accounts would certainly seem less credible. Yet in both, the healing function is held entirely within the healing agent.

While there are areas of congruency between Vespasian and Jesus in their healing miracles, there are ways in which they differ are significant. Perhaps the most significant concerns how the healing miracles have little actual commonality in efficacy. More specifically, in Jesus' healing miracles the individuals are all beyond any medical assistance and the impairments have existed for a long time.<sup>64</sup> In Vespasian's healing miracle, specifically in Tacitus' record, the individuals being healed do not appear to entirely needing of the actual

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62. Twelftree. 301, Here Twelftree provides a helpful discussion about the nature of the use of spittle to reflect the authentic historiography of both stories.

63. The change for the leper (GMk 1:40-45) was not an additional cleansing to complete the healing but to satisfy the Jewish purification laws and allow his reentry to society.

64. The Markan commentary in the hemorrhaging woman states that her condition had been brought to the attention of the medical community and she had "endured much" under their care with no change in her condition.

healing. As Tacitus relates the account, the individuals, though appearing earnest in their request of the healing, have conditions that are not beyond the reach of medical specialists of their age.<sup>65</sup> When Vespasian considers their requests he also inquires with the local medical specialists as to the extent of their conditions. Tacitus relates the account plainly, pointing out that the confirmation of the limited nature of their physical impairments seems to bolster Vespasian's move to provide the healing. In the healing accounts of Jesus, he does not first investigate the health of the individuals who need healing nor does he inquire with other persons as to the nature of their condition. Vespasian performs his miracle after consulting physicians who, in Tacitus' accounting, note that the individuals are not truly infirm they simply need a proper touch. Jesus' healing miracles are entirely different. The individuals have been infirm for extended periods of time and are beyond the aid of medicine. In these healing miracles that Jesus' performs each are efficacious to heal a disease or physical dysfunction that are beyond normal, human ability.

Another area of substantive difference is the geographic location of the acts. For Vespasian, he healed two individuals in a land far removed from his final seat of power. Alexandria, while still an important city in the Mediterranean region was not easily accessible. Jesus' healing miracles are all performed within close proximity to his ministry and residence. For someone to have performed such a wonder in a far away land is less convincing of its veracity than one who performs wondrous acts close to their home and ministry. Even though Vespasian's biographers assure the audience that anyone can go and check in on the healing, this is more ancillary than meaningful. Not only is the account separated from Vespasian's original act by several decades to over one hundred years, the geographical distance is more discounting than historical distance. Jesus' miracles were done in locations that could be easily accessed by

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65. Tacitus *Histories* 4.81

his challengers and immediate followers.<sup>66</sup> In the Jesus literature of the early churches, even taking the most critical view of these them, it is clear that within a decade of his death, miracle stories of Jesus' life were in circulation, not to mention even during his ministry.<sup>67</sup> In terms of viability of recounting, Jesus' miracles have more credibility due to their proximity to his life and ministry.

It is appropriate to point out that the sheer number of healing miracles across Jesus' own ministry outpaces most all of his rivals in antiquity. However, it is better to note that as Jesus' performed healing miracles he did so mostly in private. This stands in contrast to Vespasian who, according to his biographers, seemed to delight in performing his healing miracles before a large crowd. In the instances where Jesus healed which are considered above, there is a deliberate act by Jesus to accomplish his act in private. In two examples where he accomplished his healing public venues it is because he is approached by individuals seeking out his healing.<sup>68</sup> By not seeking out public places, or waiting for groups to appear, in order to accomplish his healings, Jesus provides a more authentic procedure for his miracles.<sup>69</sup> Too often individuals seeking out public spectacle to bolster their credibility often have nefarious motives for such a move. As Jesus examples, the more genuine the healing miracle the less it is about the public spectacle and more about the power of the divine act of healing.

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66. The naming of Bartimaeus would have provided an eyewitness account that could have been easily checked by those in his immediate followers or involved with the primitive churches of the region. Given that Bartimaeus was not only named, but located, it would have been quite easy to verify this story.

67. Cf. GMatt 8:16; GMk 1:32-34; 3:10; GLk 4:40-41 are all examples of how Jesus' healing ministry was attracting followers within his own time.

68. This is not to say that Jesus did not heal in public, there seem to be indications within the Gospels that he did perform some healing miracles in public. The larger point is, however, that he did not seek out the public to make his wondrous acts spectacles before them.

69. Craig S. Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts*, 2 vols., vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011). 93

How Jesus and Vespasian accomplished their healing acts are recorded provides some other aspects of differentiation between the two figures. For the Gospel writers, while Jesus is the central figure of their entire accounts and certainly the main character of their healing stories, they seem to go out of their way to provide individuals who, in being healed, overtake Jesus in the focus of the stories. The recipients of healing become fantastical characters who carry a significant role in the stories of their encounter with Jesus.<sup>70</sup> In this way the Gospel recordings are not worried about keeping Jesus as the primary focus, as an almost unparalleled character. Yet for the recordings of Vespasian, the recipients of his healing work are given inferior roles to Vespasian. His biographers maintain a steadfast devotion to keeping Vespasian as the central character for their entire stories. Perhaps this criticism goes to the insecurity of their own stories, or is only a minor literary characterization, but it is worth considering.

Other examples of incongruity between the stories can likely be made. For the purposes of this brief inquiry one final point which should be made is that Jesus' healing miracles considered above are attested to in the three Synoptic Gospels equally, though Blind Bartimaeus is only considered in Mark. The point here is simple: Jesus' healing miracles are multiply attested by his biographers. They do not shy away from describing Jesus as a worker of wondrous acts and performer of miracles.<sup>71</sup> Yet for Vespasian this is not the case. Outside of the three increasingly brief accounts of his healing at Alexandria, his court biographer, Josephus, refuses any mention of miraculous works by Vespasian.<sup>72</sup> Perhaps this is due to an aversion in Josephus to considering miracles, or the supernatural, outside of Israelite or Jewish figures.

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70. Cotter. 74

71. Twelftree. 242

72. Eve, "Spit in Your Eye: The Blind Man of Bethsaida and the Blind Man of Alexandria." 10-11

Though given the above data of counter-examples this is not always the case. Regardless of the reason for the exclusion of Vespasian's acts, it should be notable that Josephus neglects to include them. For a biographer who had already affirmed Vespasian's messianic characteristics these would have been important events to include. Yet their exclusion by Josephus presents a secondary challenge for those seeking to place them up and against Jesus' miracles. There is a gap in the communication and affirmation of the healings. It is a gap which must be weighted against the viability of Vespasian's miracles.

### CONCLUSION

Some have posited that Vespasian's healing miracles stand as a type of a legendary story which might have been prevalent in the era as the writing of the Gospel accounts containing Jesus' healing miracles. As a result, the stories of miraculous healings accounted for in the Gospels are embellished stories that drew their inspiration from other, common, secular myths and stories of leaders and individuals who performed miraculous works. In the accounts of Vespasian's healing miracles, while it one can grant its efficacy for the individuals who were healed, it does not seem to meet the same levels of veracity and attestation that are found in the various Gospel accounts. As a result it does not seem entirely appropriate to conflate the healing acts of Vespasian as contemporary counter-examples to those of Jesus, nor even as legitimate parallels. Given the leveraging of these miracle claims, from Vespasian, to aid his ascendancy to the Roman Imperial throne, there is an additional difficulty in seeing his healing miracles as authentic accounts.

As the accounts critically attributed to Jesus reflect an individual not using these miracles to attain a higher office or public fame, reconciling the Vespasian miracles beyond their

influence on his eventual political office becomes increasingly difficult. Jesus' healing miracles, as recorded in the Synoptic Gospels, were immediately confirmable and added to his fame. If this were not the case, the recorded crowds would have been substantial nor consistently present. Since Jesus healed and cast out demons in the same, fairly small region where he conducted his ministry, any fraudulent miracles would have been quickly uncovered and Jesus would have either been entirely discredited or quickly executed. Neither of these options, in the historically verifiable accounts, appear to have happened in his ministry. Instead, Jesus' ministry grew in fame as well as the crowds which he attracted.

Vespasian continues to stand as, perhaps, the closest Greco-Roman contemporary to Jesus Christ. Given that the works recording his rise to power and eventual rule are within a generation or two of his life, there are some parallels with Jesus Christ. However, Vespasian does not appear to be able to produce the same kind of miracle acts that Jesus accomplished. Other copycat legends or stories continue to persist in the pre-Christian Greco-Roman and Jewish literatures along with some mystery cults of the time. Vespasian's healing miracles do not provide an adequate counter-example or even a common legendary motif of leading figures during Jesus' earthly ministry. While Vespasian does provide a unique figure to survey that is contemporary to the environment of the inscripturation of the Gospels, there are enough differences between his miracle works and the critically accepted healing miracles of Jesus to see there is a difference between the two.



## Appendix

### Three Accounts of Vespasian's Healing Miracles

From Tacitus *Histories* 4.81f (emphasis mine)

81. In the months during which Vespasian was waiting at Alexandria for the periodical return of the summer gales and settled weather at sea, many wonders occurred which seemed to point him out as the object of the favour of heaven and of the partiality of the Gods. **One of the common people of Alexandria, well known for his blindness, threw himself at the Emperor's knees, and implored him with groans to heal his infirmity.** This he did by the advice of the God Serapis, whom this nation, devoted as it is to many superstitions, worships more than any other divinity. He begged Vespasian that he would deign to moisten his cheeks and eye-balls with his spittle. Another with a diseased hand, at the counsel of the same God, prayed that the limb might feel the print of a Caesar's foot. **At first Vespasian ridiculed and repulsed them. They persisted; and he, though on the one hand he feared the scandal of a fruitless attempt, yet, on the other, was induced by the entreaties of the men and by the language of his flatterers to hope for success. At last he ordered that the opinion of physicians should be taken, as to whether such blindness and infirmity were within the reach of human skill. They discussed the matter from different points of view. "In the one case," they said, "the faculty of sight was not wholly destroyed, and might return, if the obstacles were removed; in the other case, the limb, which had fallen into a diseased condition, might be restored, if a healing influence were applied; such, perhaps, might be the pleasure of the Gods, and the Emperor might be chosen to be the minister of the divine will; at any rate, all the glory of a successful remedy would be Caesar's, while the ridicule of failure would fall on the sufferers."** And so Vespasian, supposing that all things were possible to his good fortune, and that nothing was any longer past belief, with a joyful countenance, amid the intense expectation of the multitude of bystanders, accomplished what was required. **The hand was instantly restored to its use, and the light of day again shone upon the blind.** Persons actually present attest both facts, even now when nothing is to be gained by falsehood.

82. Vespasian thus came to conceive a deeper desire to visit the sanctuary of Serapis, that he might consult the God about the interests of his throne. He gave orders that all persons should be excluded from the temple. He had entered, and was absorbed in worship, when he saw behind him one of the chief men of Egypt, named Basilides, whom he knew at the time to be detained by sickness at a considerable distance, as much as several days journey from Alexandria. He enquired of the priests, whether Basilides had on this day entered the temple. He enquired of others whom he met, whether he had been seen in the city. At length, sending some horsemen, he ascertained that at that very instant the man had been eighty miles distant. He then concluded that it was a divine apparition, and discovered an oracular force in the name of Basilides.

From Suetonius *Lives of the Twelve Caesars: Divine Vespasian* 7.2 (emphasis mine)

VII. Therefore beginning a civil war and sending ahead generals with troops to Italia, he crossed meanwhile to Alexandria, to take possession of the key to Egypt. **There he dismissed all his**

**attendants and entered the Temple of Serapis alone, to consult the auspices as to the duration of his power.** And when after many propitiary offerings to the god he at length turned about, it seemed to him that his freedman Basilides [The freedman's name, connected with the Greek "Basileus", or "King", was an additional omen] offered him sacred boughs, garlands and loaves, as is the custom there; and yet he knew well that no one had let him in, and that for some time he had been hardly able to walk by reason of rheumatism, and was besides far away. And immediately letters came with the news that Vitellius had been routed at Cremona and the emperor himself slain at Rome. **Vespasian as yet lacked prestige and a certain divinity, so to speak, since he was an unexpected and still new-made emperor; but these also were given him. A man of the people who was blind, and another who was lame, came to him together as he sat on the tribunal, begging for the help for their disorders which Serapis had promised in a dream; for the god declared that Vespasian would restore the eyes, if he would spit upon them, and give strength to the leg, if he would deign to touch it with his heel. Though he had hardly any faith that this could possibly succeed, and therefore shrank even from making the attempt, he was at last prevailed upon by his friends and tried both things in public before a large crowd; and with success.** At this same time, by the direction of certain soothsayers, some vases of antique workmanship were dug up in a consecrated spot at Tegea in Arcadia and on them was an image very like Vespasian.

Dio Cassius *Roman History* 65.8 (emphasis mine)

Following Vespasian's entry into Alexandria the Nile overflowed, having in one day risen a palm higher than usual; such an occurrence, it was said, had only taken place only once before.

**Vespasian himself healed two persons, one having a withered hand, the other being blind, who had come to him because of a vision seen in dreams; he cured the one by stepping on his hand and the other by spitting upon his eyes.** 2 Yet, though Heaven was thus magnifying him, the Alexandrians, far from delighting in his presence, detested him so heartily that they were for ever mocking and reviling him. **For they had expected to receive from him some great reward because they had been the first to make him emperor, but instead of securing anything they had additional contributions levied upon them.** 3 In the first place, he collected large sums from them in various ways, overlooking no source, however trivial or however reprehensible it might be, but drawing upon every source, sacred and profane alike, from which money could be secured. He also renewed The taxes that had fallen into disuse, increased many that were customary, and introduced still other new ones. 4 And he adopted this same course later in the rest of the subject territory, in Italy, and in Rome itself. Hence the Alexandrians, both for these reasons and also because he had sold the greater part of the palace, were angry and hurled many taunts at him, this among others: "Six obols more you demand of us." Vespasian, consequently, although the most good-natured of men, became angry, 5 and gave orders that six obols should be exacted from every man, and he thought seriously about punishing them besides. For the words in themselves were insulting enough, and there was something about their broken anapaestic rhythm that roused his ire. 6 Titus, however, begged that they might be forgiven and Vespasian spared them. Yet they would not let him alone, but in a crowded assembly all loudly shouted in chorus at Titus these words: "We forgive him; for he knows not how to play the Caesar." 7 So the Alexandrians at that time went on with these foolhardy demonstrations, took their fill without restraint of that impudent licence which is always working to their detriment,

and abused the good nature of the emperor.<sup>9</sup> But Vespasian soon ceased to notice them. He sent a despatch to Rome rescinding the disfranchisement of those who had been condemned by Nero and succeeding rulers for acts of maiestas, as they were called. This order applied to the living and to the dead alike; and he put an end to the indictments based on such complaints. <sup>2</sup> He banished the astrologers from Rome, even though he was in the habit of consulting all the best of them himself, and, by way of showing a favour to Barbillus a man of that profession, had even permitted the Ephesians to celebrate some sacred games, a privilege that he granted to no other city.

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