Some of you will be familiar with the work of Morton Smith, especially on the “Secret Gospel of Mark.” I may have posted a few bits on it at some point. Smith was a brilliant scholar, always the smartest guy in the room. And he knew it. He had a rapier wit and was not afraid to use it. He regularly bloodied people – even internationally famous scholars – who disagreed with him. I met him only a couple of times, when I was a lowly graduate student and he was a mighty professor at Columbia. He really was the real deal. Unbelievably learned and uncanilly knowledgeable about all things antiquity.

One of his “popular” books was Jesus the Magician. A great book, even if you disagree with it. A new edition is coming out (it was published in 1978 – 35 years ago now!). And the publisher has asked me to write a brief Introduction to it. I was honored and flattered. Here is a draft of what I have in mind for it:

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Magic in the ancient world was not what it is today. For most of us, magic involves ruses, tricks, and sleights of hand: the modern magician is an illusionist skilled in the art of deception. In antiquity, magic was real. It accomplished what it claimed to do — not through deception but through the power to make things happen. Spectacular things. Seemingly impossible things. Things that violated the normal course of nature. The ancient magician was a miracle worker.

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