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Simon Magus: History Versus Tradition

Virginia K. Peterson Rigby

Simon Magus's place in Christian history was virtually assured by his confrontation with Peter in the eighth chapter of Acts. The text is brief but very descriptive:

But there was a certain man, called Simon, which beforetime in the same city used sorcery, and bewitched¹ the people of Samaria, giving out that himself was some great one:

To whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, This man is the great power of God. (Acts 8:9–10.)

The narrative continues with the missionary activities of Philip to those same people, noting that those amazed by the sorceries and even Simon himself were baptized. Peter and John were then sent to Samaria so that the new converts “might receive the Holy Ghost.” When Simon saw that by the laying on of hands the

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Holy Ghost was given, he offered to buy the power from the Apostles.

But Peter said unto him, Thy money perish with thee, because thou hast thought that the gift of God may be purchased with money.

Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter: for thy heart is not right in the sight of God. (Acts 8:20–21.)

Peter does not stop there, however. He continues his attack: “For I perceive that thou art in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity. Then answered Simon, and said, Pray ye to the Lord for me, that none of these things which ye have spoken come upon me.” (Acts 8:23–24.) The narrative concludes at this point, and Simon is never again brought up by name in the canon of scripture. No answer is recorded for Peter, whether he prayed for Simon or not. But there is a strong undercurrent of mistrust directed toward Simon which is capitalized on by those writers who have imposed their own brand of theology or understanding on the conflict.

Historians of the new Christian faith were quick to discredit Simon. Justin Martyr spent considerable effort explaining Simon’s brand of “theology” in a futile effort to curb persecution of the early Saints. Irenaeus wrote not long afterward, and in his *Five Books Against Heresies* he mounts his campaign, claiming that Simon Magus was the “father of all heresies.”² Hippolytus’s *Refutation of All Heresies*³ claims to refute the actual writings of Simon, which he called the *Great Announcement*. Josephus even mentions a Simon, a magician.⁴ Elsewhere, those who recounted the traditions about Simon and his contests with Peter have an even more fantastic story to tell us about this magician. The *Pseudo-Clementines* and the *Acts of Peter* (two apocryphal works we will consider) each portray a different persona of Simon, one more human than the other. This striking interest in Simon Magus suggests that he stands at a pivotal point in early Christian history. Was he the father of Gnosticism (as is claimed by Irenaeus), an anti-Christ, or an illusionist? Can we even separate out what is fact from what is not? How much historical detail exists within the traditions of the man and, on the

other hand, how much fable has been incorporated into the historical view?

HISTORICAL

The first non-biblical record we have of Simon is in Justin's letter to Emperor Titus Aelius Hadrianus Antoninus Pius Augustus Caesar, commonly referred to as *The First Apology of Justin, the Martyr*.⁵ He claims that Simon was "a Samaritan from the village of Gitta, who in the time of Claudius Caesar, through the arts of the demons who worked in him, did mighty works of magic in . . . Rome."⁶ Thus Magus was added to his name. Justin continues with a fairly standard method of character assassination—association with an immoral woman:

Almost all the Samaritans, and a few in other nations, confess this man as their first god and worship him as such, and a woman named Helena, who traveled around with him in those days, and had formerly been a public prostitute, they say was the first Concept produced from him.⁷

He then introduces Menander, a disciple and heir of Simon's power over the people, claiming that "he deceived many at Antioch by magic arts, and even persuaded his followers that he would never die."⁸ Justin does not claim this to be one of Simon's doctrines.⁹ He does claim to have compiled a treatise exposing the heresies of his time, and offers to send Caesar a copy if he is interested.

Irenaeus, who may have had a copy of Justin's treatise in his possession, wrote his *Five Books Against Heresies* mainly to discredit the Valentinian principles, but the work includes the heretical philosophies of the time known to Irenaeus, including Simonianism. Irenaeus believed that Simon was the first to pollute the living tree of the church. After explaining the confrontation recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, Irenaeus adds that when Simon's money was turned down, the magician took Helena about with him, claiming that she was his first thought. She was conceived in his mind, and upon leaping forth from him she produced the angels and archangels and the lower parts (that which is

lower than the heavens in Hellenistic cosmology). After she had finished creating, the angels kept her in bondage because they didn't want to be known as the progeny of any source other than the Father. Helena was shut up in a human form and had been transmigrating from one form to another until Simon came to redeem her. It is she who is the "lost sheep" in Jesus' parable.¹⁰ Simon not only rescued this lost sheep, but also came to give salvation to men by knowledge of himself. The Hebrew prophets, claimed Simon, were inspired by the angels who created this world and not by the Father.¹¹ Simon seems to be combining Greek mythology (i.e., Minerva's being born from her father's head after eating her mother)¹² and Christian ideals (of a redeemer-savior) into a very Platonic concept of the human condition (as in the *Phaedo*, where a soul migrates from body to body until released by those against whom the soul has transgressed). Simon offered deliverance to his followers from the empire of the imperfect angels.¹³ Since this is one of the basic principles of Gnosticism, there could be a basis for believing that Simon was the first to profess gnosis (knowledge as a saving principle). This idea was developed later by Gnostic teachers.

Hippolytus, who wrote an entire generation after Irenaeus, appears to be familiar with both Justin and Irenaeus. In the early portion his Book VI of the *Refutation of All Heresies*, Hippolytus deals with the reported writings of Simon from a book called *Megale Apophasis*, or the *Great Announcement*.¹⁴ Using Justin as his source, Hippolytus states that Simon was from the village of Gitta in Samaria. However, unlike in Irenaeus, Simon is characterized by Hippolytus as trying to explain the mysteries of the law of Moses, and incorporating them into his own doctrines.

According to Simon, therefore, there exists that which is blessed and incorruptible in a latent condition in every one—(that is,) potentially, not actually; and that this is he who stood, stands, and is to stand.¹⁵

The term *standing* was used to denote divine nature. "He [Simon] uses this name as implying that he can never be dissolved, asserting that his flesh is so compacted by the power of his divinity, that it can endure to eternity. Hence, therefore, he is

called the standing one, as though he cannot fall by any corruption.”¹⁶ It is important this point is understood, as it is brought up continually in reference to Simon by later writers. According to Hippolytus, Simon claims to have appeared to the Jews “in Judea as ‘Son,’ and in Samaria as ‘Father,’ and among the rest of the Gentiles as ‘Holy Spirit.’ ”¹⁷ Simon was claiming to be the Father, the one true God. There has been some discussion that since Simon Magus was a contemporary of the Apostles and possibly of Christ also, the Simon referred to here, or at least his philosophy, was the product of a later generation.¹⁸

Hippolytus also writes that Simon believed that Jesus (Simon himself in another form) came “for the restoration” (of things), and that Jesus appeared as a man when in reality he was not a man. Simon further said that Jesus did not actually undergo suffering, but rather appeared to do so.¹⁹ The Docetics were a Gnostic sect who believed that Christ’s body was not really earthly but heavenly, and was above all human weakness;²⁰ like Simon, they claimed that Christ never suffered, nor was he polluted by the process of being born.

TRADITIONAL

The *Pseudo-Clementines* are a series of writings attributed to St. Clement of Rome and deal with his life, his contact with Peter, and the lessons he learned from watching Peter confront Simon Magus. It is this latter part of the work that we are concerned with. Before Peter’s confrontation with Simon, he gave a preliminary discourse on the purpose and mission of a true prophet. The will of God had fallen into oblivion for differing reasons, and it then became important that a true prophet be found to “enlighten the souls of men, that with their own eyes they may be able to see the way to eternal salvation.”²¹ After this, Peter expounded his Doctrine of the Pairs of Opposites or Syzygies, stating that there needed to be opposites so men alone would be able to use the gift of free will. This doctrine is demonstrated by opposites in history—for example, Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, Jacob and Esau. The final syzygy is that of Christ, then Simon, and then Peter. “A false gospel must first come

from an imposter and only then, after the destruction of the holy place, can a true gospel be sent forth for the correction of the sects that are to come.”²²

In the next part of this work, Simon’s origin from Gitta in Samaria is given, as in Justin’s account. The *Pseudo-Clementines* add, moreover, that Simon and his Helena were attached to John the Baptist, and that Simon was himself second in authority only to John. Before John’s death Simon traveled to Egypt, where he studied magic, and Dositheus became leader of the small movement after John the Baptist’s death. Upon returning to Samaria, Simon began to slowly undermine the leadership of Dositheus until he eventually took over the position of the Standing One. At this point in the *Pseudo-Clementines*, Simon took Helena to himself and claimed she was brought down from the heaven and was the mother of all being and Wisdom. Peter added that Simon claimed to be able to separate the soul from the body of others and to fashion them out of the air, from which man came into being, rather than from the earth.

The next section of the narrative begins the classical confrontation that has become a pattern in the literature of the New Testament apocrypha. Simon first advocates that since the literature of the Jews mentions many gods, there must exist other gods. On this supposition he builds a case for the creator god, who is “unable to foresee the future, and that he is imperfect, not without needs, not good, and is subject to innumerable dubious passions.”²³ The nature of the creator god had puzzled readers and the uneducated for many centuries, and the giving of a definitive answer to the problem may account for its inclusion in the text. Simon further posits the existence of an unmentioned god who is perfect, without needs, good and passionless, and who thus possesses all the traits for a perfect God, making him superior to the creator god. Simon’s examples from the Hebrew Bible to illustrate the ignorant, imperfect god included Adam, who was born innocent, knowing neither good nor evil. Adam became disobedient, was expelled from the paradise prepared for him, and became subject to death. Simon then asks how Adam could sin if he was innocent. Further to prove that the creator is

unable to see everywhere, Simon refers to the time of the fall of Sodom by quoting from the Genesis account: “Come, Let us go down and *see* whether or not they do according to their cry that comes before me, *that I may know it* (Genesis 18:21; emphasis added). The same passage is used to point out that this creator god is ignorant or he would have known what was happening. Other passages are used to demonstrate similar points, but we do not have the space here to discuss them.

Peter’s defense, to me, is too simple. He asks Simon, “Is a scoundrel or malefactor ready to admit his offense to himself?”²⁴ Simon replies no. Then Peter answers that God can’t be wicked and bad if the actions ascribed to him are written with his consent. Simon questions Peter further: “How can one know the truth when of the books of Scripture some describe God as wicked and others describe him as good?”²⁵ Peter gives a simple reply: “Those statements of the Holy Scriptures which are in keeping with the creation wrought by God must be counted as genuine and those which contradict them as false.”²⁶

There are many levels of conflict in this piece. There is the actual debate between Simon and Peter, an underlying theme of the triumph of good over evil, and yet another level indicating the difference between false and true prophets. All are included to demonstrate Peter’s point of opposites and the agency of man. The writer has taken great steps to demonstrate this principle, using Peter and Simon as puppets in a play. Although this work is strictly orthodox in its outlook, we should be able to see that the questions and discussions are contrived and meant to teach a principle; therefore the text cannot be taken as historical. The concepts portrayed are noble, but should be taken to reflect the thoughts of one man or a group of men on the principle of free will, and the text adds insight into the understanding early Christians had of this principle. The answers Peter gives to questions are certainly meant as a clarification of the orthodox position. They are, however, too simple for the complex theology they imply. Despite the theological accretions in the text, the fundamental details relating to Simon are based in fact. The references to Simon’s nationality and knowledge of magic, plus other refer-

ences to already described Simonian doctrine,²⁷ show that the author was familiar with the story of Simon portrayed by the earlier Christian writers.

In the *Acts of Peter*, a different but still similar tradition is portrayed. The author seems not to be as familiar with Simon's doctrine as was the author of the *Pseudo-Clementines*. He is nevertheless familiar with Simon's claim to be the Standing One.²⁸ Simon's understanding of God is also stated here through Marcellus, who pleads with Peter to take him back after he realizes that Simon hasn't the true knowledge.²⁹ He is also aware of the statue spoken of in Justin's apology, and may have received his knowledge of it through that source.³⁰

The confrontation in this text seems again to be based on the supremacy of good over evil, and a number of references are made to Satan and the devil. At one point Peter, through a dog, even alludes to Simon's being a son of perdition with these words: "Cursed therefore you shall be, you enemy and corruptor of the way of the truth of Christ, who shall prove your iniquities which you have done with undying fire, and you shall be in outer darkness."³¹ The author may have been expressing a belief that Simon had been a disciple of John the Baptist and that he knowingly turned to evil, but the reference is too vague for that conclusion. Peter is also told in a vision: "You shall convert many: but you will have Simon opposing you with the works of his father."³²

The classical confrontation between Simon and Peter has Peter working many miracles through a talking dog, a suckling child reproving Simon, a smoked tuna living and swimming, and so forth. The account finishes with Simon separating the soul from the body of a young boy and Peter restoring his life. In fact, Peter restores life to others also, symbolizing that only through the true knowledge can one partake of eternal life. The symbolism of Balaam's ass, the phrase from Psalms (8:2), "Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings,"³³ and the life-giving gospel versus the doctrines of men and Satan leading to death are very evident in the text, leading one to believe that the basic traditions which underlie both the *Pseudo-Clementines* and the *Acts of Peter* were the same. Each author differed in his approach to the subject, one taking a more theological approach and the other

painting a more demonstrative or miraculous picture. It is also apparent that the authors of both works were aware of the historical writings of the apologists of their day, and tried to base their writings somewhat in the current knowledge and traditions of Peter and Simon. In the *Acts of Peter*, there is very little understanding of Simon's personal theology or his character. One interesting comment is attributed to Simon in opposition to perceived Christian theology: "You men of Rome, is God born? Is he crucified? He who owns a Lord is not God."³⁴ That implied criticism must have been prevalent among the early Christians by those from a Hellenistic background. Here Peter gives in answer what could be interpreted as a Docetic response: "Another prophet says, 'He was not born from the womb of a woman, but came down from a heavenly place.'"³⁵ There are other examples, but space does not permit us to look at them here.

In the end of the section regarding Simon and Peter, Simon is exposed and Peter is triumphant. Simon, realizing that he must do something grand to keep his disciples, makes plans to ascend to heaven and be with his Father.³⁶ Peter, having been warned in a vision of the upcoming event, comes to the appointed place and watches as Simon profanes Christ, and all the Christians who are present look to Peter for his action. After Simon has flown around Rome in the sight of everyone, Peter prays, and Simon falls from his great height and breaks his leg in three places. Simon's credibility is completely shattered (along with his leg), and his fall is both physical and symbolic of the final fall of all the wicked. With the help of friends, Simon is taken to a sorcerer in Aricia. Although he undergoes an operation (possibly to restore his leg), he dies. Although the setting is different, it is not unlike the death listed in *Hippolytus* for Simon. *Hippolytus* states that after being reproved by the Apostles in Rome, Simon continued giving instruction under a plane tree. When he believed that conviction was imminent,

he stated that, if he were buried alive, he would rise the third day and accordingly, having ordered a trench to be dug by his disciples, he directed himself to be interred there. They, then, executed the injunction given; whereas he remained (in the grave) until this day, for he was not the Christ.³⁷

The inference here (as in the *Acts of Peter*) is that Simon died in

his sins. Another similarity between the two accounts is the physical lowering of the body, in the one account by a fall from the sky and in the other by interment in the ground. Both signify the soul of Simon being captured by Sheol or Hades.³⁸

CONCLUSION

I realize that I have made a number of assumptions about Simon Magus. First, I assume that the Simon spoken of in all the references is the same person, even though I have mentioned differing opinions. That does not presuppose that I believe all the traditions about him are correct and true. In fact, the opposite should be understood. I need to state that I can also see how Irenaeus would have called him the father of all heresies, since he is mentioned as opposing the Apostles in Acts, and also since the first so-called heretical sect took his name, and finally since Peter in the *Acts of Peter* calls him an anti-Christ in that he became a rival redeemer-savior.

An idea we have not yet explored in this paper is the manner in which Simon's Samaritan/Israelite background may have affected his doctrines. If Simon had been an eyewitness to the ministry of Christ through John the Baptist (not that I believe he was, but perhaps some early Christians believed it was so), and had seen the other messianic pretenders prevalent at the time, he may have wanted Samaria, which was considered inferior to Judah and Jerusalem in his day, to have a messiah. Others must have felt the same way, for Justin claims that nearly all Samaria rallied around him. The literature (*Pseudo-Clementines* and the *Acts of Peter*, for example) may have had the purpose of returning Samaria to its lesser status by emphasizing the triumph of the Jewish Apostle over Samaria's self-proclaimed messiah.

There is too little written to enable us to assume that Simon is the author of all the evil with which he has been credited. R. McL. Wilson states that his doctrine "is nothing more or less than an assimilation of imperfectly understood Christian doctrines to a fundamentally Pagan theme."³⁹ An examination of the extant literature shows this to be true, but time and human bias have eroded away much of the truth of the matter, leaving

only a shell after the hatching of more progressive ideas. One point we need to note is that the anti-heretical writers were not interested in noting similarities between the theology of heretics and that of the orthodox church, but they spared no effort to dramatize the differences.

I am convinced that Simon, a magician, existed, and that his sorcery became a thorn in the side of the struggling church clergy, as evidenced by the fact that Eusebius observes that the sect was still functioning in his day.⁴⁰ I am equally convinced that the story in the *Acts of Peter* and in the *Pseudo-Clementines* is, for the most part, a conglomeration of myths and traditions placed in narrative form by the authors, to demonstrate the eventual triumph of good over evil and to discredit Simon's theology and his person. In the Christian literature treating Simon Magus, authors place Simon Magus somewhere in judgment between the priests of Pharaoh and Korihor. Stories seem, with time, to become greater each time they are told. This may also be the situation with Simon Magus.

Notes

1. Rev. Alfred Marshall's *New International Version Interlinear Greek-English New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982) translates "bewitched" as "astonished." Albert Barnes, in his *Notes on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel Publications, 1982), prefers "astonished" or "amazed."

2. Irenaeus, *Five Books Against Heresies* (Oxford and London: James Parker Co., 1872), III, Preface.

3. *Refutation of All Heresies* can be found in Rev. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (1919; reprint ed., Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1971), 5:74–81, for the part we need about Simon.

4. Flavius Josephus, *Josephus: Complete Works*, trans. William Whiston (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel Publications, 1980), *The Antiquities of the Jews*, XX.7.2. However, Josephus's Simon is a Jew of Cyprus and is probably not the same person.

5. Quoted in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1:163–87. This work was written about A.D. 152.

6. *The First Apology of Justin, the Martyr*, p. 258. Justin was also from Samaria, and his views are highly regarded by scholars.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. Scholars disagree as to whether Simon was the author of many of these doctrines or whether they were the product of later Simonian leaders.

10. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I.23.2 (written before c. 195).

11. The Demiurge, or world creator, is a subordinate god, imperfect with passions, needs, etc. Cf. Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981), p. 44.

12. Thomas Bulfinch, *Mythology* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1979), p. 91.

13. Ontological dualism was foreign to Jewish thought. See Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1973), p. 61.

14. Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies*, VI.6.

15. Ibid.

16. *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 3:196. This is the reference claiming Simon believed he was immortal used by the anti-heretical writers. It is also used to argue that the Simonians believed they, too, could become immortal.

17. Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies*, VI.14. Thus he, like his Helena, transmigrated.

18. Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism*, p. 63. Yamauchi quotes Schenke as stating that because of its strong philosophic character the Simonian heresy refuted by Hippolytus is later or secondary.

19. Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* VI.14. Some question whether or not Hippolytus understood whether Simon believed he was Jesus.

20. J. G. Davies, *The Early Christian Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1965), p. 196.

21. Pseudo-Clementines, 19.1. This writing may be found in Edgar Hennecke and W. Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), 2:536–70.

22. Ibid., 17.4. Simon is being placed in the position of an anti-Christ.

23. Ibid., 38.2. See footnote 11, relating to the defense for the doctrine of the Demiurge.

24. Ibid., 40.1.

25. Ibid., 42.2.
26. Ibid., 42.3.
27. Ibid., 22.2–7.
28. The *Acts of Peter* (particularly from the Actus Vercellenses), 2.4. This manuscript can also be found in Hennecke and Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 2:276–322.
29. Ibid., 4.8.
30. Discussion of the statue dedicated to the Sabine god but ascribed to Simon is not included here, because it is a favorite theme of Gnostic critics and can be found in any book which has a chapter on Simon Magus or a critique of Justin's *First Apology*.
31. *Acts of Peter*, 5.12.
32. "His Father" is a reference to Satan.
33. *Acts of Peter*, 6.16.
34. Ibid., 8.23.
35. Ibid., 8.24.
36. Ibid., 9.31. "And I am going up to my Father and shall say to him, 'Even me, thy Son that standeth, they desired to bring down.' "
37. Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies*, VI, chap. xv.
38. Samuel George Frederick Brandon, *The Judgement of the Dead* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1967), p. 58.
39. R. McL. Wilson, *The Gnostic Problem* (London: A. R. Mowbray & Co., 1958), p. 100.
40. Eusebius, *The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Publishing House, 1975), II.1.12.