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Simon Magus

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1

SIMON MAGUS, mā'gus (Σίμων, *Símōn*, Gr form of Heb שִׁמְעוֹן, *shim`ōn*; Gesenius gives the meaning of the Heb word as “hearing with acceptance”; it is formed from the root שָׁמַע, *shāma`*, “to hear”):

1. Simon, a Magician
2. Simon and the Apostles
 - (1) Simon and Philip
 - (2) Simon and Peter and John
3. The Magicians and the Gospel
4. Testimony of Early Christian Writers
5. Sources of Legendary History
6. Traditions of His Death
7. The Simoniani
8. Was Simon the Originator of Gnosticism?

1. Simon, a Magician

The name or term “Magus” is not given to him in the NT, but is justly used to designate or particularize him on account of the incident recorded in Acts 8:9–24, for though the word “Magus” does not occur, yet in ver 9 the present participle *mageúōn* is used, and is translated, both in AV and in RV, “used sorcery.” Simon accordingly was a sorcerer, he “bewitched the people of Samaria” (AV). In ver 11 it is also said that “of long time he had amazed” them “with his sorceries” (*magíais*). The claim, given out by himself, was that he “was some great one”; and this claim was acknowledged by the Samaritans, for previous

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RV Revised Version (English and American)

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Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

to the introduction of the gospel into Samaria, "they all gave heed [to him], from the least to the greatest, saying, This man is that power of God which is called Great" (ver 10).

2. Simon and the Apostles

(1) It so happened, however, that Philip the deacon and evangelist went down from Jerusalem to Samaria, and "proclaimed unto them the Christ" (ver 5); and as the result of the proclamation of the gospel, many were gathered into the Christian church. Many miracles also were performed by Philip, sick persons cured, and demons cast out; and Simon fell under the influence of all these things, both of the preaching and of "the signs." So great was the impression now made upon Simon that he "believed" (ver 13). This means, at least, that he saw that Philip was able in the name of Jesus Christ to display powers greater than anything he himself was acquainted with: Philip's power was greater by far than Simon's. He therefore came forward as one of the new converts, and was baptized. After his baptism he continued with Philip. The signs which accompanied the introduction of the gospel into this city did not cease, and Simon seeing them "was amazed." The word denoting Simon's amazement at the "signs" wrought by Philip is the same as that used to express how the people of Samaria had been amazed at Simon's sorceries. It is an indication of the nature of the faith which he possessed in the gospel—wondering amazement at a new phenomenon not yet understood, not repentance or trust in Christ.

(2) News having reached Jerusalem of the events which had occurred in Samaria, the apostles sent Peter and John to establish the work there. These two apostles prayed for the converts that they might receive the Holy Ghost, which they had not yet received. And when they had laid their hands upon the converts, the Spirit was given to them. At this early period in the history of the church the Holy Ghost was bestowed in a visible manner which showed itself in such miraculous gifts as are described in Acts 2. Simon saw what had taken place, and then, instead of joining the company of those who had truly repented and trusted Christ, he came forward with the same amazement as he had previously shown, and offered money to Peter and John, if they would impart to him the power of giving the Holy Ghost to others. Peter instantly rebuked this bold and ungodly request, and did so with such sternness as to cause Simon to ask that the judgment threatened by the apostle might not fall upon him.

Such is the unenviable history of Simon Magus, as it is recorded in the NT. Later centuries have shown their estimation of the heinousness of Simon's sin by employing his name to indicate the crime of buying or selling a spiritual office for a price in money—"simony."

3. The Magician and the Gospel

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

It is not strange to find the gospel brought into direct conflict with magicians, for in the 1st and 2d cents. there were a multitude of such persons who pretended to possess supernatural powers by which they endeavored to deceive men. They flattered the sinful inclinations of the human heart, and fell in with men's current ways of thinking, and required no self-renunciation at all. For these reasons the magicians found a ready belief on the part of many. The emperor Tiberius, in his later years, had a host of magicians in constant attendance upon him. Elymas, with whom Paul came in contact in Cyprus "was with the deputy of the country, Sergius Paulus, a prudent man" (Acts 13:7 AV). Elymas was one of those magicians, and he endeavored to turn away the deputy from the faith. Luke expressly calls this man "magus," Elymas the magus (Acts 13:6, 8 m).

3

The influence of such persons presented an obstacle to the progress of the Christian faith, which had to force its way through the delusions with which these sorcerers had surrounded the hearts of those whom they deceived. When the gospel came in contact with these magicians and with their works, it was necessary that there should be striking facts, works of supernatural power strongly appealing to men's outward senses, in order to bring them out of the bewilderment and deception in which they were involved, and to make them able to receive the impression of spiritual truth. Such miracles were wrought both in Cyprus and in Samaria, the spheres of influence of the magicians Elymas and Simon. These Divine works first arrested men's attention, and then dispelled the delusive influence of the sorcerers.

4. Testimony of Early Writers

(1) The history of Simon Magus does not close with what is narrated in the Acts, for the early Christian writers have much to say in regard to him.

Justin Martyr, himself a Samaritan, states that Simon Magus was a "Samaritan from the village called Gittōn." Justin also relates that, in the time of Claudius Caesar. Simon was worshipped as a god at Rome on account of his magical powers, and that a statue had been erected to him, on the island in the river Tiber, with the inscription *Simoni Deo Sancto*, that is, "To Simon the sacred god." Curiously enough, in the year 1574, a stone which appears to have served as a pedestal of a statue, was dug up in the Tiber at the spot described by Justin; and on it were inscribed the words *semoni Sanco Deo Fidio Sacrum*, that is, the stone then discovered was dedicated to the god Semo Sancus, the Sabine Hercules. This antiquarian find makes it probable that Justin was mistaken in what he said about a statue having been erected in honor of Simon Magus. "It is incredible that the folly should ever be carried to such an extent as that a statue should be erected,

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Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

and the senate should pass a decree enrolling Simon Magus among the *deos Romanos*" (Neander, *Church History*, II, 123). The inscription found in 1574 shows the source of the error into which Justin had fallen.

There are many stories told by some of the early Christian writers regarding Simon Magus, but they are full of legend and fable: some of them are improbable in the extreme and border on the impossible.

(2) Jerome, who professes to quote from writings of Simon, represents him as employing these words in reference to himself, "I am the Word of God, I am the Comforter, I am Almighty, I am all there is of God" (Mansel, *The Gnostic Heresies*, 82). Irenaeus (Mansel, *ibid.*, 82) writes regarding him: "Simon, having purchased a certain woman named Helena, who had been a prostitute in the city of Tyre, carried her about with him, and said that she was the first conception of his mind, the mother of all things, by whom, in the beginning, he conceived the thought of making the angels and archangels; for that this conception proceeded forth from him, and knowing her father's wishes, she descended to the lower world, and produced the angels and powers; by whom also he said that this world was made. But after she had produced them, she was detained by them through envy, since they were unwilling to be considered the offspring of any other being; for he himself was entirely unknown by them; but his conception was detained by those powers and angels which were put forth from her, and suffered every insult from them that she might not return upward to her father; and this went so far that she was even confined within a human body, and for ages passed into other female bodies, as if from one vessel into another. He said also that she was that Helen, on whose account the Trojan war was fought ... and that after passing from one body to another, and constantly meeting with insult, at last she became a public prostitute, and that this was the lost sheep. On this account he himself came, that he might first of all reclaim her and free her from her chains, and then give salvation to men through the knowledge of himself. For since the angels ruled the world badly, because one of them desired the chief place, he had come down for the restoration of all things, and had descended, being changed in figure, and made like to principalities and powers and angels, so that he appeared among men as a man, and was thought to have suffered in Judaea, though he did not suffer.... Furthermore he said that the prophets uttered their prophecies under the inspiration of those angels who framed the world; for which reason they who rest their hope on him and his Helena no longer cared for them, but as free men could act as they pleased, for that men are saved by his [i.e. Simon's] grace, and not according to their own just works, for that no acts were just by nature, but by accident, according to the rules established by the angels, who made the world, and who attempt by these precepts to bring men into bondage. For this reason he promised that the world should be released, and those who are his set at liberty from the government of those who made the world."

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

5. Sources of Legendary History

The chief sources of the legendary history of Simon Magus are the collection of writings known as *The Clementines* (see Literature, Sub-apostolic; Peter, First Epistle of; Peter, Second Epistle of). What is there said of him is, that he studied at Alexandria, and that he had been, along with the heresiarch Dositheus, a disciple of John the Baptist. He became also a disciple of Dositheus, and afterward his successor. *The Clementines* comprise (1) *The Homilies*, (2) *The Recognitions*, and (3) *The Epitome*. These three are cognate works, and in part are identical. The date of *The Homilies* may be placed about 160 AD. The contents comprise a supposed letter from the apostle Peter to the apostle James, along with other matter. Then follow the homilies, of which there are twenty. These record the supposed travels of Clement, a Rom citizen. Clement meets with Barnabas and with Peter. Then there is narrated a discussion between Peter and Simon Magus. This disputation lasts for three days, Simon maintaining that there are two gods, and that the God of the OT is an imperfect being. Simon Magus withdraws to Tyre and then to Sidon. Peter follows Simon from place to place, counteracting his sorceries, and instructing the people. At Laodicea a second disputation takes place between the apostle and Simon on the same subjects.

The Homilies are not a Christian protest against Gnosticism, but merely that of one gnostic school or sect against another, the Ebionite against the Marcionite. The Deity of Christ is denied, and He is regarded as one of the Jewish prophets.

In the legends Simon is represented as constantly opposing Peter, who ultimately discredits and vanquishes him. These legends occur in more forms than one, the earlier form selecting Antioch as the place where Simon was discomfited by the apostle and where he also died, while the later tradition chooses Rome for these events.

6. Traditions of His Death

One tradition tells how the magician ordered his followers to bury him in a grave, promising that if this were done, he would rise again on the third day. They did as he wished and buried him; but this was the end of him, for he did not rise again.

Simon is said to have met his death at Rome, after an encounter with the apostle Peter. During this his final controversy with the apostle, Simon had raised himself in the air by the help of evil spirits, and in answer to the prayer of Peter and Paul he was dashed to the ground and killed.

According to another form of this tradition, Simon proposed to give the Rom emperor a proof of his power by flying off to God. He succeeded, it is said, in flying for a certain

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

distance over Rome, but in answer to the prayer of Peter he fell and broke one of his legs. This tradition accounts for his end by saying that the people stoned him to death.

7. The Simoniani

The Simoniani, the Simonians or followers of Simon, were an eclectic sect, who seem, at one time, to have adopted tenets and opinions derived from paganism, at another, from Judaism and the beliefs of the Samaritans, and at another still, from Christianity. Sometimes they seem to have been ascetics; at others they are wild scoffers at moral law. They regarded Simon Magus as their Christ, or at least as a form of manifestation of the redeeming Christ, who had manifested Himself also in Jesus. The Simonians were one of the minor gnostic sects and were carried far away both from the doctrine and from the ethical spirit of the Christian faith.

Origen denies that the followers of Simon were Christians in any sense. The words of Origen are, "It escapes the notice of Celsus that the Simonians do not in any way acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God, but they call Simon the Power of God." In the time of Origen the followers of Simon had dwindled in number to such a degree that he writes, "I do not think it possible to find that all the followers of Simon in the whole world are more than thirty: and perhaps I have said more than there really are" (*Contr. Cels.*, i. 57, quoted by Alford, *Gr NT*, Acts 8:9).

8. Was Simon the Originator of Gnosticism?

Irenaeus also has much to say regarding Simon and his followers. He makes the legendary Simon identical with the magician of Acts 8, makes him also the first in the list which he gives of heretics, and also says that it was from him that Gnosticism sprang. The account which he gives of the Simonians shows that by the time when Irenaeus lived, their system had developed into Gnosticism; but this fact does not justify Irenaeus in the assertion that Simon of Acts 8 is the originator of the gnostic system. The early Christian writers took this view, and regarded Simon Magus as the founder of Gnosticism. Perhaps they were right, "but from the very little authentic information we possess, it is impossible to ascertain how far he was identified with their tenets" (Alford, *NT*, II, 86). In the midst of the various legends regarding Simon, it may be that there is a substratum of fact, of such a nature that future investigation and discovery will justify these early Christian writers in their judgment, and will show that Simon Magus is not to be overlooked as one of the sources from which Gnosticism sprang. The exact origin of Gnosticism is certainly difficult to trace, but there is little or no indication that it arose from the incidents narrated in Acts 8. It cannot be denied that a connection is possible, and may have existed between the two, that is between Simon Magus and some of the gnostic heresies; but the facts of history show widespread tendencies at work, during and

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

even before the Apostolic age, which amply account for the rise of Gnosticism. These are found, e.g. in the Alexandrian philosophy, and in the tenets of the false teachers at Colossae and in other places. These philosophical and theosophical ideas commingled with the influences of Zoroastrianism from Persia, and of Buddhism from India, and these tendencies and influences, taken in conjunction, were the sources of the various heresies known by the name of Gnosticism.

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7

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¹ Rutherford, J. (1915). "Simon Magus." In J. Orr, J. L. Nuelsen, E. Y. Mullins, & M. O. Evans (Eds.), *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* (Vols. 1–5). Chicago: The Howard-Severance Company. Public Domain, 2795-2797.