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Simon the Magician

VARIOUS AUTHORS

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Peter's conflict with Simon Magus by Avanzino Nucci, 1620. Simon is on the right, wearing black.

Simon Magus (Σίμων ὁ μάγος), also known as Simon the Sorcerer or Simon the Magician, was a religious figure whose confrontation with Peter is recorded in the Acts of the Apostles 8:9-24. The act of simony, or paying for position, is named after Simon, who tried to buy his way into the power of the Apostles.

According to Acts, Simon was a Samaritan magus¹ or religious figure of the 1st Century AD and a convert to Christianity, baptized by Philip the Evangelist. Simon later clashed with Peter. Accounts of Simon by writers of the second century exist, but are not considered verifiable.² Surviving traditions about Simon appear in orthodox texts, such

¹ Magus (singular) or Magi (plural) is the term for priests in Zoroastrianism and earlier Persian religions. The earliest known use of the word *magi* is in the trilingual inscription written by Darius the Great, known as the Behistun Inscription. Old Persian texts, predating the Hellenistic period, refer to a magus as a Zurvanic, and presumably Zoroastrian, priest.

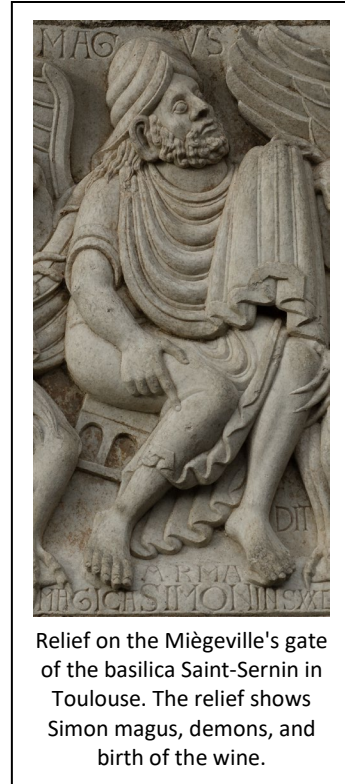
² Knight, Kevin (2012). "Simon Magus". www.newadvent.org. *Catholic Encyclopedia*. Retrieved October 19, 2024. It is difficult or rather impossible to extract from them any historical fact the details of which are

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as those of Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, Hippolytus, and Epiphanius, where he is often described as the founder of Gnosticism,³ which has been accepted by some modern scholars,⁴ while others reject claims that he was a Gnostic, maintaining that he was merely considered to be one by the Church Fathers.⁵

Justin, who was himself a 2nd Century native of Samaria, wrote that nearly all the Samaritans in his time were adherents of a certain Simon of Gitta, a village not far from Flavia Neapolis. Irenaeus believed him to have been the founder of the sect of the Simonians.⁶ Hippolytus quotes from a work he attributes to Simon or his followers the Simonians, *Apophysis Megale*, or *Great Declaration*. According to the early church heresiologists,⁷ Simon is also supposed to have written several lost treatises, two of which bear the titles *The Four Quarters of the World* and *The Sermons of the Refuter*.

In apocryphal works including the *Acts of Peter*, Pseudo-Clementines, and the *Epistle of the Apostles*, Simon also appears as a formidable sorcerer with the ability to levitate and fly at will. He is sometimes referred to as “the Bad



established with certainty.; “Simon Magus | Samaritan magician”. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Retrieved October 19, 2024.

³ St. Irenaeus of Lyons. (1992-2012). *St. Irenaeus of Lyons: Against the Heresies*, (3 volumes). New York: The Newman Press; Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea (1833). *The Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius Pamphilus, Bishop of Caesarea, in Palestine*. New York: Swords, Stanford & Company; Hippolytus: *Refutation of All Heresies* can be found in Rev. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (1919; reprint ed., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), 5:74–81, for the part we need about Simon; Ferreiro, Alberto (5 May 2018). *Simon Magus in Patristic, Medieval And Early Modern Traditions*. Leiden: Brill.

⁴ Rudolph, Kurt (1977), *Die Gnosis: Wesen u. Geschichte e. spätantiken Religion*, Leipzig: Koehler & Amelang, 312ff.; Haar, Stephen Charles (2003), *Simon Magus: The First Gnostic?* Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 306.

⁵ Antonia Tripolitis (2002). *Religions of the Hellenistic-Roman Age*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 125; Ferreiro (2018), 53.

⁶ Smith, William & Wace, Henry, eds. (1887). *Dictionary of Christian Biography*, London: John Murray, 4:682; Hastings, James (1918). *Dictionary of the Apostolic Church*; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2:496

⁷ In theology or the history of religion, heresiology is the study of heresy, and heresiographies are writings about the topic. Heresiographical works were common in both medieval Christianity and Islam. Heresiology developed as a part of the emerging definition of Christian orthodoxy. Church scholars studied and documented the teachings of various Christian sects in order to clearly distinguish between those they accepted as orthodox and those they rejected as heretical. [Royalty, Robert M. (2013). “Policing the Boundaries: The Politics of Heresiology”. *The Origin of Heresy: A History of Discourse in Second Temple Judaism and Early Christianity*. Milton Park, England: Routledge, 119–146.]

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Samaritan" due to his malevolent character.⁸ The *Apostolic Constitutions* also accuses him of "lawlessness" (antinomianism⁹).¹⁰

The *Apostolic Constitutions*, which date from Antioch about the year 400, give the legend of Simon Magus in what we may call its complete form (vi. 7–9): "The source of all heresy is Simon of Gitta. First of all, the story in the Acts is given. Then comes an account of all the false teachers who went forth into the world. Then of the contest between Simon and Peter at Cæsarea, where the companions of Peter were Zacchæus the publican, and Barnabas, and Nicetas and Aquila, brothers of Clement, 'bishop and citizen of Rome, who had been the disciple of Paul and co-apostle and helper in the gospel.' They discoursed for three days concerning prophecy and the unity of the Godhead. Then Simon, being defeated, fled into Italy. Then comes an account of the contest at Rome of the same character as we shall come across shortly in the *Apocryphal Acts*."¹¹

HISTORICAL REFERENCES TO SIMON THE MAGICIAN

The New Testament

The canonical Acts of the Apostles features a short narrative about Simon Magus; this is his only appearance in the New Testament.

But there was a man named Simon, who had previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he himself was somebody great. They all paid attention to him, from the least to the greatest, saying, "This man is the power of God that is called Great."¹² And they paid attention to him

⁸ Mark J. Edwards, Mark J. (1997). *Portraits: Biographical Representation in the Greek and Latin Literature of the Roman Empire*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 69.

⁹ Antinomianism (ἀντί [anti] "against" + νόμος [nomos] "law") is any view which rejects laws or legalism and argues against moral, religious or social norms, or is at least considered to do so.

¹⁰ Clement of Rome, translated by Philip Schaff, et al. *Ante-Nicene Fathers*/Volume VII/Constitutions of the Holy Apostles, vi. § 4, 16.

¹¹ Headlam, A. C. (1911–1912). "Simon Magus." In J. Hastings, J. A. Selbie, A. B. Davidson, S. R. Driver, & H. B. Swete (Eds.), *A Dictionary of the Bible: Dealing with Its Language, Literature, and Contents Including the Biblical Theology* (Vol. 4, p. 522). Charles Scribner's Sons; T. & T. Clark.

¹² Also, "the Great Power of God" [Gr. *Dynamis Megale*]. "Geburah, or *Dynamis*, was an appellative or metonym of "The Divine Glory" among the apocalypticists, and with this very meaning entered the Gospels in the famous passage: "You shall see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the *Dynamis* [Matthew 26:64; Mark 14:62]." Although in rabbinic sources of the first and second centuries the name *Dynamis* was widely used as a synonym for God Himself, the esoteric use continued in the circles of the [Merkabah mystics](#). ... This term must have had wide usage, since according to the Acts of the Apostles 8:10 even the Samaritan Simon Magus claimed to be the Great *Dynamis*: ἡ δύναμις τοῦ θεοῦ ἢ καλούμενη μεγάλη." [Scholem, Gershom (1965). *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition*. New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 67.

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because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic. But when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed.

Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, for he had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit. Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, saying, "Give me this power also, so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity." And Simon answered, "Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me."

Acts 8:9-24

MacArthur explains that "Simon had an egotistical view of himself. Practicing magic in the city, and astonishing the people of Samaria led him to claim to be someone great. He saw in Philip's teaching a means to gain more greatness for himself. Magic referred originally to the lore of the Magi—the priests of the Medo-Persians. It was a mix of science and superstition, combining astrology, divination, and occultic practices with history, mathematics, and agriculture. It could be trickery or demonic.

"Simon's hold on the people of Samaria was complete. All of them, from smallest to greatest, were giving attention to him. Impressed by his occult powers, they exclaimed, This man is what is called the Great Power of God. That title shows that Simon claimed deity for himself (cf. Mark 14:62). That Simon viewed himself as God betrays the most heretical view of self imaginable. The early church Fathers reported that Simon was one of the founders of Gnosticism and that he viewed himself as God incarnate:

The first two teachers to propagate gnostic ideas within Christian circles were Simon and his successor Menander. Unlike later and more famous representatives of Gnosticism, both Simon and Menander claimed divinity for themselves. According to Acts 8:9–11, Simon called himself the "great power of God." The Greek term he used, *dunamis*, was used by later, more orthodox theologians in

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reference to both the Son and the Holy Spirit.... Justin Martyr also reports Simon's messianic claim.¹³

"Simon's perverted view of himself gave Satan an opening to use him to spread false doctrine through the church. His false teaching, later elaborated into full-blown Gnosticism, was to threaten and embattle the church from Paul onward for centuries."¹⁴

Josephus

Josephus mentions a magician named Atomus (Simon in Latin manuscripts)^[21] as being involved with the Roman procurator Felix, King Agrippa II and his sister Drusilla, where Felix has Simon convince Drusilla to marry him instead of the man she was engaged to. Some scholars have considered the two to be identical,¹⁵ although this is not generally accepted, as the Simon of Josephus is a Jew rather than a Samaritan. Robert McNair Price has spoken on the speculation by academics Ferdinand Christian Baur and Hermann Detering that Simon may be identified with Paul the Apostle.¹⁶

SIMON MAGUS ACCORDING TO THE EARLY CHURCH FATHERS

The writings of the church fathers, including Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Hippolytus, discuss Simon Magus extensively and present him as a dangerous heretic.¹⁷

Justin Martyr

The earliest attestation of Simon Magus in the post-New Testament era is from Justin Martyr (ca. AD 150) in his *First Apology* and *Dialogue with Trypho*. In these texts, Justin Martyr associates Simon with demonic activity (*First Apology* 1:26; compare Ferreiro, *Simon Magus*, 3). Justin also provides details about a woman named Helena who was an influential advocate of Simon's teachings.

Justin identifies Simon's birthplace as Gitta, a city in Samaria. This detail, coupled with the fact that Samaria at the time was an emerging center of Gnosticism and other heretical sects, prompted later church fathers like Irenaeus to allege that Simon was the founder of

¹³ Brown, Harold O. J. (1984). *Heresies*. [Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 50.

¹⁴ MacArthur, J. F., Jr. (1994). Chicago: Moody Press, 1:240-241.

¹⁵ Hilgenfeld, *Ketzergeschichte*, p. 170; Albert, *Die Ersten Fünfzehn Jahre der Christlichen Kirche*, p. 114, Münster, 1900; Waitz, in *Zeitschrift für Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*, v. 128; Price 2012.

¹⁶ "Dr. Robert Price: The True Identity of St. Paul". https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zfsu1xXa_VI. <https://creatingchristdoc.com/>. Excerpt from the interview with Dr. Robert Price for the documentary "Creating Christ". Module 6 of 9. Retrieved October 19, 2024.

¹⁷ For a summary of Simon Magus accounts in Christian writers prior to AD 400, see Haar (2003). *Simon Magus*, 83–131.

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Gnosticism. However, evidence for this claim is lacking and was likely embellished by Irenaeus; it's also possible to interpret Irenaeus' comments as him indicating that the ideas of Gnosticism emerge with Simon.¹⁸ According to Haar, Justin's works demonstrate that Simon "performed mighty acts of magic in the city of Rome, through the agency of demons at work within him."¹⁹

Justin Martyr (in his *Apologies*, and in a lost work against heresies, which Irenaeus used as his main source) and Irenaeus (*Adversus Haereses*) record that after being cast out by the Apostles, Simon Magus came to Rome where, having joined to himself a profligate woman of the name of Helen, he gave out that it was he who appeared among the Jews as the Son, in Samaria as the Father and among other nations as the Holy Spirit. He performed such signs by magic acts during the reign of Claudius that he was regarded as a god and honored with a statue on the island in the Tiber which the two bridges cross, with the inscription *Simoni Deo Sancto*,²⁰ "To Simon the Holy God" ([First Apology, XXVI](#)). However, in the 16th Century, a statue was unearthed on the island in question, inscribed to Semo Sancus,²¹ a Sabine²² deity,²³ leading some scholars to conclude that Justin Martyr confused *Semoni Sancus* with Simon.

Irenaeus

Church father Irenaeus borrows extensively from Justin. Irenaeus' primary work addressing Simon, *Against Heresies*, may have been composed ca. AD 180–185. Irenaeus condemns Simon as "the father of all heresies" and as an enthusiast of magic who did not possess genuine faith in God.²⁴

Irenaeus expands on the identity and influence of Helena and offers a detailed explanation of Simon's teachings. For instance, he writes that those whom he oppose believe that "Simon is the first god called 'great' power, and Helena his 'Ennoia' (first

¹⁸ Compare Ferreiro, *Simon Magus*, 38; Yamauchi, *Gnosticism*, 56–68

¹⁹ Haar (2003). *Simon Magus*, 85

²⁰ Chisholm, Hugh, ed. (1911). "Simon Magus." In *Encyclopædia Britannica* (11th ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 25:126–130. Public Domain.

²¹ In ancient Roman religion, Sancus (also known as Sangus or Semo Sancus) was a god of trust (*fides*), honesty, and oaths. His cult, one of the most ancient amongst the Romans, probably derived from Umbrian influences. Cato and Silius Italicus wrote that Sancus was a Sabine god and father of the eponymous Sabine hero Sabus. He is thus sometimes considered a founder-deity.

²² The Sabines were an Italic people who lived in the central Apennine Mountains of the ancient Italian Peninsula, also inhabiting Latium north of the Anio before the founding of Rome.

²³ *Semoni Sanco Deo*. Gruter, Janus (1707). *Inscriptiones antiquae totius orbis romani, in absolutissimum corpus redactae*. Amsterdam: Franciscus Halma, 1:95 n. 5.

²⁴ *Adversus Haereses* 1.23:2; Haar (2003). *Simon Magus*, 93.

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thought) is the mother of all, who created the angels and in turn they created the world.”²⁵ Irenaeus depicts Simon’s teaching and followers as not in accord with the gospel and in need of refutation. Harr observes, “Clearly Irenaeus not only presents Simon as the author of a rival message, and a false ‘gnosis,’ but as a dangerous divine pretender.”²⁶

Hippolytus

Irenaeus’ disciple Hippolytus also understood Simon Magus as an apostate. Similar to the church fathers before him, he recounts Simon’s confrontations with the apostles in Rome, where he met opposition from Peter in particular for his teachings.²⁷ Hippolytus goes beyond Irenaeus by providing further information about Simon’s background. For instance, Hippolytus notes that a sorcerer named Thrasymedes mentored Simon and taught him how to deify himself.²⁸ Hippolytus denounces such teaching by stressing that it was perpetrated by demons and fully repudiated by the apostles.

Hippolytus provides a lengthy discourse comparing Simon to another well-known sorcerer, Apsethus from Libya. He recounts how Apsethus, who also believed himself to be divine, trained a flock of parrots to repeat the phrase “Apsethus is a god” and then sent them out to spread that message. The parrots failed to convince the area’s residents, who in turn trained the parrots to repeat that Apsethus had tricked them and that he really was not a god. When the Libyans heard this, they came together and burned Apsethus.²⁹ In giving this extra background information, Hippolytus apparently sought to remind his readers that Simon was a worthless magician and a fraud.³⁰

In *Philosophumena*,³¹ Hippolytus retells the narrative on Simon written by Irenaeus (who in his turn based it on the lost *Syntagma* of Justin). Upon the story of “the lost sheep”, Hippolytus comments as follows:

²⁵ *Adversus Haereses* 1.23.1–4.

²⁶ Haar (2003). *Simon Magus*, 94.

²⁷ *Adversus Haereses* 6.15.

²⁸ Hippolytus (1971). *Refutation* 6.2.

²⁹ Hippolytus (1971). *Refutation* 6.3.

³⁰ Hippolytus (1971). *Refutation* 2.3.

³¹ The *Refutation of All Heresies* (Φιλοσοφούμενα ἢ κατὰ πασῶν αἱρέσεων ἔλεγχος, *Philosophoumena hē kata pasōn haireseōn elenchos*; Latin: *Refutatio Omnium Haeresium*), also called the *Elenchus* or *Philosophumena*, is a compendious Christian polemical work of the early third century, whose attribution to Hippolytus of Rome or an unknown “Pseudo-Hippolytus” is disputed. It catalogues both pagan beliefs and 33 Gnostic systems deemed heretical by the author/s and/or compiler/s, making it a major source of information on contemporary opponents of Christian orthodoxy as understood today.

The first book, a synopsis of Greek philosophy, circulated separately in several manuscripts and was known as the *Philosophoumena* (Φιλοσοφούμενα “philosophical teachings”), a title which some extend to the

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But the liar was enamoured of this wench, whose name was Helen, and had bought her and had her to wife, and it was out of respect for his disciples that he invented this fairy-tale.³²

Also, Hippolytus demonstrates acquaintance with the folk tradition on Simon which depicts him rather as a magician than Gnostic, and in constant conflict with Peter (also present in the apocrypha and Pseudo-Clementine literature). Reduced to despair by the curse laid upon him by Peter in the Acts, Simon soon abjured the faith and embarked on the career of a sorcerer:

Until he came to Rome also and fell foul of the Apostles. Peter withstood him on many occasions. At last he came ... and began to teach sitting under a plane tree. When he was on the point of being shown up, he said, in order to gain time, that if he were buried alive he would rise again on the third day. So he bade that a tomb should be dug by his disciples and that he should be buried in it. Now they did what they were ordered, but he remained there until now: for he was not the Christ.³³

Later Works

Simon also appears in the writings of others from the early church period, such as Tertullian, Epiphanius, and even in the so-called pseudo-Clementine literature, which depicts Simon as a deceiver.³⁴ Throughout the post-New Testament literature, Simon Magus is viewed as a counterfeit believer and antagonist of the Christian faith. These disparaging portrayals continued through the medieval era and into early modern traditions in both literary and artistic renditions. As a result, it is likely that Simon Magus will forever be identified as the quintessential heretic.³⁵

Myth of Simon and Helen

Justin and Irenaeus are the first to recount the myth of Simon and Helen, which became the center of Simonian doctrine. Epiphanius of Salamis also makes Simon speak in the

whole work. Books IV-X were recovered in 1842 in a manuscript at Mount Athos, while books II and III remain lost. The work was long attributed incorrectly to the early Christian theologian Origen.

³² Chisholm (1911). *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 25:126–130. Public Domain. Hippolytus, *Refutation of all Heresies*, 6, 19.

³³ Hippolytus, *Refutation of all Heresies*, 6, 15.

³⁴ Haar (2003). *Simon Magus*, 118–131.

³⁵ (For a detailed discussion of Simon throughout the centuries, see Ferreiro, *Simon Magus*); Aernie, M. D. (2016). "Simon Magus." In J. D. Barry, D. Bomar, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, D. Mangum, C. Sinclair Wolcott, L. Wentz, E. Ritzema, & W. Widder (Eds.), *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Lexham Press.

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first person in several places in his *Panarion*,³⁶ and the implication is that he is quoting from a version of it, though perhaps not verbatim.³⁷

As described by Epiphanius, in the beginning God had his first thought, his *Ennoia*, which was female, and that thought was to create the angels. The First Thought then descended into the lower regions and created the angels. But the angels rebelled against her out of jealousy and created the world as her prison, imprisoning her in a female body. Thereafter, she was reincarnated many times, each time being shamed. Her many reincarnations included Helen of Troy, among others, and she finally was reincarnated as Helen, a slave and prostitute in the Phoenician city of Tyre. God then descended in the form of Simon Magus, to rescue his *Ennoia*, and to confer salvation upon men through knowledge of himself.³⁸

“And on her account”, he says, “did I come down; for this is that which is written in the Gospel ‘the lost sheep’.”

— Epiphanius, *Panarion*, 21.3.5³⁹

For as the angels were mismanaging the world, owing to their individual lust for rule, he had come to set things straight, and had descended under a changed form, likening himself to the Principalities and Powers through whom he passed, so that among men he appeared as a man, though he was not a man, and was thought to have suffered in Judaea, though he had not suffered.⁴⁰

³⁶ In early Christian heresiology, the *Panarion* (Koinē Greek: Πανάριον, derived from Latin *panarium*, meaning “bread basket”), to which 16th Century Latin translations gave the name *Adversus Haereses* (Latin: “Against Heresies”), is the most important of the works of Epiphanius of Salamis. It was written in Koine Greek beginning in 374 or 375, and issued about three years later, as a treatise on heresies, with its title referring to the text as a “stock of remedies to offset the poisons of heresy.” It treats 80 religious sects, either organized groups or philosophies, from the time of Adam to the latter part of the fourth century, detailing their histories, and rebutting their beliefs. The *Panarion* is an important source of information on the Jewish–Christian gospels, the Gospel of the Ebionites, and the Gospel of the Hebrews.

The treatise can be considered a sequel to the *Ancoratus* (374), which takes the form of a letter to the church of Syedra in Pamphylia, describing how the “barque” of the church can counteract the contrary winds of heretical thought, and become “anchored” (ἀγκυρωτός); hence the title of the work; the *Ancoratus* even outlines the content of the *Panarion* within its text. [Williams, Frank; translator (1987). “Introduction”. *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, Book I, Sections 1-46.]

³⁷ Chisholm (1911). *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 25:126–130. Public Domain.

³⁸ Chisholm (1911). *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 25:126–130. Public Domain.

³⁹ Williams, Frank (1987). *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis* (2 volumes). Leiden; New York; København; Köln: E.J. Brill, 1:60.

⁴⁰ Chisholm (1911). *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 25:126–130. Public Domain.

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“But in each heaven I changed my form,” says he, “in accordance with the form of those who were in each heaven, that I might escape the notice of my angelic powers and come down to the Thought, who is none other than her who is also called Prunikos and Holy Ghost, through whom I created the angels, while the angels created the world and men.”

— Epiphanius, *Panarion*, 21.2.4⁴¹

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But the prophets had delivered their prophecies under the inspiration of the world-creating angels: wherefore those who had their hope in him and in Helen minded them no more, and, as being free, did what they pleased; for men were saved according to his grace, but not according to just works. For works were not just by nature, but only by convention, in accordance with the enactments of the world-creating angels, who by precepts of this kind sought to bring men into slavery. Wherefore he promised that the world should be dissolved, and that those who were his should be freed from the dominion of the world-creators.⁴²

In this account of Simon there is a large portion common to almost all forms of Gnostic myths, together with something special to this form. They have in common the place in the work of creation assigned to the female principle, the conception of the Deity; the ignorance of the rulers of this lower world with regard to the Supreme Power; the descent of the female (Sophia)⁴³ into the lower regions, and her inability to return. Special to the Simonian tale is the identification of Simon himself with the Supreme, and of his consort Helena with the female principle.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Williams (1987). 1:58.

⁴² Chisholm (1911). *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 25:126–130. Public Domain.

⁴³ Sophia (Koinē Greek: Σοφία "Wisdom", Coptic: τσοφια "the Sophia"^[1]) is a major theme, along with Knowledge (γνώσις *gnosis*, Coptic: τσωον τsōwn), among many of the early Christian knowledge theologies grouped by the heresiologist Irenaeus as *gnostikoi* (γνωστικοί), "knowing" or "men that claimed to have deeper wisdom". Gnosticism is a 17th century term expanding the definition of Irenaeus' groups to include other syncretic faiths and the Greco-Roman mysteries.

In Gnosticism, Sophia is a feminine figure, analogous to the human soul but also simultaneously one of the feminine aspects of God. Gnostics held that she was the *syzygy*, or female twin, of Jesus, i.e. the Bride of Christ, and the Holy Spirit of the Trinity. She is occasionally referred to by the term *Achamōth* (Ἀχαμώθ, Hebrew: חכמה *chokmah*) and as *Prunikos* (Προύνικος). In the Nag Hammadi texts, Sophia is the lowest aeon or anthropic emanation of the godhead. She would be the daughter of Elohim.

⁴⁴ One or more of the preceding sentences incorporates text from a publication now in the public domain: Salmon, George (1911). "Simon Magus." In Wace, Henry; Piercy, William C. (eds.). *Dictionary of Christian Biography and Literature to the End of the Sixth Century* (3rd ed.). London: John Murray.

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Simonians

Heresiologists attribute the origin of the sect of the Simonians to Simon Magus, which did not possess heavily gnostic traits. The most salient points of the teachings were as follows: Simon was considered to be the chief God and Helen, a prostitute whom he had rescued from a brothel in Tyre, was the Thought (Ennoia) that had emerged from his mind. Helen had created the intermediary powers (angels and archangels), which in turn had created the world. Envious and jealous, these created beings had enclosed Helen within a human body, forcing her to transmigrate from one body to another. To deliver Helen and all humankind from the power of the intermediary powers, Simon descended to earth, granting people the ability to know God, as the Son in Judea, as the Father in Samaria and as the Holy Spirit in other regions. Salvation was obtained through faith in Simon's liberating power.

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These teachings do not appear very much in line with gnostic systems, and the most difficult problems that arise coincide with the individuation of their primitive and central nucleus, because traits and analogies with a certain type of preaching in Samaria can be considered either as primordial or later additions. The following have a gnostic stamp: the hostility of the intermediary powers toward God and human beings, the view that the human body is a prison of the divine element and disregard for the Old Testament. Other traits are indefinable or at least without justification as a gnostic theme: the deification of Simon and Helen, their claimed immortality, the failure to link a specific fault that justifies Simon's descent, the lack of connection between redemption and the knowledge of Simon's nature. One has the impression that this movement had moved toward Jewish-Christian gnosticism but had not yet entered gnosticism properly speaking.⁴⁵

Hippolytus gives a much more doctrinally detailed account of Simonianism, including a system of divine emanations and interpretations of the Old Testament, with extensive quotations from the *Apophysis Megale*. Some believe that Hippolytus' account is of a later, more developed form of Simonianism, and that the original doctrines of the group were simpler, close to the account given by Justin Martyr and Irenaeus (this account however is also included in Hippolytus' work).

Hippolytus says the free love doctrine was held by them in its purest form, and speaks in language similar to that of Irenaeus about the variety of magic arts practiced by the Simonians, and also of their having images of Simon and Helen under the forms

⁴⁵ Peretto, E., & Starowieyski, M. (2014). "Simon Magus—Simonians." In A. Di Berardino & J. Hoover (Eds.), & J. T. Papa, E. A. Koenke, & E. E. Hewett (Trans.), *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity* (3:588–589). IVP Academic; InterVarsity Press.

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of Zeus and Athena. But he also adds, “if any one, on seeing the images either of Simon or Helen, shall call them by those names, he is cast out, as showing ignorance of the mysteries.”⁴⁶

Epiphanius

Epiphanius writes that there were some Simonians still in existence in his day (c. AD 367), but he speaks of them as almost extinct. Gitta, he says, had sunk from a town into a village. Epiphanius further charges Simon with having tried to wrest the words of Paul about the armor of God⁴⁷ into agreement with his own identification of the *Ennoia* with Athena. He tells us also that he gave barbaric names to the “principalities and powers”, and that he was the beginning of the Gnostics. The Law, according to him, was not of God, but of “the sinister power”. The same was the case with the prophets, and it was death to believe in the Old Testament.⁴⁸

Cyril of Jerusalem

Cyril of Jerusalem (AD 346) in the sixth of his Catechetical Lectures prefaces his history of the Manichaeans by a brief account of earlier heresies: Simon Magus, he says, had given out that he was going to be translated to heaven, and was actually careening through the air in a chariot drawn by demons when Peter and Paul knelt down and prayed, and their prayers brought him to earth a mangled corpse.⁴⁹

SIMON THE MAGICIAN IN THE APOCRYPHA

Acts of Peter

Simon Magus plays a prominent role in the noncanonical works *Acts of Peter* and *Acts of Peter and Paul*, both of which portray him as an agent of Satan. In both texts Simon is ultimately defeated by the power of God working through the apostles. This may be

⁴⁶ Chisholm (1911). *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 25:126–130. Public Domain.

⁴⁷ Ephesians 6:14-16.

⁴⁸ Chisholm (1911). *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 25:126–130. Public Domain.

⁴⁹ Cyril of Jerusalem. (1894). “The Catechetical Lectures of S. Cyril, Archbishop of Jerusalem.” In P. Schaff & H. Wace (Eds.), & R. W. Church & E. H. Gifford (Trans.), *S. Cyril of Jerusalem, S. Gregory Nazianzen* (7:44–47). Christian Literature Company; Chisholm (1911). *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 25:126–130. Public Domain.

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compared to the traditions of the early church fathers, although these works certainly did not agree with their viewpoints in their entirety.⁵⁰

The apocryphal *Acts of Peter* gives a more elaborate tale of Simon Magus' death. Simon is performing magic in the Forum, and, in order to prove himself to be a god, he levitates into the air above the Forum. The apostle Peter prays to God to stop his flying, and he stops mid-air and falls into a place called "the *Sacra Via*" (meaning "Holy Way" in Latin), breaking his legs "in three parts". The previously non-hostile crowd then stones him. Now gravely injured, he has some people carry him on a bed at night from Rome to Ariccia, and is brought from there to Terracina to a person named Castor, who has been banished from Rome, on account of accusations of sorcery levelled against him. The Acts then continue to say that he died "while being sorely cut by two physicians."⁵¹

Acts of Peter and Paul

Another apocryphal document, the *Acts of Peter and Paul* gives a slightly different version of the above incident, which was shown in the context of a debate in front of the Emperor Nero. In this version, Paul the Apostle is present along with Peter, Simon levitates from a high wooden tower made upon his request, and dies "divided into four parts" due to the fall. Peter and Paul are then imprisoned by Nero, who further orders that Simon's body be kept carefully for three days, in case, Christ-like, the magician should rise again.⁵²

Pseudo-Clementine literature

The Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions* and *Homilies* give an account of Simon Magus and some of his teachings in regards to the Simonians. They are of uncertain date and authorship, and seem to have been worked over by several hands in the interest of diverse forms of belief.⁵³

Simon was a Samaritan, and a native of Gitta. The name of his father was Antonius, that of his mother Rachel.⁵⁴ He studied Greek literature in Alexandria, and, having in addition to this great power in magic, became so ambitious that he wished to be considered a highest power, higher even than the God who created the world. And sometimes he

⁵⁰ Aernie, M. D. (2016). "Simon Magus." In J. D. Barry, D. Bomar, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, D. Mangum, C. Sinclair Wolcott, L. Wentz, E. Ritzema, & W. Widder (Eds.), *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Lexham Press.

⁵¹ "The Acts of Peter." www.earlychristianwritings.com

⁵² *Acts of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul*.

⁵³ Chisholm (1911). *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 25:126–130. Public Domain.

⁵⁴ *Recognitions*, Book 2.

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“darkly hinted” that he himself was Christ, calling himself the Standing One. Which name he used to indicate that he would stand for ever, and had no cause in him for bodily decay. He did not believe that the God who created the world was the highest, nor that the dead would rise. He denied Jerusalem, and introduced Mount Gerizim in its stead. In place of the Christ of the Christians he proclaimed himself; and the Law he allegorized in accordance with his own preconceptions. He did indeed preach righteousness and judgment to come.⁵⁵

There was one John the Baptist, who was the forerunner of Jesus in accordance with the law of parity; and as Jesus had twelve Apostles, bearing the number of the twelve solar months, so had he thirty leading men, making up the monthly tale of the moon. One of these thirty leading men was a woman called Helen, and the first and most esteemed by John was Simon. But on the death of John he was away in Egypt for the practice of magic, and one Dositheus, by spreading a false report of Simon’s death, succeeded in installing himself as head of the sect. Simon on coming back thought it better to dissemble, and, pretending friendship for Dositheus, accepted the second place. Soon, however, he began to hint to the thirty that Dositheus was not as well acquainted as he might be with the doctrines of the school.⁵⁶

Dositheus, when he perceived that Simon was depreciating him, fearing lest his reputation among men might be obscured (for he himself was supposed to be the Standing One), moved with rage, when they met as usual at the school, seized a rod, and began to beat Simon; but suddenly the rod seemed to pass through his body, as if it had been smoke. On which Dositheus, being astonished, says to him, “Tell me if thou art the Standing One, that I may adore thee.” And when Simon answered that he was, then Dositheus, perceiving that he himself was not the Standing One, fell down and worshipped him, and gave up his own place as chief to Simon, ordering all the rank of thirty men to obey him; himself taking the inferior place which Simon formerly occupied. Not long after this he died.⁵⁷

The encounter between Dositheus and Simon Magus was the beginnings of the sect of Simonians. The narrative goes on to say that Simon, having fallen in love with Helen, took her about with him, saying that she had come down into the world from the highest heavens, and was his mistress, inasmuch as she was Sophia, the Mother of All. It was for her sake, he said, that the Greeks and Barbarians fought the Trojan War, deluding themselves with an image of truth, for the real being was then present with the First

⁵⁵ Chisholm (1911). *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 25:126–130. Public Domain.

⁵⁶ Clementine *Homilies*, ii. 23; Chisholm (1911). *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 25:126–130. Public Domain.

⁵⁷ Clementine *Recognitions*, ii. 11.

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God.⁵⁸ By such allegories Simon deceived many, while at the same time he astounded them by his magic. A description is given of how he made a familiar spirit for himself by conjuring the soul out of a boy and keeping his image in his bedroom, and many instances of his feats of magic are given.⁵⁹

ANTI-PAULINISM WRITINGS

15

The Pseudo-Clementine writings were used in the 4th century by members of the Ebionite sect, one characteristic of which was hostility to Paul, whom they refused to recognize as an apostle.⁶⁰ Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792–1860), founder of the Tübingen School, drew attention to the anti-Pauline characteristic in the Pseudo-Clementines, and pointed out that in the disputations between Simon and Peter, some of the claims Simon is represented as making (e.g. that of having seen the Lord, though not in his lifetime, yet subsequently in vision) were really the claims of Paul; and urged that Peter's refutation of Simon was in some places intended as a polemic against Paul.⁶¹ The enmity between Peter and Simon is clearly shown. Simon's magical powers are juxtaposed with Peter's powers in order to express Peter's authority over Simon through the power of prayer, and in the *17th Homily*, the identification of Paul with Simon Magus is effected. Simon is there made to maintain that he has a better knowledge of the mind of Jesus than the disciples, who had seen and conversed with Jesus in person. His reason for this strange assertion is that visions are superior to waking reality, as divine is superior to human.⁶² Peter has much to say in reply to this, but the passage which mainly concerns us is as follows:⁶³

But can any one be educated for teaching by vision? And if you shall say, "It is possible," why did the Teacher remain and converse with waking men for a whole year? And how can we believe you even as to the fact that he appeared to you?

⁵⁸ Cf. Plotinus, *Ennead* II, 9, 10: "They first maintain that the Soul and a certain 'Wisdom' [Sophia] declined and entered this lower sphere . . . Yet in the same breath, that very Soul which was the occasion of descent to the others is declared not to have descended. 'It knew no decline,' but merely illuminated the darkness in such a way that an image of it was formed upon the Matter. Then, they shape an image of that image somewhere below — through the medium of Matter or of Materiality . . . and so they bring into being what they call the Creator or Demiurge, then this lower is severed from his Mother [Sophia] and becomes the author of the Cosmos down to the latest of the succession of images constituting it." MacKenna trans., 230; Chisholm (1911). *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 25:126–130. Public Domain.

⁵⁹ Chisholm (1911). *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 25:126–130. Public Domain.

⁶⁰ As the *Peregrinations of Peter*. Epiphanius, *Panarion*, 30.15.1; Williams (1987), 1:131; Salmon (1911). "Simon Magus."

⁶¹ Salmon (1911). "Simon Magus."

⁶² Chisholm (1911). *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 25:126–130. Public Domain. *Clementine Homilies*, xvii. 5; 14.

⁶³ Chisholm (1911). *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 25:126–130. Public Domain.

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And how can he have appeared to you seeing that your sentiments are opposed to his teaching? But if you were seen and taught by him for a single hour, and so became an apostle, then preach his words, expound his meaning, love his apostles, fight not with me who had converse with him. For it is against a solid rock, the foundation-stone of the Church, that you have opposed yourself in opposing me. If you were not an adversary, you would not be slandering me and reviling the preaching that is given through me, in order that, as I heard myself in person from the Lord, when I speak I may not be believed, as though forsooth it were I who was condemned and I who was reprobate. Or, if you call me condemned, you are accusing God who revealed the Christ to me, and are inveighing against Him who called me blessed on the ground of the revelation. But if indeed you truly wish to work along with the truth, learn first from us what we learnt from Him, and when you have become a disciple of truth, become our fellow-workman.⁶⁴

The anti-Pauline context of the Pseudo-Clementines is recognised, but the association with Simon Magus is surprising, according to Jozef Verheyden, since they have little in common.⁶⁵ However the majority of scholars accept Baur's identification,⁶⁶ though others, including Lightfoot, argued extensively that the "Simon Magus" of the Pseudo-Clementines was not meant to stand for Paul.⁶⁷ More recently, Berlin pastor Hermann Detering (1995) has made the case that the veiled anti-Pauline stance of the Pseudo-Clementines has historical roots, that the Acts 8 encounter between Simon the magician and Peter is itself based on the conflict between Peter and Paul.⁶⁸ Detering's belief has not found general support among scholars, but Robert M. Price argues much the same case in *The Amazing Colossal Apostle: The Search for the Historical Paul* (2012).⁶⁹

Identification of Simon as the Apostle Paul

⁶⁴ Chisholm (1911). *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 25:126–130. Public Domain.

⁶⁵ "The decision [in the Pseudo-Clementines] to associate Paul with Simon Magus is surprising since they have little in common. It is generally accepted that this association represents a later stage in the development of Ps.-Clem. and was an attempt to do away with or adapt some of the criticisms that had been aimed at Paul." Verheyden, Jozef (2004), "Demonization of the Opponent." In Hettema, Theo L.; van der Kooij, Arie (eds.), *Religious Polemics in Context*, 333.

⁶⁶ "Baur's view that Simon is Paul has occasionally been questioned ..." Bockmuehl, Markus (2010). *The Remembered Peter: In Ancient Reception and Modern Debate*. Mohr Siebeck, 102.

⁶⁷ "... letters (beginning of the second century AD, which give no evidence of strife between Peter and Paul) were spurious and late ... The idea of a revival of Baur's thesis appears to be quite self-conscious and explicit." Pate, C. Marvin (2000). *The Reverse of the Curse: Paul, Wisdom, and the Law*, 439.

⁶⁸ Hermann Detering, *The Dutch Radical Approach to the Pauline Epistles*.

⁶⁹ Price, Robert M. (2012), *The Amazing Colossal Apostle: The Search for the Historical Paul*, Signature Books.

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Since Ferdinand Christian Baur in the 19th Century, scholars including Hermann Detering and Margaret Barket have concluded that the attacks on “Simon Magus” in the 4th Century Pseudo-Clementines may be attacks on Paul. Detering takes the attacks of the Pseudo-Clementines as literal and historical, and suggests that the attacks of the Pseudo-Clementines are correct in identifying “Simon Magus” as a proxy for Paul of Tarsus,⁷⁰ with Simon-Paul originally having been detested by the church, and the name changed to Paul when he was rehabilitated by virtue of forged Epistles *correcting* the genuine ones.⁷¹ Robert Price has stated his agreement with this assertion.

Anti-Marcionism

There are other features in the portrait which are reminiscent of Marcion. The first thing mentioned in the *Homilies* about Simon’s opinions is that he denied that God was just.⁷² By “God” he meant the creator god. But he undertakes to prove from the Jewish scriptures that there is a higher god, who really possesses the perfections which are falsely ascribed to the lower god.⁷³ On these grounds Peter complains that, when he was setting out for the gentiles to convert them from their worship of *many gods upon earth*, Satan had sent Simon before him to make them believe that there were *many gods in heaven*.⁷⁴

DRUIDISM

In Irish legend Simon Magus came to be associated with Druidism. He is said to have come to the aid of the Druid Mog Ruith.⁷⁵ The fierce denunciation of Christianity by Irish

⁷⁰ Hermann Detering, *The Dutch Radical Approach to the Pauline Epistles*.

⁷¹ See also: F C Baur; A. Hilgenfeld; Hermann Detering (1995, translated into English in 2003). *The Falsified Paul: Early Christianity in the Twilight*; and J.R. Porter, *The Lost Bible*, 230.

⁷² Clementine *Homilies*, ii. 14.

⁷³ Clementine *Homilies*, iii. 10; 38.

⁷⁴ E.g. Clementine *Homilies*, iii. 3; 9; 59; Chisholm (1911). *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 25:126–130. Public Domain.

⁷⁵ Mug Ruith (or Mogh Roith, “slave of the wheel”) is a figure in Irish mythology, a powerful blind druid of Munster who lived on Valentia Island, County Kerry. He could grow to enormous size, and his breath caused storms and turned men to stone. He wore a hornless bull-hide and a bird mask, and flew in a ship called the *roth rámach*, the “oared wheel”. He had a fiery ox-driven chariot with blazing jewels that made night seem as bright as day, a star-speckled black shield with a silver rim, and a stone which could turn into a poisonous eel when thrown in water.

Legend: Stories about Mug Ruith are set in various periods of Irish history. Some say he lived during the reign of 3rd century High King Cormac mac Airt, while others put him in Jerusalem during the time of Christ. In *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* he is said to have died in the reign of Conmael, nearly two thousand years before Cormac’s time. Perhaps due to this array of times and settings, poets attributed the druid with extraordinary longevity (he lived through the reign of nineteen kings according to one story). His powers and long lifespan have led some to conclude he was a euhemerized sun or storm god.

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Druids appears to have resulted in Simon Magus being associated with Druidism. The word Druid was sometimes translated into Latin as *magus*, and Simon Magus was also known in Ireland as "Simon the Druid."⁷⁶

MEDIEVAL LEGENDS, LATER INTERPRETATIONS

The church of Santa Francesca Romana, Rome, is claimed to have been built on the spot where Simon fell. Within the Church is a dented slab of marble that purports to bear the imprints of the knees of Peter and Paul during their prayer. The fantastic stories of Simon the Sorcerer persisted into the later Middle Ages,⁷⁷ becoming a possible inspiration for the *Faustbuch* and Goethe's *Faust*.⁷⁸

The opening story in Danilo Kiš's 1983 collection *The Encyclopedia of the Dead*, "Simon Magus", retells the confrontation between Simon and Peter agreeing with the account in the *Acts of Peter*, and provides an additional alternative ending in which Simon asks to be buried alive in order to be resurrected three days later (after which his body is found putrefied).⁷⁹

The various medieval legends about his adventures in the Holy Land at the dawn of Christendom paint him as an interesting and mysterious character, a defender of paganism and an enemy of Christianity. He is said to have been a student of Simon Magus, who taught him his magic skills and helped him build *roth rámach*. *Roth rámach* is described as a flying machine with great destructive power. It blinded those who looked at it, deafens whoever hears it, and kills whoever it strikes. A prophecy attributed to Saint Columba describes the ship as laying waste to Europe before the Last Judgement. Another vehicle attributed to him is a chariot. This description leads scholar Aideen M. O'Leary to speculate he may have been an euhemerized sun god.

In at least two other poems Mug Ruith is identified as the executioner who beheaded John the Baptist, bringing a curse to the Irish people. He cuts an equally impressive figure in *The Siege of Knocklong*, set in Cormac mac Airt's time. Here he defeats Cormac's druids in an elaborate magical battle in exchange for land from King Fiachu Muillethan of southern Munster, from whom Cormac had been trying to levy taxes. Mug Ruith's daughter was Tlachtga, a powerful druidess, who gave her name to a hill in County Meath and a festival celebrated there. Tlachtga, who was raped by Simon Magus while her father was learning magic, gave birth to three sons Dorb, Cuma, and Muach.

⁷⁶ Spence, Lewis (1999). *The Magic Arts in Celtic Britain*. Courier Corporation, 36.

⁷⁷ Sometimes with Mug Ruith. MacKillop, James (2004) [1998]. *A Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*. New York: Oxford University Press, 337.

⁷⁸ "Surely few admirers of Marlowe's and Goethe's plays have an inkling that their hero is the descendant of a gnostic sectary, and that the beautiful Helen called up by his art was once the fallen Thought of God through whose raising mankind was to be saved." Jonas, Hans (2001) [1958]. *The Gnostic Religion* (3rd ed.). Boston: Beacon Press, 111.

⁷⁹ Power, Chris (2 August 2012). "A brief survey of the short story part 42: Danilo Kiš". *The Guardian*. Retrieved 16 December 2013; Taylor, Benjamin (1995). *Into the Open: Reflections on Genius and Modernity*. NYU Press, 107 n.1.

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