


ARTICLE

## Simon the Composite Sorcerer

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### Abstract

Simon Magus is a key figure in the earliest apocryphal Acts of Peter. He is a sorcerer and confidant of the emperor who clashes with Peter and, in later apocryphal texts, with both Peter and Paul. However, this is not simply the villain of the Acts of the Apostles. In this article I will argue that the apocryphal Simon is a composite figure drawn substantially, but not necessarily wholly, from the Simon of Acts 8 and the Elymas/Bar-Jesus figure who opposes Paul in Acts 13.

**Keywords:** Simon Magus; Elymas; apocryphal acts; Acts of the Apostles; apostle Peter; apostle Paul

Simon the sorcerer (Simon Magus) is one of the most famous characters in early Christian literature. The villain par excellence, Simon appears in numerous places and is assigned various roles of wickedness. From a fairly brief account in the Acts of the Apostles, early Christian authors created an expanded universe of Simonian thought and influence.

Many elements of this universe are familiar to scholars: (1) Simon’s place in the history of heresiology: authors such as Irenaeus created a family tree of heresy, the roots of which often go back to Simon himself – accusations of being the father of Gnosticism are particularly notable in this regard;<sup>1</sup> (2) Simon’s connection to accusations of magic and sorcery;<sup>2</sup> (3) Simon in the Pseudo-Clementine literature either as a stand-in for Paul<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The bibliography is too long to cite in its entirety. Representative studies include G. Lüdemann, ‘The Acts of the Apostles and the Beginnings of Simonian Gnosis’, *NTS* 33 (1987) 420–6; G. Theissen, ‘Simon Magus – die Entwicklung seines Bildes vom Charismatiker zum gnostischen Erlöser: Ein Beitrag zur Frühgeschichte der Gnosis’, *Religionsgeschichte des Neuen Testaments* (ed. K. Berger *et al.*; Tübingen: Francke, 2000) 407–32; S. Haar, *Simon Magus: The First Gnostic?* (Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2003); A. Ferreiro, *Simon Magus in Patristic, Medieval, and Early Modern Traditions* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2005); D. E. MacRae, ‘Simon the God: Imagining the Other in Second-Century Christianity’, *Geneses: A Comparative Study of the Historiographies of the Rise of Christianity, Rabbinic Judaism, and Islam* (ed. J. Tolan; London/New York: Routledge, 2019) 64–86.

<sup>2</sup> F. Heintz, *Simon ‘le magicien’: Actes 8, 5–25 et l’accusation de magie contre les prophètes thaumaturges dans l’antiquité* (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1997); A. Tuzlak, ‘The Magician and the Heretic: The Case of Simon Magus’, *Magic and Ritual in the Ancient World* (ed. P. Mirecki and M. Meyer; Leiden: Brill, 2002) 416–26; J. N. Bremmer, ‘Magic in the Apocryphal Acts’, *Maidens, Magic and Martyrs in Early Christianity: Collected Essays I* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017) 197–217, where Bremmer sets Simon Magus in the broader historical and rhetorical contexts of the Greco-Roman world; *idem*, ‘Simon Magus: The Invention and Reception of a Magician in a Christian Context’, *Religion in the Roman Empire* 5 (2019) 246–70.

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. S. Légasse, ‘La polémique antipaulinienne dans le judéo-christianisme hétérodoxe’, *BLE* (1989) 5–22, 85–100; G. Lüdemann, *Opposition to Paul in Jewish Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989). I have argued against

or as a liminal figure;<sup>4</sup> (4) the narrative character of Simon in a broader context of ancient philosophy and literature, pointing to connections, for example, to Platonic dialogue and the concepts of the ‘divine man’ or the ‘true prophet’;<sup>5</sup> (5) Simon’s role in the apocryphal acts, in particular the martyrdom accounts of initially Peter but later of both Peter and Paul together, including Simon’s alleged claims to be the true Christ.<sup>6</sup> To put it simply, Simon seems to be everywhere, and he is always up to no good.

Yet over the years of studying the figure of Simon, I have been harassed by a nagging question: where does this narrative Simon come from? The Simon of the Acts of Peter, and certainly the Simon of the combined Peter and Paul martyrdom accounts, seems quite far from the Simon of the Acts of the Apostles. In this article I will propose that we understand the literary Simon of late antiquity as a composite character, forged in the fires of reception, refraction and memory primarily from two separate villains in the Acts of the Apostles: Simon himself and the sorcerer who opposes Paul, Elymas/Bar-Jesus.

## 1. The Apocryphal Sorcerer

Simon’s first apocryphal appearance is in the Acts of Peter, a collection of traditions about Peter that are typically dated to the late-second century in literary form. He also plays a prominent role in the later joint martyrdom accounts of Peter and Paul. We will begin by examining the major plot points involving Simon in these various texts, and will then move into attempting to identify possible sources of these traditions.

In the Acts of Peter, Simon is in Rome seemingly at the same time as Paul, although Simon is outside the city in Aricia. Soon after Paul’s departure for Spain, Simon becomes more of a direct threat to the Roman church. ‘But after a few days there was great turmoil in the midst of the church, because some said that they had seen miraculous deeds done by a certain man, named Simon, who was at Aricia. They also added that he was saying that he was a great power of God and did nothing without God.’ Simon earns a reputation for performing deeds of power and claims that this power comes from God (*se diceret magnam virtutem esse Dei et sine deo nihil facere*). Many believers are confused, because Simon’s deeds appear to equal those of Paul, so they begin to ask: ‘Is he not the Christ?’<sup>7</sup>

Simon is invited to come to Rome, and he arrives (or so it appears) by flying over the city gate. His fame grows, and neither Paul nor Timothy nor Barnabas is in the city to counter him. Simon’s followers soon attack the authority of Paul: ‘Many of them were

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this view in D. L. Eastman, *The Many Deaths of Peter and Paul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019) 203–8; see also D. Côté, ‘La fonction littéraire de Simon le Magicien dans les *Pseudo-Clémentines*’, *LTP* 57 (2001) 513–23.

<sup>4</sup> D. Côté, ‘Simon Magus in the Pseudo-Clementine Homilies: ‘Magician’ or Philosopher?’, *The Pseudo-Clementine Homilies: A Philosophical and Rhetorical Novel of Late Antiquity* (ed. B. De Vos and D. Praet; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, forthcoming).

<sup>5</sup> J. E. Fossum, *The Name of God and the Angel of the Lord* (WUNT 1/36; Tübingen: Mohr, 1985); P. Herczeg, ‘Theios Aner Traits in the Apocryphal Acts of Peter’, *The Apocryphal Acts of Peter: Magic, Miracles, and Gnosticism* (ed. J. N. Bremmer; Leuven: Peeters, 1998) 29–38; N. Kelley, *Knowledge and Religious Authority in the Pseudo-Clementines: Situating the ‘Recognitions’ in Fourth Century Syria* (WUNT 11/213; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), esp. 135–78; T. Nicklas with T. J. Kraus, ‘Simon Magos: Erschaffung eines Luftmenschen (Ps-Clem H II 26; R II 15)’, *Nouvelles intrigues pseudo-clémentines. Plots in the Pseudo-Clementine Literature* (ed. F. Amsler et al.; Prahins: Zèbre, 2008) 409–24; B. De Vos, ‘Paideia, Plato’s Sophist and the Pseudo-Clementines: Simon Magus’s characterisation in the Pseudo-Clementine Homilies’, *Biblical Figures Outside the Bible* (ed. D. Hamidovic, E. Serra and P. Therrien; Turnhout: Brepols, forthcoming).

<sup>6</sup> T. Adamik, ‘The Image of Simon Magus in the Christian Tradition’, *Apocryphal Acts of Peter*, 52–64; Eastman, *Many Deaths*, 180–203; *idem*, ‘Simon the Anti-Christ? The Magos as Christos in Early Christian Literature’, *JECH* 6 (2016) 116–36.

<sup>7</sup> Acts Pet. 4.

daily calling Paul a sorcerer,<sup>8</sup> and others a deceiver; and from so great a multitude that had been established in the faith, many fell away.’ The few remaining believers beseech God to send Paul back to Rome, or to send ‘someone else who could visit his servants, because the devil had led them away by his wickedness.’<sup>9</sup>

Peter is in Jerusalem and receives a vision from God of his approaching confrontation with Simon: ‘Peter, the one you convicted and threw out of Judea, Simon the sorcerer, has again become a hindrance to all of you in Rome. And so that you may know this in a few words, all who had believed in me have fallen away through the craftiness and effort of Satan, whose power he [Simon] has proven to be (*cuius virtutem se adprobat esse*).’ Thus, although Simon claims to work by the power of God (*magnam virtutem esse Dei*), he is in fact empowered by Satan (*satanas cuius virtutem*). Peter is told to leave on a boat the next day.<sup>10</sup> His boat makes a stop at Puteoli along the way, where Peter learns from a Christian named Ariston, who had fled Rome, that ‘a certain Jew’ (*Judaeum quendam*), namely Simon, had been ravaging the church.<sup>11</sup>

Peter at last arrives in Rome and begins preaching. As the faithful begin to return to the truth, they beg the apostle to counter Simon, for he had managed to deceive even a senator named Marcellus, who had previously been a leader in the Christian community and a great friend to the poor: ‘The brothers were beseeching Peter to confront Simon and not allow him to disturb the people any longer.’ Simon is staying at Marcellus’ house, so Peter goes there with a crowd to confront the sorcerer. Because Simon refuses to come out, Peter gives the power of speech to a dog and sends it to find Simon and call him out. The dog pronounces: ‘Simon, Peter, who stands at the door, bids you to come outside in public; for he says, “On your account have I come to Rome, you wicked man and destroyer of simple souls.”’<sup>12</sup>

This demonstration of power convinces Marcellus that he had been deceived, and he begs Peter for forgiveness. Peter meanwhile gives more evidence of his authority by performing other supernatural deeds, including bringing a smoked fish back to life, empowering a baby to speak with a man’s voice, and healing many of blindness.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, Peter and Simon come face to face in the presence of ‘senators and prefects and officials’ (*senatores et praefecti et officia*). Peter goes on the offensive, reminding Simon that he had already condemned the sorcerer in the East: ‘Tell us, Simon, did you not fall at my

<sup>8</sup> Accusations of magic or sorcery were serious offences in Roman antiquity, and thus Simon’s magical activities were starkly contrasted with Peter’s displays of divine power in the context of early Christianity. See e.g. M. W. Dickie, *Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman World* (London: Routledge, 2001); Tuzlak, ‘Magician and the Heretic’, 416–26; M. Kahlos, ‘“A Christian Cannot Employ Magic”: Rhetorical Self-Fashioning of the Magicless Christianity of Late Antiquity’, *Rhetoric and Religious Identity in Late Antiquity* (ed. R. Flower and M. Ludlow; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020) 128–42; J. Van Pelt, ‘From the Acts of Peter to the Life of Leo of Catania: Distinguishing Magic and Miracle’, *The Apostles Peter, Paul, John, Thomas and Philip with their Companions in Late Antiquity* (SECA 17; ed. T. Nicklas, J. E. Spittler and J. N. Bremmer; Leuven: Peeters, 2021) 55–80.

<sup>9</sup> Acts Pet. 4.

<sup>10</sup> Acts Pet. 5.

<sup>11</sup> Acts Pet. 6. There is a well-documented debate over the translation of *Iudaeus/Ἰουδαίος* as ‘Jew’ or ‘Judean’. I am following the lead of A. Reinhartz and A.-J. Levine in opting for ‘Jew/Jewish’ throughout this article. See A.-J. Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2006) 159–66; A. Reinhartz, ‘The Vanishing Jews of Antiquity’, *Marginalia*, 24 June 2014, online at: <https://themarginaliareview.com/vanishing-jews-antiquity-adele-reinhartz/> (accessed 21/3/2022). In addition, in the Acts of Peter, Peter himself is described as a *Judaeus* (Acts Pet. 22), but in the Gospels he is from the Galilee, not Judea.

<sup>12</sup> Acts Pet. 9.

<sup>13</sup> Acts Pet. 8–22. The presentation of this series of miracles by Peter is part of a rhetorical strategy in the apocryphal acts of distinguishing between the true miracles of the apostles and the false miracles of magicians. See Bremmer, ‘Magic’.

feet and the feet of Paul in Jerusalem, after you saw the healings that were done by our hands, and did you not say: “I beg you, take from me however much money you wish so that I may be able to place my hands on people and do such great works of power”? And after we heard this, did we not curse you and say: “Are you trying to tempt us to want money”? And now you have no fear at all?’ Simon counters that Peter’s Lord was just a normal man who was born and crucified, while the true God is neither born nor can die.<sup>14</sup>

A prefect named Agrippa takes charge of the debate between the rivals. Peter challenges Simon to a battle of power. Agrippa does not want to appear to act ‘unjustly’ (*inpie*), so he orders Simon to kill one of his servants and Peter to revive him. (Perhaps this poor servant may have found this idea unjust.) This story is interrupted by and then interwoven with two more healing stories, all of which show Peter’s superiority as the servant of the true God. The prefect listens and observes and ultimately realises that Peter is authentic, not Simon.<sup>15</sup> After several days, Simon regains his courage and challenges Peter again, this time claiming that he will prove his worth by flying over Rome. He soars into the sky, and Peter appeals to Christ for help: ‘Peter cried out to the Lord Jesus Christ, saying, “If you allow this thing that he is trying to do, all who have believed in you will be caused to stumble, and whatever signs you did through me will be disregarded. Therefore, Lord, act quickly by your grace to show your power to all those near me.”’ Simon falls from the sky and breaks his leg in three places. The crowd stones and abandons him, another former Simon follower joins Peter, and several days later Simon dies.<sup>16</sup> After this the martyrdom account begins. In this version, it is notable that Peter’s death has nothing to do with Simon but is instead a result of the apostle’s preaching of chastity.<sup>17</sup>

To review, here are the major plot points from the Acts of Peter:

- (1) Simon gains fame by works of sorcery.
- (2) Peter confronts him in the presence of a prefect.
- (3) Contests of power ensue.
- (4) The prefect considers both sides and favours Peter.
- (5) Peter is proven true by his power over Simon.

If we turn to the joint apostolic martyrdom accounts, we find many similar elements alongside some differences. Here we are examining the traditions as reflected in primarily three texts, all of which have some characteristics in common: the Latin *Passion of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul* attributed to Pseudo-Marcellus; the Greek *Acts of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul*, which draws significantly from the Latin of Pseudo-Marcellus; and the Latin *Passion of the Apostles Peter and Paul*, which I have argued is derived largely from the Pseudo-Marcellus tradition and Pseudo-Hegesippus, *On the Destruction of Jerusalem*.<sup>18</sup> While there are differences among these texts, they are fairly consistent when it comes to the figure of Simon. We will follow primarily the plot of the Latin *Passion of Pseudo-Marcellus* and note any differences as we proceed.

Simon is already in Rome practising sorcery to deceive many, and Peter counters with his own demonstrations of spiritual power. Through trickery, Simon convinces Nero that he is a divine being. In Pseudo-Marcellus’ *Passion*, Simon claims: ‘I am the son of God who

<sup>14</sup> Acts Pet. 23. The narrative departures from Acts 8 will be addressed below.

<sup>15</sup> Acts Pet. 25–8.

<sup>16</sup> Acts Pet. 31–2.

<sup>17</sup> Eastman, *Many Deaths*, 38–44.

<sup>18</sup> D. L. Eastman, *The Ancient Martyrdom Accounts of Peter and Paul* (Atlanta: SBL, 2015) 331.

descended from heaven.<sup>19</sup> In the other Latin *Passion of the Apostles*, in a section not taken from Pseudo-Hegesippus, Simon states: 'I am the Christ, whom, after I was beaten with whips, the Jews handed over to be crucified.'<sup>20</sup> Simon argues that those who oppose him, the apostles, must be eliminated: 'It is certain that unless you plot their destruction, your kingdom will not be able to stand.'<sup>21</sup> Nero calls Simon and the apostles before him, and they engage in a lengthy war of words. They argue back and forth about who is the true Christ, the master of Peter and Paul or Simon. At first, Nero is unsure whom to believe: 'I myself cannot decide between you.'<sup>22</sup> However, in subsequent displays of supernatural authority, Peter repeatedly defeats Simon, and Nero's trust in the sorcerer is further eroded: 'Well, Simon? I think that we are beaten.'<sup>23</sup> Simon attempts to explain away the situation by claiming that Peter is simply anticipating what Simon will do based upon their previous conflicts 'in Judea and in all of Palestine and Caesarea'.<sup>24</sup> By this point Simon has lost the confidence of the emperor, and Paul warns Nero that it is Simon's survival, not Paul and Peter's, that threatens the empire.

Simon then makes the familiar appeal: 'Order a tall tower to be built for me out of wood. I will climb it and call upon my angels, and I will order them to carry me into heaven to my father with everyone watching.'<sup>25</sup> Peter and Paul remain confident that Simon, who is being aided by demons, will fail. Still more discussion ensues between Nero and the apostles in which they, but primarily Paul, explain the message of the gospel. Nero is astounded by Paul's teaching and begins to lose patience with Simon's continued attempts to avoid proving the truth of what he says:

Simon said, 'I will not answer you now.'

Nero said, 'You say this because you are a liar. If I am not able to do anything to you, then the God who is able will do it.'

Simon said, 'I will no longer respond to you.'

Nero said, 'And I will consider you to be nothing. As I see it, you are deceitful in everything.'<sup>26</sup>

Note that even Nero seems to understand that if Simon is false, the true God will reveal this and punish him. At last the day comes for Simon to prove his divinity, and in the famous scene the sorcerer's initial apparent success ends with a terrible crash to the ground and his death. Nero retaliates by ordering the execution of Paul and Peter.<sup>27</sup>

The primary plot points are the following:

- (1) Simon deceives a government leader through works of sorcery.
- (2) The apostles accuse Simon of deceit.
- (3) The sorcerer and the apostles engage in a lengthy debate in front of the leader.
- (4) Contests of power take place, with Peter always victorious.
- (5) The leader loses confidence in Simon.
- (6) Simon's failed attempt to prove his divinity ends in his death.

<sup>19</sup> Ps.-Marcellus, *Pass. Holy* 15.

<sup>20</sup> *Pass. Apost.* 4.

<sup>21</sup> Ps.-Marcellus, *Pass. Holy* 15.

<sup>22</sup> Ps.-Marcellus, *Pass. Holy* 25.

<sup>23</sup> Ps.-Marcellus, *Pass. Holy* 28; cf. *Pass. Apost.* 7.

<sup>24</sup> Ps.-Marcellus, *Pass. Holy* 28.

<sup>25</sup> Ps.-Marcellus, *Pass. Holy* 30.

<sup>26</sup> Ps.-Marcellus, *Pass. Holy* 47.

<sup>27</sup> Ps.-Marcellus, *Pass. Holy* 56–9; *Pass. Apost.* 11–13.

To reiterate the point, these three joint martyrdom accounts are not identical, and I have explored some of the important distinctions in my previous work;<sup>28</sup> however, our interest here is in the general narrative framework that is present in all these texts as it pertains to Simon.

## 2. The Conflicting Sorcerer

Over the years of studying this material, I have been plagued by a recurring question: how can we explain the transition from the Simon in Samaria of the canonical Acts to the Simon in Rome of these apocryphal acts?

The search to explain the apocryphal Simon naturally began in our earliest source for this character, the Acts of the Apostles. In Acts 8.9–24, Peter and John have an encounter with Simon. The background of this encounter actually lies with Philip, who is preaching successfully in Samaria. He is performing various signs, including casting out evil spirits and healing the lame. A man named Simon sees what Philip is doing and seeks the same power for himself. The text tells us that he had earned a reputation by practising sorcery: ‘Now a certain man named Simon had previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he was someone great. All of them, from the least to the greatest, listened to him eagerly, saying, “This man is the power of God that is called Great” (ἡ Δύναμις τοῦ θεοῦ ἡ καλουμένη Μεγάλη). And they listened eagerly to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic.’<sup>29</sup> However, after Philip arrives, ‘proclaiming the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ’,<sup>30</sup> many believe in Christ and are baptised, including Simon, who afterward follows Philip, amazed by the signs and miracles.

The apostles in Jerusalem hear of what is happening in Samaria and send Peter and John, who lay their hands on these new believers and confer the Holy Spirit. Simon decides that this is a power he simply must have: ‘Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles’ hands, he offered them money, saying, “Give me also this power so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.”’<sup>31</sup> Peter rebukes him: “May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain God’s gift with money! ... 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 the chains of wickedness.” Simon answered, “Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may happen to me.”’<sup>32</sup> One on level, the Simon Magus (‘the sorcerer’) of later Christian tradition is easily identified with this Simon, who had earned a reputation because ‘he had amazed them with his magic’ (ταῖς μαγείαις ἐξεστακέναι αὐτούς).

Nonetheless, this is the story of a misguided new convert who makes a terrible mistake; but when he is made aware of it, he repents and begs for forgiveness. One of the peculiarities of early Christian tradition is that from this brief story, numerous authors constructed and imagined Simon as the ultimate heretic and symbol of anything evil. If you needed an enemy or a villain, Simon was your man. From this brief account in Acts 8, apocryphal authors fashioned an enemy who seeks to kill Peter and, in the joint martyrdom accounts, whose confrontation with the apostles ultimately leads to both their deaths.

<sup>28</sup> Eastman, *Many Deaths*, esp. 11–141.

<sup>29</sup> Acts 8.9–11. All biblical quotations are taken from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

<sup>30</sup> Acts 8.12.

<sup>31</sup> Acts 8.18–19.

<sup>32</sup> Acts 8.20–4.



But who Simon later became is not who Simon is in Acts 8, even if we extrapolate aggressively from Peter's comment that Simon is in 'the chains of wickedness' or, as the NIV renders the phrase, 'captive to sin'.<sup>33</sup> How did we get from the Simon in Samaria of the canonical Acts to the Simon in Rome of these apocryphal acts? Indeed, if we consider the figure of Simon in the apocryphal acts, we find a narrative character that conflicts in many ways with the canonical one.

Let us consider some of the differences between the biblical and apocryphal Simon.

(1) In Acts 8, it appears that Simon is a Samaritan. Indeed, this is how he is described by some Christian authors. Justin Martyr in his *First Apology* and Hippolytus of Rome (or Pseudo-Hippolytus) in the *Refutation of All Heresies* both state that Simon came from a village in Samaria called Gitta.<sup>34</sup> However, in the Acts of Peter, the disheartened believer in Puteoli, Ariston, describes Simon as 'a certain Jew'.<sup>35</sup> This is a noticeable alteration.

(2) Acts 8 states that the confrontation between Simon and the apostles occurs in Samaria. However, this is not the scenario described in these apocryphal acts. In the Acts of Peter, the heavenly vision identifies Simon as one who had been driven out of Judea by Peter,<sup>36</sup> and later in the story Peter states:

Tell us, Simon, did you not fall at the feet of Paul and me in Jerusalem (*non tu Hierosolymis procidisti ad pedes mihi et Paulo*), seeing the healings that were done by our hands? And did you not say, 'I beg you, take from me however much money you want so that I may be able to place my hand on someone and do such powerful works'? And after we heard this from you, we cursed you: 'Are you trying to tempt us to want to possess money?'<sup>37</sup>

This is in clear contrast with the Simon account in Acts 8, for no one with any knowledge of the geography of that region would place Jerusalem in Samaria. My explanation for this change is that the author alters the story in order to fit with the accusation of Simon as 'a certain Jew'. Where might one expect a misguided Jew to confront the apostles in a heretical way? There could be no better setting than Jerusalem, which in light of anti-Jewish sentiment was rhetorically marked as the centre of erroneous Jewish thought and practice.

In Pseudo-Marcellus, we also find this dissimilarity to Acts 8. In that text, Simon is attempting to explain to Nero why Peter was able to anticipate his actions and therefore seem to have supernatural insight into Simon's thoughts and plans. Simon states that they had met before 'in Judea and in all of Palestine and Caesarea'.<sup>38</sup> Here, again, Samaria is noticeably absent.

In Acts 8, Simon is famously in and seemingly from Samaria, which provides part of the tension for that larger narrative about the apostolic mission. But in the apocryphal acts, the site of his showdown with Peter (and perhaps Paul) is Judea.

(3) Also noticeable here is the replacement of John with Paul. The author of the Acts of Peter could not possibly foresee the way in which the tradition would later develop, leading to joint martyrdom accounts that on some level replace the individual martyrdom accounts of the late-second century. However, the Acts of Peter includes an important rhetorical move appealing quite early to a joint apostolic tradition of Peter and Paul

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Rom 7.23, where Paul suggests this condition is true of all people.

<sup>34</sup> Justin, *1 Apol.* 26; Hippolytus, *Haer.* 6.7.1.

<sup>35</sup> Acts Pet. 6: *Judaeum quendam*. T. Nicklas further explores the rhetorical force of references to Judaism in the Acts of Peter in 'Spuren des Judentums in den lateinischen Petrusakten (Actus Vercellenses)', forthcoming.

<sup>36</sup> Acts Pet. 5: *quem tu eiecisti de Iudea adprobatum magum Simonem*.

<sup>37</sup> Acts Pet. 23.

<sup>38</sup> Ps.-Marcellus, *Pass. Holy* 28: *in Iudaea et in tota Palaestina et Caesarea*.

not just in Rome but even going back to Jerusalem. If we look at the canonical record, the only time we see Peter and Paul together in Jerusalem is at the time of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. Neither one of them seems to be the leader in that situation, and we certainly do not get a sense of joint activity. But in the Acts of Peter, joint apostolic activity in Jerusalem is how the past has been reimagined.

(4) Many of the plot points of the later apocryphal acts are simply absent in Acts 8. It is this point more than the others that has prompted this current adventure into the apocrypha and will be the focus of our study moving forward.

### 3. The Other Sorcerer

After many years of contemplating my questions about the apocryphal Simon, a rather simple solution occurred to me that had for some reason eluded me previously: the magus of the apocryphal acts is not just Simon; he is in some ways a combination of Simon and another magus that had an encounter with an apostle in Acts, namely Elymas or Bar-Jesus.

In Acts 13, Paul<sup>39</sup> and Barnabas arrive on Cyprus and come to the city of Paphos. This passage is worth quoting in its entirety:

When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they met a certain magician, a Jewish false prophet, named Bar-Jesus. He was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, an intelligent man, who summoned Barnabas and Saul and wanted to hear the word of God. But the magician Elymas (for that is the translation of his name) opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul away from the faith. But Saul, also known as Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him and said, 'You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord? And now listen – the hand of the Lord is against you, and you will be blind for a while, unable to see the sun.' Immediately mist and darkness came over him, and he went about groping for someone to lead him by the hand. When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was astonished at the teaching about the Lord.<sup>40</sup>

If we return to the general plot progression surrounding the narrative Simon in the apocryphal acts, we see a number of parallels.

(1) Elymas is identified as a 'a certain magician, a Jewish false prophet'. Like the Simon of the Acts of Peter, Elymas is a 'sorcerer' (μάγικον). He is also 'Jewish' (Ἰουδαῖον), although at that point he is active on Cyprus. Finally, he is a 'false prophet' (ψευδοπροφήτην) who is leading people away from the true message of Christ.<sup>41</sup> Like Elymas, Simon uses his sorcery in the apocryphal acts to lure believers away from the teaching of first Paul, then Peter, in the Acts of Peter, and of both apostles in the joint accounts.

(2) Elymas has earned the trust, and is a close confidant of, a prominent member of the Roman government, the proconsul Sergius Paulus. The apocryphal Simon is in some texts closely attached to the emperor Nero.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Called Saul in this passage.

<sup>40</sup> Acts 13.6–12.

<sup>41</sup> Matt 7.15; 24.11; 24.24; Mark 13.22; 2 Pet 2.1; 1 John 4.1. The term remains common in later Christian usage (e.g. Origen of Alexandria, Tertullian, Cyprian of Carthage, Athanasius, John Chrysostom, Augustine, Theodoret of Cyrus).

<sup>42</sup> Bremmer ('Magic', 211) has discussed the motif of Roman aristocrats having their own house magicians.



(3) Elymas opposes the messengers of Christ, which leads to a meeting in the presence of that leader. In the same way, Simon denounces Peter or Peter and Paul, causing Agrippa or Nero to bring them all together for an in-person confrontation.

(4) Elymas is identified as 'a son of the devil' (υιὲ διαβόλου), just as Simon is accused of doing the work of Satan or the devil. In the Acts of Peter, in Peter's vision when he is still in Jerusalem, God tells him that Simon is undermining Paul's preaching 'by the power of Satan' (*energia Satanae*). Similarly, Pseudo-Marcellus tells the reader that Simon 'was raging in the service of the devil' (*diaboli ministerio bachabatur*).<sup>43</sup>

(5) Paul declares that Elymas is 'full of all deceit and villainy', and the apocryphal Simon deceives many by his sorcery and fraudulent so-called miracles, including a faked resurrection that fools Nero.

(6) Elymas is characterised as 'making crooked the straight paths of the Lord'. This is especially true of Simon in the acts, who goes as far as claiming that he is the Christ. What could be a great perversion than enticing people to follow a false Christ?

(7) Sergius Paulus is 'astonished' (ἐκπλησσομένος) and convinced by the words and actions of Paul. Although Nero ultimately kills Peter or Peter and Paul out of vengeance for the death of Simon, the narratives make it clear that the emperor's confidence in Simon is severely shaken. In Pseudo-Marcellus' *Passion*, Nero is 'astounded' (*Nero his auditis obstupuit*)<sup>44</sup> by Paul's teaching and even concedes that they are beaten by the apostles.

(8) Paul and Barnabas' encounter with Elymas ends with the punishment of the sorcerer for his wicked ways. By Paul's word, the Lord moves against Elymas and strikes him blind 'for a while'.<sup>45</sup> Christ also moves against the sorcerer Simon in the apocryphal acts. While the words of Peter and, in some texts, the prayer of Paul play a role in striking down Simon from the sky, Christ is the true actor. In the Acts of Peter, the apostle fears eternal consequences for the deceived believers if Simon is allowed to fly into heaven and asks Christ to intercede: 'If you permit this man to do what he has set out to do, then now all those who have believed in you will be made to stumble, and the signs and wonders that you gave to them through me will be disbelieved. Hurry, Lord, to demonstrate your grace, and after he has fallen down, let him be manifestly broken to pieces but not die.'<sup>46</sup> In the Pseudo-Marcellus Latin *Passion*, we have already seen that Nero foresees possible divine judgement for Simon: 'If I am not able to do anything to you, then the God who is able will do it.'<sup>47</sup> When the moment of Simon's attempted flight arrives, Peter cries out to the demons carrying him: 'I command you through God, the creator of all things, and through Jesus Christ, whom he raised from the dead on the third day, not to carry him any longer but to let him go.'<sup>48</sup> In the other Latin *Passion* (a section that does appear in Pseudo-Hegesippus), Paul tells Peter: 'Ask the omnipotent God to show his power and thwart the craftiness of the enemy.' In his prayer, Peter proclaims: 'I rebuke you, you demons who are carrying him, through God the almighty Father and Jesus Christ his Son. Let go of him right now, and all will say that Christ is the Saviour of this world.'<sup>49</sup> Just as with Elymas in Acts 13, the punishment of Simon comes not from the apostles themselves, but from God.

<sup>43</sup> Satan: Acts Pet. 6. The devil: Ps.-Marcellus, *Pass. Holy* 14.

<sup>44</sup> Ps.-Marcellus, *Pass. Holy* 39.

<sup>45</sup> Several later authors read Elymas' blindness not as a punishment, but as the means of his ultimate salvation, not unlike the experience of Paul himself: John Chrysostom, *Hom. Act* 28: 13.6–8; Didymus the Blind, *Comm. Zach.* 12. Cf. Jerome, *Ep.* 109.3, who states that Paul doomed Elymas to 'blindness for a lifetime'.

<sup>46</sup> Acts Pet. 32.

<sup>47</sup> Ps.-Marcellus, *Pass. Holy* 47.

<sup>48</sup> Ps.-Marcellus, *Pass. Holy* 56.

<sup>49</sup> *Pass. Apost.* 11.

This dense cluster of comparisons between Elymas and the apocryphal Simon may lead us to conclude that the literary Simon is rooted more in Elymas than the biblical Simon. Such a conclusion would not be without merit, but I would like to propose a more complex model of development for the figure of Simon.

#### 4. The Composite Sorcerer

The Simon of the apocryphal acts should be most accurately understood as a composite figure, a sort of pastiche of various traditions, of which Elymas and the Simon of Acts 8 are key components.

The eventual combining of these two biblical sorcerers in the apocryphal texts is not surprising when we consider the way in which other early Christian authors linked them to each other. In his treatise *On Idolatry*, written in the early-third century, Tertullian explicitly connects the two. He comments that workers of magic have been testing God's patience since the days of Moses. Simon provides an example of this and was 'expelled from the faith by the apostles' (*ab apostolis de fide eiectus est*). Elymas is next on the list: 'That other sorcerer, who was with Sergius Paulus, because he was opposing the same apostles, was stricken with blindness.'<sup>50</sup> Although Tertullian does not name Elymas, it is clear whom he has in mind. These two sorcerers from the Acts of the Apostles stand side by side. Notably, Tertullian thinks that both had opposed 'the same apostles' (*isdem aduersabatur apostolis*). Of course, no apostle appears in both biblical scenes (Peter and John in Acts 8; Paul and Barnabas in Acts 13), yet Tertullian seems to reflect the same alteration of the biblical narrative that we see in the Acts of Peter, where Peter indicates that Peter and Paul, not Peter and John, had opposed Simon in the East.<sup>51</sup> It would appear that this narrative modification had taken root in the tradition by the late-second century, and Tertullian knows and adopts it in the early-third, even if it conflicts with Acts 13.

In several other cases Elymas is tied closely to Simon. In his *Homilies on Acts*, John Chrysostom comes to 13.6 and simply comments about Elymas: 'He was also a Jewish sorcerer, just like Simon.'<sup>52</sup> Elymas should be understood as just another sorcerer, and a Jewish one at that, apparently following the identification of Simon as Jewish in the Acts of Peter. The other appearance of Elymas in Chrysostom's writings is in his encomium *In Praise of Saint Paul*. There he provides a list of scriptural examples of those who had in some sense betrayed God: 'Judas, Nebuchadnezzar, Elymas the sorcerer, Simon, Ananias and Sapphira, and the entire Jewish people.'<sup>53</sup> Elymas is linked to Simon, even appearing before him in the list.

It should therefore not surprise us that two figures who were so closely related in early Christian thinking could have been conflated in early Christian literature.

The rhetorical imagination of early Christianity was in full vigour when it came to taking a short passage in Acts 8 and from it creating an arch-heretic, a deceitful and wicked sorcerer, an enemy of the apostles, and even an anti-Christ. The apocryphal Simon embodies all these things. But wickedness alone does not a good story make, so

<sup>50</sup> Tertullian, *Idol.* 9: *alter magus, qui cum Sergio Paulo, quoniam isdem aduersabatur apostolis, luminum amissione multatus est.*

<sup>51</sup> Acts Pet. 23.

<sup>52</sup> John Chrysostom, *Hom. Acts* 28: 13.6–8.

<sup>53</sup> John Chrysostom, *Laud. Paul.* 5. We may note here the condemnation of 'the entire Jewish people'. Chrysostom famously penned *Eight Homilies against the Jews*, and much ink has been spilled by scholars on the interpretation of these homilies and other passages related to the Jews. For a summary of this discussion, see W. Mayer, 'Preaching Hatred? John Chrysostom, Neuroscience, and the Jews', *Revisioning John Chrysostom: New Approaches, New Perspectives* (CAEC 1; ed. C. de Wet and W. Mayer; Leiden: Brill, 2019) 58–136, esp. 58–65.

apocryphal authors drew from an additional body of material – another story in Acts 13 about a sorcerer confronting an apostle in the presence of imperial power. This story was pregnant with possibilities and allowed the accounts of Peter, and later Peter and Paul, to be brought into the corridors of power in Rome itself. Even Nero himself becomes personally aware of, concerned with and taught by the apostles with a simple stroke of the pen.

In this article, I have attempted to trace narrative elements of the apocryphal Simon tradition back to biblical antecedents, where often we find there Elymas at least as much as Simon himself. Although Elymas is seldom named in early Christian literature,<sup>54</sup> his legacy, I have suggested, is alive and well in the battles of Simon Magus with Peter and Paul.

However, in closing I would emphasise that we must resist the temptation to draw lines of influence that are too clean or direct. This article attempts to show that Elymas, and to a lesser extent Simon himself in the Acts of the Apostles, may help us identify roots of parts of the Simon tradition; nonetheless, this inquiry by no means answers all our questions about the ubiquitous Simon. There are traditions that we know contributed to the expanded Simonian universe, such as the apocryphal acts and the Pseudo-Clementines; but there are also actors and authors outside our historical gaze who no doubt played roles in shaping the early Christian imagination regarding Simon, the composite sorcerer. Clear family trees in tradition are elusive, and attempting to discern distinct lines of influence in the apocryphal literature is an impossible task.

And yet, these very ambiguities, and the broader mysteries to which they point, are part of what makes the study of apocryphal literature an endless source of joyful frustration.

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<sup>54</sup> The most notable appearance of Elymas/Bar-Jesus in apocryphal literature is in the fifth-century Acts of Barnabas, where he repeatedly attempts to thwart Barnabas’ missionary activities and finally leads a Jewish mob that kills Barnabas.