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Cavalier Treatment: The Figure of Simon

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Cavalier Treatment

A Column by Lee Speth

The Figure of Simon

I recently noticed the hindmost page of a market-rack tabloid, one which I will not dignify by naming. It offered FREE! -- well, actually for "a token" \$10.00 fee for shipping and -- ahem -- to help defray the cost of the ad -- a "Diamond and Ruby Miracle Crucifix." "Feast your eyes on this magnificent Cross.... Within this cross is a priceless Miracle Treasure: Sacred Water from Lourdes and Holy Earth from the very Birthplace of Jesus." It is, we are assured, "the most breathtaking -- the most spectacular -- MIRACLE CRUCIFIX of all times." Naturally it comes with options. An extra \$2 gets you a gift box and another three is good for an eighteen-inch gold-plated chain. Whatever misgivings we might entertain about the origins of the soil and water samples that one would undoubtedly find, upon receipt, within the crucifix, this truly appalling offer -- "If anything in the world can bring you Miracles of Money and other things you desire, the \$100.00 MIRACLE CRUCIFIX is it" -- is a vital proof that simony is alive and well in our day.

Simony, the sin of trying to buy or sell that which is sacred, is the namesake in moral theology of Simon the Magician, or Simon Magus, a minor figure in the Book of Acts. He appears in Chap. 8 (9-24) as a Christian convert anathematized by St. Peter for attempting to obtain supernatural gifts from the apostle on a flat cash basis. But over and beyond this brief scriptural role, Simon grew in the early Christian imagination and in legend so that the figure of Simon as sorcerer came to overshadow his association with the sin that bears his name. This legendary Simon Magus underlies the villain of Williams's All Hallow's Eve, for this modern fictional Simon has nothing to do with simony. Nor does Simon Magus as he came to appear in primitive Christian legend.

Over the last hundred years or so, Protestant and Catholic novelists have composed a number of tales aimed at reproducing the Roman Empire in the first centuries of Christian emergence. From Newman's Callista and Gen. Wallace's Ben-Hur, through The Robe and The Silver Chalice to Anthony Burgess's recent novelization of the TV miniseries A.D., these imaginative reconstructions have moved in procession through homes and libraries in the hopes of establishing contact between modern Christian imagination and the life of ancient Antioch, Ephesus, and the Rome of the Caesars.

But what seems to be the earliest example of this sort of novel first appeared within the Roman Empire itself. The Recognitions of Clement is the alleged memoir of Clement, Bishop of Rome, a very real figure of the first century A.D. (his Epistle to the Corinthians is one of the oldest extant Christian documents not included in the New Testament).

The Recognitions, first known in Greek and probably composed early in the third century, is undoubtedly spurious, though its Latin translator Rufinus, a priest of Aquileia (modern Venice), believed in it piously. There is a variant, known as The

Homilies of Clement, which is the same material presented as a series of transcribed lectures. Scholars argue, it seems, with appropriate heat over which work has priority of composition; the general reader will probably prefer The Recognitions.

The narrative purports to tell, in the first person, how St. Clement became the companion of St. Peter and a Christian, and how his journeys with the apostle reunited him, like the heroes and heroines of late Shakespearean romance, with his long-lost brothers and parents (these successive encounters are the "recognitions" of the title). Structurally the tale bears little comparison to a modern novel, the first section being taken up with Peter's instruction of Clement and with the word-for-word account of a long public debate in Caesarea between Peter and Simon the Magician. A later section details a debate between the apostle and an abstruse but respectable pagan philosopher, but our interest here is in the clash of the saint and the Magus.

Cheerfully oblivious of the Book of Acts, The Recognitions makes this contest the first meeting of the two men and Simon appears not as a Christian convert, but as a rival and cult leader. He is also a figure of some dread, and two former disciples, now Christians, give us a dramatic preview in preparing St. Peter for the debate: Simon has turned "air into water, and water again into blood, and solidifying it into flesh, formed a new human creature." (Recall the golem in All Hallow's Eve.) The vaunts of the Magus which they report are sweeping: "I can make new trees suddenly spring up, and produce sprouts at once. I can throw myself into the fire and not be burnt.... I shall ascend by flight into the air... I shall be worshipped as God."

Most resonant to readers of Williams will be the trade secret that Simon has revealed to these two former devotees:

"I have made the soul of a boy, unsullied and violently slain, and invoked by unutterable adjurations, to assist me." And "when it [the soul] goes out of the body it acquires knowledge of the future." Here we see, I think, the genesis of Simon the Clerk's use and schemes involving his daughter in All Hallow's Eve.

The apostle goes forth to debate Simon, but the reader will not be given here a blow-for-blow account. In Vol. VIII of the Eerdmans Ante-Nicene Fathers collection, where I found this text, the confrontation runs on for twenty-five close-printed, double-columned pages.

The contrast of personalities is what one might expect. St. Peter is firm but courteous, Simon glib and arrogant. Throughout the debate, the Magus shifts doctrinal coloration like a chameleon, becoming, in himself, the expositor of each system that rivalled the ancient Church. He urges polytheism and ingeniously quotes the Old Testament in its support. He perceives another, perfect God as ultimate master above and

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contemporary view on the matter, especially if the word "feminist" is associated with a narrow and anti-male point of view. But for many readers of the late twentieth century it is almost impossible to understand this play and much else of Miss Sayers's life and career except through the lens of a generous-spirited feminism. No doubt other readers await this and other of Sayers's works in a now unimaginable future. That is why they will outlast both Mrs. Dale's flawed editing and Mrs. Reynolds's spirited criticism of that editing.

Nancy-Lou Patterson

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behind the God who made this imperfect world. He moves then into his own gnosis ("Do you so far err, Peter, as not to know that our souls were made by that good God, the most excellent of all, but they have been brought down as captives into this world?") On the second day of the disputation, stung by the saint's penetrating cross-examination, he falls to a kind of agnosticism — "I know not whether I know" — becomes carping, and turns at last to simple hedonism:

"You persuade many to embrace your religion, and to submit to the restraint of pleasure, in hope of future good things; to whom it happens that they lose the enjoyment of things present, and are deceived with hopes of things future. For as soon as they die, their soul [sic] shall at the same time be extinguished."

These meanderings are sufficient to exasperate a saint and they do. Peter, "grinding his teeth" and making various gestures of frustration, cries out: "You wished to introduce many gods; but now, being confuted in that, you assert that there is not God at all. For by occasion of I know not what unknown God, you denied that the Creator of the world is God, but asserted that He is either an evil Being, or that He has many equals, or, as we have said, that He is not God at all." Then, after the apostle exposes some of the sorcerer's sinister hidden practices, Simon at last spits forth his true creed, which is simply an egomaniacal claim of power and a demand for his own exaltation:

"I am the first power, who am always, and without beginning.... I have flown through the air; I have been mixed with fire, and been made one body with it; I have made statues to move.... I am the Son of God enduring to eternity.... but your words are all in vain; nor can you perform any real works such as I have now mentioned, ...he also who sent you is a magician, who yet could not deliver himself from the suffering of the cross."

He shouts blasphemies at the apostle till the shocked crowd drives Magus forth.

(to be continued)