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Cavalier Treatment

A Column by Lee Speth

The Last of Simon Magus

Romance requires a villain and, as I noted in the last issue, Christian romance in the early centuries fastened on the figure of Simon the Magician, expanding his brief scriptural role as a would-be desecrator to the more lurid and polarizing role of rival Messiah and anti-Christ.

This larger role may have an historical basis. According to Justin Martyr, who addressed his First Apology for the Christian faith to the emperor Antonius Pius around 145 A.D.:

...after Christ's ascension into heaven the devils put forward certain men who said that they themselves were gods.... There was a Samaritan, Simon, a native of the village called Gitto, who in the reign of Claudius Caesar, and in your royal city of Rome, did mighty acts of magic, by virtue of the art of the devils operating in him. He was considered a god, and as a god was honored by you with a statue, which statue was erected on the river Tiber, between the bridges, and bore this inscription in the language of Rome — "Simoni Deo Sancto" ["To Simon the holy god"]. And almost all the Samaritans, and a few even of other nations, worship him, and acknowledge him as the first god; and a woman, Helena, who went about with him at that time, and had formerly been a prostitute, they say is the first idea generated by him.

Irenaeus, also in the second century, excoriates the Magus in a similar vein. His Against the Heresies was the definitive attack of ancient Catholicism on the Gnostics, and he fathers that movement upon Simon:

Now this Simon of Samaria, from whom all sorts of heresies derive their origin, formed his sect out of the following materials: — Having redeemed from slavery at Tyre, a city of Phoenicia, a certain woman named Helena, he was in the habit of carrying her about with him, declaring that this woman was the first conception of his mind, the mother of all, by whom, in the beginning, he conceived in his mind [the thought] of forming angels and archangels.

Irenaeus goes on at length as to Simon's mythology and the alleged reincarnations of Helena "in that Helen on whose account the Trojan war was undertaken," then passing from one body to another, each less fortunate, till she "at last became a common prostitute; and she it was who was meant by the lost sheep" whom Simon as Messiah had come into the world to redeem. And the "mystic priests belonging to this sect both lead profligate lives and practise magical arts, each one to the extent of his ability." They have, or claim, the company of "those beings who are called 'Paredri' (familiars) and 'Oniropompi' (dream-senders)".

But how much of this is historically valid? I don't know if Simon appears in any pagan records (and

anyone with any information on this point should feel free to use the letter column of this journal to enlighten the rest of us). At any rate, the first great historian of the Church, Eusebius, took over and incorporated these statements of Justin and Irenaeus and aimed heady invective at Simon's memory — "the prime author of every heresy" — while treating Simon's followers as a sect extant in his own day (the fourth century). Their rites "involve such appalling degradation, such unspeakable conduct, that no decent man would let a mention of them pass his lips." Naturally, Inquiring Minds would like to know, but we can only say that images of Simon and Helena were worshipped "with incense, sacrifices and libations," and that Eusebius claims that Simonian observances also included the mockery of "wretched women, burdened indeed with vices of every kind."

The Eusebian account corresponds to a longer narrative of considerable interest, if only because it is the source of Thomas Costain's treatment of the Magus in The Silver Chalice, which many of us recall from the novel, or from Jack Palance's portrayal in the movie.

The Acts of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul was an apocryphal scripture of at least moderate ancient popularity. Origen refers to it, and it records several episodes that are part of widespread Christian tradition (the crucifixion of St. Peter upside down for instance). And it also relates the sublime pretension and spectacular end of Simon the Magician.

Neither Justin nor Irenaeus had mentioned what had, at last, become of the Magus, and Eusebius is strikingly reticent while pointing toward some sort of divine reprisal:

He [Simon] arrived in Rome where he was greatly helped by the power [presumably infernal] that awaited its opportunity there, and in a short time his efforts met with such success that the citizens actually set up a statue of him and honored him as a god. However, this success of his was short-lived. Close on his heels, in the same reign of Claudius, the all-gracious and kindly providence of the universe brought to Rome... the strong and great apostle, chosen for his merits to be spokesman for all the others, Peter himself. Clad in the divine armor, like a noble captain of God, he brought... the proclamation of the Kingdom of Heaven. Thus when the divine word had made its home among them, Simon's power was extinguished and destroyed at once with the man himself. (II:14. All quotes from Eusebius, by the way, are from the translation of G.A. Williamson, Penguin, 1965).

The Acts of Peter and Paul gives a picturesque if undependable account of that ending.

The Acts seems to pick up from a narrative in progress. The emperor Claudius is dead, and deified according to custom, his grand-nephew and stepson Nero is sovereign, and St. Peter is in the city. We find the

Jews of Rome petitioning Nero that St. Paul should be barred from approaching Rome and the emperor indulges them. "And they [the Jews] also informed Simon the Magician, having sent for him, that [St. Paul] should not come into the parts of Italy."

But Paul arrives anyway, and after some discussion of his mission in Rome, and Peter's activities, we hear that "Simon, moved with zeal, rouses himself, and began to say many evil things about Peter, saying that he was a wizard and a cheat. And they believed him, wondering at his miracles; for he made a brazen serpent move itself, and stone statues to laugh and move themselves, and himself to run and suddenly to be raised into the air." Word of this conflict between the apostles and the Magus reaches the ears of Caesar; Nero summons them. Simon responds impressively to this command performance:

he... began suddenly to assume different forms so that on a sudden he became a child, and after a little an old man, and at other times a young man; for he changed himself both in face and stature into different forms, and was in a frenzy, having the devil as his servant.

Nero is, naturally, impressed with these Protean pyrotechnics and swerves near to belief. The two saints, however, scorn Simon's effects, and Peter challenges his adversary to read his mind, while covertly requesting to have a barley loaf smuggled in to him. Abetted by the emperor, the apostle puts the loaf literally up his sleeve and repeats his challenge to Simon to describe what he is thinking and doing. The magician, baffled, protests that "no one knows the thoughts of man but God alone."

Peter, having blessed the barley loaf which he had received, and having broken it with his right hand and his left, had heaped it up in his sleeves. Then Simon, enraged that he was not able to tell the secret of the apostle, cried out, saying: Let great dogs come forth, and eat him up before Caesar. And suddenly there appeared great dogs and rushed at Peter. But Peter... showed to the dogs the loaf which he had blessed; which the dogs seeing, no longer appeared.

Simon must now trump a considerable high card. "If I do not manifestly hold myself out to be a god, no one will bestow upon me due reverence." So he begs the emperor to construct a wooden tower, promising that his angels will lift him from it into heaven. And after an interminable theological dispute, which I here spare the reader,

Nero ordered a lofty tower to be made in the Campus Martius, and all the people and the dignities to be present at the spectacle. And on the following day, all the multitude having come together, Nero ordered Peter and Paul to be present, to whom also he said: Now the truth has to be made manifest.... Then Simon went up upon the tower in the face of all, and, crowned with laurels, he began to fly.

Nero sneers at the apostles, seeing their cause undone, and, oddly, even St. Paul seems despairful. "And Paul, having looked up, full of tears, and seeing Simon flying, said, Peter, why art thou idle? ...Do at once what thou doest," he adds, in an odd echo of a well-known New Testament text.

And Peter, looking steadfastly against Simon, said: I adjure ye, ye angels of Satan, who are carrying him into the air, to deceive the hearts of the unbelievers, by the God that created all things, and by Jesus Christ, ...no longer from this hour to keep him up, but to let him go. And immediately, being let go, he fell into a place called Sacra Via ...and was divided into four parts, having perished by an evil fate.

Despite this triumph, the two apostles are eventually martyred by Nero, but at least Simon has been exploded, in at least two senses of the word.

It only remains to consider why Simon Magus seemed so important to the early Christian romancers. I think the answer lies in the element I have cited: the need for a really compelling villain. For the Christians, dogged by persecution, the obvious villains might have been the emperors. But it was important to these Christians to demonstrate that they were reliable and loyal citizens; they could not productively vilify any emperor in his own person (though he might be cloaked under monstrous forms, as in the Apocalypse of John). They could risk a certain fleeing at Nero, whom all of Rome at last excoriated, but not Trajan or Marcus Aurelius. And besides, their battle was not entirely of this world. Over and above the head of state who misunderstood them and bloodied their bodies stood a sneering, arrogant threat to the understanding and the soul, a figure who appealed for his power to the supernatural realms such as they also invoked, caricaturing their own gifts and message. For all the brutality of the state persecutions, Simon Magus represented the true threat and the true rival.

