

The Book Of Acts: Verse-By-Verse

Acts 8:9-12

As we return to chapter 8, Luke begins to narrate a story about a man named Simon Magus. Let's read verses 9-10:

Now for some time a man named Simon had practiced sorcery in the city and amazed all the people of Samaria. He boasted that he was someone great, and all the people, both high and low, gave him their attention and exclaimed, "This man is the divine power known as the Great Power."

• **The Great Power: vv. 9-10**

Luke gives us a preliminary outline of the story he wants us to hear. Now before we dive into this section, let me make a couple of things clear for all of us. Luke's intention is to show how the power of the Holy Spirit is far superior to any other power – real or imagined. That's the point of the whole story.

Second, Luke is not presenting this story as a lesson in soteriology – the study of salvation. He does not explain – as we will see – how Simon Magus could be both a Christian and still be, as Peter put it, "full of bitterness and captive to sin." (v.23)

We will, of course, try to shed some light on this issue, but it is not Luke's primary purpose in relating this story.

Okay, so let's try to get some historical background on Simon Magus that will help us understand the context of the story.

Luke identifies our subject as "Simon Magus". The word, "Magus", is a designation of a priestly caste of scholars. Over time the term was used to designate any kind of magical practitioners, such as Elymas – who we will meet in Acts 13.

As you may have guessed, the term Magus and Magi are related. The Magi or "wise men" in Matthew's gospel were evidently astrologers whose caste had been influenced by Daniel many decades before Christ's birth, during the Babylonian Captivity.

From the various historical sources, we gather that Simon had a following in both Samaria and Rome – and that he was responsible for corrupting some of the Christians in Rome by his false teachings.

Some scholars suggest that Simon was the founder of the Gnostic sect of the Simonians. Justin Martyr, who we will reference shortly, was from Samaria. He recorded that Simon was considered a god and was worshipped not only by the Samaritans but also by some in Rome. His Roman followers supposedly erected a statue in his honor.

As F.F. Bruce points out, "Simon Magus plays an extraordinary role in early Christian literature."

We might not expect this to be the case, but Church history bears out Bruce's assertion. The name Simon Magus is found in various historical accounts from the first century. I'm going to cite several examples of these

accounts, but we must keep in mind that it is difficult to ascertain how accurate these characterizations are.

- **Josephus**, the Jewish historian, mentions that a Jewish magician was sent by the Roman governor Felix to ensure that Princess Drusilla – the niece of Herod Agrippa – married him.
- **Justin Martyr** – a convert to Christianity – became a travelling teacher, settling in Rome during the reign of Antonius Pius. He made this reference to Simon Magus:

“There was a Samaritan, Simon, a native of the village called Gitto, who in the reign of Claudius Cesar, and in your royal city of Rome, did mighty acts of magic, by virtue of the art of the devils operating in him. [...] 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”. - Justin Martyr, *The First Apology, Chapter 26*

- **Irenaeus**, a Greek speaking Christian writer and bishop in Roman Gaul. Was the first heresiologist or “cataloguer of heresies”.

He describes how Simon Magnus taught that one Helena was the “First Thought” and also “Mother of All”. This associates her with Eve. These terms also appear in some mysterious gnostic texts written during the same the same time period of Irenaeus.

- **Hippolytus**, a Greek speaking Christian indicated that Simon Magus developed a theology consisting of three pairs: Mind and Intelligence, Voice and Name,

and Ratiocination and Reflection. Hippolytus' records suggest that Simon's followers had a definite influence on early Christian history.

Here's a quote from Hippolytus about Simon: "He stated that, if he were buried alive, he would rise the third day. And accordingly, having ordered a trench to be dug by his disciples, he directed himself to be interred there. They, then, executed the injunction given; whereas he remained (in that grave) until this day, for he was not the Christ." Hippolytus: *Book VI, Chapter 15*

Now that we have seen some historical references to Simon Magus, let's try to piece together a description of the man, and why he is important to Luke's narrative.

Let's read verses 9-11 again:

"Now for some time a man named Simon had practiced sorcery in the city and amazed all the people of Samaria. He boasted that he was someone great, and all the people, both high and low, gave him their attention and exclaimed, "This man is the divine power known as the Great Power." They followed him because he had amazed them for a long time with his magic."

• Simon's Local Influence:

Samaria, as we know, was always a place of theological divergence, if not outright heresy. The Samaritans were, largely, a group of half-Jew, half-Gentiles who came out of the Jewish dispersion.

Jesus' conversation with the woman at the well demonstrates that they had long since rejected

Solomon's Temple and established their own system of worship at Mount Gerizim. They rejected all the Old Testament, except for the first five books of Moses.

Luke tells us that Simon impressed his fellow-countrymen by his magic powers. Pay attention to that. Simon was performing magical feats that had real power. He was so persuasive that people from the lower and higher classes of Samaria regarded him as some great power.

Some of the early Church fathers, like Irenaeus, indicated that Simon presented himself as a kind of semi-god, using the title, "The Great Power". Evidently, the Samaritans bought into Simon's self-designation.

• **Simon Magus And Philip's Samaritan Evangelism**

As we have seen, Simon had quite a niche carved out for himself in Samaria – and possible some part of Rome. He was regarded as someone powerful – if nothing else. But now something happened that changed the status quo.

Starting at verse 12 we read, "But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women."

Regardless of Simon's prior hold on the city of Samaria, he suddenly found himself challenged by the preaching and miracles of Philip, one of the seven men chosen to oversee the widows' distributions.

I'd like us to keep something in mind that we saw earlier in our study. Luke records that the people of Samaria

believed the preaching of the “good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ.”

In prior passages we saw the “name of Jesus Christ” was a way of saying “the power and authority of Jesus Christ”. When Peter explained how the man at the gate called Beautiful was healed, he told the Sanhedrin that it was by the “Name of Jesus”.

So Luke is saying something important to us. He’s relaying that the Samaritans not only heard the gospel of the Kingdom of God ... they also saw the evidence of Jesus’ power as Philip preached.

The combination of Philip’s preaching and miracles convinced the rank and file of Samaria that Christ was the Messiah. This was not the first time the gospel had been preached to Samaria.

The man who had been previously tormented by a legion of demons had spread the news about Jesus there. In addition, Jesus had also preached there.

It's not the subject that was new: Instead, this was the first post-resurrection preaching of the gospel at Samaria. Philip simply built upon the prior evangelism events that had taken place in that city.

This time, however, Simon’s grip on the populace was weakened. In verse 12 Luke tells us the people “paid close attention to what Philip said” and this led to their conversion to Christ. This was followed by another strong statement that “they were baptized, both men and women.”

As we have seen before in Acts, converts to Christ did not take baptism lightly. It was the definite sign that faith in Christ had led people to fully embrace the gospel – whatever the consequences might be.

• **What About Simon?**

But what about Simon? He suddenly found himself in an adverse situation. Whereas, in the past, the Samaritans had acknowledged him as “The Great Power”, now they were acknowledging Jesus as the Messiah.

Did Simon see his grip over the city slipping away? We are not told, but he was greatly impressed by Philip's message and miracles, because in verse 13 Luke records, “Simon himself believed and was baptized. And he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw.”

Let's take those two statements in reverse. First, “Simon followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw.” I put it to you that if a man who was famous for his sorcery was astonished by the great signs and miracles that he saw – then Philip's miracles must have been outstanding.

One commentator put it this way: “Like the magicians of Egypt in the presence of Moses, [Simon] he recognized that the messenger of the true God had access to a source of power that outstripped his own.

Second, Luke tells us, “Simon himself believed and was baptized.” Okay, here comes the problem for so many New Testament scholars and theologians: Was Simon truly saved?

Some commentators say something like this: “Well we don’t really know if Luke means that Simon became a Christian. Perhaps he was just faking it”. No doubt the “eternal security” groups find it necessary to take this stance.

However, there is another obvious side to this. The apostles and their colleagues obviously recognized baptism as outward declaration of belief in Christ. If Philip had any doubts about the genuineness of Simon’s conversion, do you think he would he have allowed him to be baptized?

I think it is much more likely that, given the Jews normal distancing of themselves from the Samaritans, Philip must have accepted the Samaritans’ faith as genuine since they baptized many from that city.

Likewise, Simon Magus was known to all. His background could not have been a secret to Philip and those assisting him in the Samaritan Outreach. Philip certainly would have opposed Simon being baptized if there was any doubt as to the genuineness of his conversion.

Considering all this, we ought to take Luke’s words for what they were intended to mean: “Simon himself believed and was baptized.”

• **Next time: The Samaritan Revival – Follow Up**