

The Conversion Of A Sorcerer

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It is written:

*Acts 8:9-13-But there was a certain man called Simon, who previously practiced sorcery in the city and astonished the people of Samaria, claiming that he was someone great, **10** to whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, "This man is the great power of God." **11** And they heeded him because he had astonished them with his sorceries for a long time. **12** But when they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized. **13** Then Simon himself also believed; and when he was baptized he continued with Philip, and was amazed, seeing the miracles and signs which were done.*

In the Book of Acts, we read about a sorcerer who came to faith in Jesus and was saved. His name is Simon, but he is often referred to as Simon the Sorcerer (or Simon Magus). As we read of his conversion, there are some important lessons that we can learn from him.

First, the text in Acts suggests that Simon was a Samaritan. The people of Samaria were predominantly half-Jewish and half-Gentile, with a religion that combined elements of Judaism with paganism. The church fathers provide a great deal of commentary on Simon Magus.

“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. . . . He was considered a god, and as a god was honored by you with a statue. This statue was erected on the Tiber River, between the two bridges. It bore the following inscription in the language of Rome: “To Simon, the holy God.” . . . And almost all the Samaritans, and a few even of other nations, worship him. They acknowledge him as the first god. Justin Martyr (c. 160, E), 1.171. The Samaritans, Simon and Menander, did many mighty works by magic and deceived many. They remain deceived. Even among yourselves [i.e., the pagan Romans], as I said before, Simon was in the royal city of Rome in the reign of Claudius Caesar. He so greatly astonished the sacred Senate and the Roman people that he was considered a god. He was honored with a statue, just like the others whom you honor as gods. . . . I advise you to destroy that statue. Justin Martyr (c. 160, E), 1.182. When I communicated

in writing with Caesar, I gave no thought to any of my people, that is, the Samaritans. Rather, I stated that they were in error to trust in the magician Simon of their own nation. They say that he is God above all power, authority, and might. Justin Martyr (c. 160, E), 1.260. Simon the Samaritan was the magician of whom Luke, the disciple and follower of the apostles, [writes]. . . . He set himself eagerly to contend against the apostles, in order that he himself might seem to have been a supernatural being. So he applied himself with still greater zeal to the study of the entirety of magic arts, so he could bewilder and overpower multitudes of men. This was his method during the reign of Claudius Caesar, who honored Simon with a statue because of his magical power, according to what is said. This man, then, was glorified by many persons as if he were a god. And he taught that it was himself who appeared among the Jews as the Son. . . . All sorts of heresies derive their origin from this Simon of Samaria. He formed his sect in the following manner: At Tyre, a city of Phoenicia, he redeemed from slavery a certain woman named Helena. He used to take her along with him. He declared that this woman was the first conception of his mind. Irenaeus (c. 180, E/ W), 1.347, 348. God will also judge the vain speeches of the perverse Gnostics, by showing that they are the disciples of Simon Magus. Irenaeus (c. 180, E/ W), 1.507. You install Simon Magus in your Pantheon, giving him a statue and the title of holy God. Tertullian (c. 197, W), 3.29. The doctrine of Simon's sorcery taught the worship of angels. It was itself actually reckoned among idolatries and condemned by the apostle Peter in Simon's own person. Tertullian (c. 197, W), 3.259. From that point forward, Simon Magus, who had just become a believer, was cursed by the apostles and ejected from

the faith. For he was still thinking somewhat of his juggling sect. That is, he wanted to buy even the gift of the Holy Spirit through imposition of hands, so that he could include it among the miracles of his profession. Tertullian (c. 200, W), 3.66. There is the Simon of Samaria in the Acts of the Apostles, who bargained for the Holy Spirit. He had only a vain remorse that he and his money must perish together. After his condemnation, he applied his energies to the destruction of the truth, as if to console himself by revenge. In addition to the support with which his own magic arts furnished him, he had recourse to deception. He purchased a Tyrian woman of the name of Helen out of a brothel, with the same money that he had offered for the Holy Spirit—a transaction worthy of the wretched man. He actually pretended that he was the Supreme Father, and he further pretended that the woman was his own Primary Conception. Tertullian (c. 210, W), 3.215. At this very time, even the heretical dupes of this same Simon are so much elated by the extravagant pretension of their art, that they try to bring up from Hades the souls of the prophets themselves. Tertullian (c. 210, W), 3.234. The disciples, then, of this [Simon Magus] celebrate magical rites, and they resort to incantations. They transmit both love spells and charms. . . . This Simon, deceiving many in Samaria by his sorceries, was reproved by the apostles, and he was put under a curse. All of this has been written in the Acts. But Simon afterwards renounced the faith. . . . And journeying as far as Rome, he came in conflict with the apostles. Peter offered repeated opposition to him, for Simon was deceiving many by his sorceries. Hippolytus (c. 225, W), 5.80, 81. We know that Simon Magus gave himself the title of the “Power of God.” Origen (c. 228, E), 9.317. [Simon Magus] was successful

on that one occasion. But today I think it would be impossible to find thirty of his followers in the entire world. In fact, I am probably overstating the number. There are exceedingly few in Palestine. And in the rest of the world (throughout which he desired to spread the glory of his name), you find him nowhere mentioned. Where his name is found, it is found quoted from the Acts of the Apostles. So he owes the preservation of his name to Christians. This clearly proves that Simon was in no respect divine. Origen (c. 248, E), 4.422. [Celsus] next pours down upon us a heap of names, saying that he knows of the existence of certain Simonians, who worship Helen . . . as their teacher. They are called Helenians. However, it has escaped the notice of Celsus that the Simonians do not at all acknowledge Jesus to be the Son of God. Rather, they consider Simon to be the Power of God. Origen (c. 248, E), 4.570. Simonians are now found [practically] nowhere throughout the world. Yet, in order to gain many followers to himself, Simon protected his disciples from the danger of death [through martyrdom] . . . by teaching them to regard idolatry as a matter of indifference. So even at the beginning of their existence, the followers of Simon were not exposed to persecution. After all, the wicked demon who was conspiring against the teachings of Jesus was well aware that none of his own teachings would be weakened by the teachings of Simon. Origen (c. 248, E), 4.578. [The people of Rome] had seen the chariot of Simon Magus, his fiery car, blown into pieces by the mouth of Peter and vanish when Christ was named. They had seen Simon, I say, trusting in false gods. Yet, being abandoned by them in their terror, borne down headlong by his own weight, Simon lay prostrate with his legs broken. Arnobius (c. 305, E), 6.438. Simon Magus believed and was baptized with

many others. Pamphilus (c. 309, E), 6.167. Simon the magician, . . . as he flew in the air in an unnatural manner, was dashed against the earth. Apostolic Constitutions (compiled c. 390, E), 7.401. The first of the new [i.e., Christian] heresies began in this manner: The devil entered into one Simon, a Samaritan of a village called Gitthae. He was a magician by profession. . . . Simon himself, when he saw the signs and wonders that were done without any magic ceremonies, fell into admiration, believed, was baptized, and continued in fasting and prayer. . . . But when Simon saw that the Spirit was given to believers by the laying on of hands, he took money and offered it. Apostolic Constitutions (compiled c. 390, E), 7.452. When he was in Rome, he disturbed the church severely and subverted many, bringing them over to himself. He astonished the Gentiles with his skill in magic. Apostolic Constitutions (compiled c. 390, E), 7.453; see also 5.143; extended discussion: 5.74–5.81, 7.452–7.453.”” (David Bercot, *A Dictionary Of Early Christian Beleifs: A Reference Guide To More Than 700 Topics Discussed By The Early Church Fathers*, 22873-22971 (Kindle Edition); Peabody, Massachusetts; Hendrickson Publishers Marketing, LLC)

Second, these facts also remind us that “magic” in the ancient world was usually connected with disincarnate spirits, ie., demons. Clinton Arnold informs us:

“ONE OF THE CLEAREST WINDOWS FOR SEEING WHAT ORDINARY PEOPLE BELIEVED lieved about supernatural powers in the New Testament era is the realm of magic and divination. Magical beliefs and practices were a part of all

religious traditions (and even came to have a share in Christianity!). In Western culture we have come to think of magic as harmless trickery in the context of entertainment. When we speak of magic during the period of the New Testament, however, we must realize it was not the art of illusion. Magic represented a method of manipulating good and evil spirits to lend help or bring harm. Magical formulas could be used for such things as attracting a lover or winning a chariot race. Black magic, or sorcery, involved summoning spirits to accomplish all kinds of evil deeds. Curses could be placed, competitors subdued, and enemies restrained.” (Clinton E. Arnold, *Powers of Darkness: Principalities & Powers in Paul's Letters*, 21 (Kindle Edition); Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press)

Johnson gives us some more detail especially about Canaanite paganism:

"From Deuteronomy we can create a list of nine separate forms of Paganism. Once we identify these and learn exactly what the practices are, we will be able to see the form they occur in today....The Canaanites worshiped a god called Moloch with human sacrifices. Children, (mainly their firstborn sons) were burned alive in their sacrifices to this god....“Tophet is Moloch, an idol which was made of brass. The Canaanites heated him from his lower parts; and his outstretched hands were made hot. They put the child in his hands, and it was burnt alive. When the child vehemently cried out the priests beat a drum, so the father would not hear the voice of his son, and move his heart.” Rabbi Rashi’s Commentary on Jeremiah 7:31...Diviner –“Kesem”

“Kesem” is the practice where one gazes at an object until he becomes transfixed by it and forgets the world around him. Once he achieves this great level of concentration, he can predict future events. By this definition, some form of meditation is required to achieve an altered state of consciousness....Observer of Times –“Me'onen” “Me'onen” is Chaldean Astrology. In later times it was confused with the cloud reader and those who divine by observing the flights of birds...The enchanter sees omens in animals. An enchanter uses something to charm/control animals (serpents and scorpions) to be passive or to attack. Burning incense is one way of charming...“Sorcerer” is a general term for any occult practice. It may include drug use, meditation, or both, but it always has some method to cause an altered state of consciousness. Compare this to Shamanism. The ancient church fathers used the terms “magician” and “sorcerer” interchangeably....A charmer is one who makes charms. A charm is a piece of jewelry worn for protection or to cause something to happen, such as attract love or money. A protective charm is called an amulet. Other charms are called talismans. In Acts 19:19, Paul's new Christian converts in the city of Ephesus burned their magic books. Archeology has unearthed some of these texts. The magic rites of Diana included spells, amulets, and talismans invoking her for aid. This is exactly the same thing found today inside the religions of Hinduism and Wicca....One with a Familiar Spirit – “Ob” Ob's conjured up ghosts and spirits and made them materialize and speak. One kind used a skull (teraphim) and the other kind used soothsaying. Some rabbis taught that the Ob would see the spirit but not hear it speaking; the inquirer would hear the voice but not see the spirit, while bystanders would not

hear or see anything...The Ob was the kind of Canaanite Sorcerer used by King Saul to conjure the spirit of the prophet Samuel....So the Ob created what is commonly called a necromantic pit. By use of a teraphim, (her familiar spirit) she caused spirits to appear. This same practice of casting magic circles on the ground for ritual purposes is still used today by modern witches. See the chapter on Wicca for details....The Talmud states that the name for a wizard, Yidde'oni, comes from a word loosely translated as an extinct animal. It also states that no one remembers exactly what kind of animal it was. The name carried over to mean those who used a bone of this extinct animal by placing it in their mouths and through some incantations can have the dead speak through this bone. This has been translated as a ventriloquist or a medium. It is quite possible that the term in this ancient passage means, instead of "extinct animal," a bone from the deceased. Mediums today often ask for an artifact of the deceased in order to try to make some sort of contact with them....A necromancer is a little different from the wizard. According to this passage in the Talmud, necromancers were said to spend nights in cemeteries in order to invoke the spirits of the dead. They would wear special clothing designed especially for this purpose and burn incense to attract the spirits. Once the ritual was thought to be complete, the necromancer would go to sleep on the grave of the deceased, expecting them to appear in their dreams and answer their questions....Magician and Soothsayer are general terms for any of the previous practices. A sorcerer uses more ceremonial magic (calling on spirits for aid), while a magician uses more non-ceremonial magic (relying on the power of the human spirit without asking other spirits for aid.) Biblically, whether the

occultist thinks he or she is contacting a spirit or using their own power, it is exactly the same demonic manifestation." (Ken Johnson, Th.D., *Ancient Paganism: The Sorcery Of The Fallen Angels*, 59-63 (Kindle Edition))

It has been my experience from working with many former witches that demons often appeal to a person who has been in some way victimized by others. (One young man I worked with told me how the demons he eventually turned to freed him from physical abuse when he was younger, and all they asked for in return was his devotion and loyalty. He later learned that demons are in reality wicked taskmasters whose promises always come with a terrible price to pay. I was blessed to be able to baptize him into Christ Jesus). Often, demons can promise power to these poor souls. As a result, the person who thereby comes under the influence of demons does not realize the lies that such beings are spouting. As another example, consider the following account from a former sorcerer:

“My journey into the evil world of sorcery began at an early age. I do not remember much of my early childhood. My dad was an alcoholic Vietnam vet that would often fly into drunken abusive rages. My mom worked hard to support myself, my brother, and my dad. (He rarely worked because he was too enslaved to his drinking habit.) My first experience with darkness happened one night while laying in bed waiting to sleep. A black shadow-like figure passed by my brother’s bedroom window which I could see from my bed. This frightened me and I ran out to the living room to tell my mom and dad. They searched outside but found no trace of any one being there. A few nights later I was in bed

and suddenly sensed an evil presence at the foot of my bed. Though I couldn't see it I knew it was about six or so feet tall, felt it was black, and there was a fierce, malevolent, powerful, energy emanating from it. At first I was very frightened and felt threatened. Because I felt threatened I became enraged at this thing that would dare to frighten me. I got up from my bed and chased it into my parent's room where it retreated into the closet. Foolish child I was, only about nine or so, I challenged said it, saying "Come and get me!". It didn't respond so I went to bed and slept peacefully. I didn't know any better as a child not to threaten demons like that but about a week later it did indeed "Come and get me." My father was in one of his drunken rages, attacking my mother and I was scared for her, and didn't know how to help. Then the same evil entity I confronted earlier came inside of me. When the demon entered I overflowed with massive power. More power than I had ever felt. I grabbed my dad and tore him off of my mother, almost throwing him across the room. He crashed into the hot water heater with his bare back, getting severe burns. I was a small child and my dad was over six feet tall. Without that demon entering me and giving me all that power my dad probably would have killed my mom. I felt violated when the demon entered me without my consent but was grateful that its dark power enabled me to save my mom. That's when my life started down the wrong path. I felt like a new person with all that power flowing through me. I wasn't scared much by anyone any more. The demon must have fused with me pretty well because I could sense in my intuition it was constantly communicating with me on some level. Also I instantly became wiser than my years and acted much older than I was from that point on. Its personality overshadowed mine and

I became cold and emotionless, except of course for my occasional fits of rage. It felt like a constant struggle from that point on to be myself. Life was hard in a violent alcoholic home. Many a night I would hide in fear for my life, while my father fueled his drunken rage with flashbacks of Vietnam. I would often hide while he and my mother fought, but the night the demon entered me my mother cried out for me to help. My father was going to kill her, and even though I didn't ask that demon for help his power enabled me to save my mother's life. The demon's evil nauseated me but as a young victimized child I felt empowered and protected with him inside of me." (Martin Decker, Jr., *Death of a Sorcerer*, 1-2 (Kindle Edition); Victoria, BC, Canada; FriesenPress)

Demons are experts at manipulation.

1 Timothy 4:1-Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons,

Third, notice that it was the preaching and confirmation of the Gospel that led Simon and the Samaritan to faith in Jesus. God has provided more than enough evidence to confirm His Word. The historical credibility of the Bible, coupled with the many miraculous evidences that it is the Word of God, can overshadow any deceptions of the world of darkness. Simon believed and was baptized, along with the other Samaritans. Thus, he became a Christian like them:

Mark 16:16-He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.

This reminds me of the former sorcerer that I mentioned previously.

“When I was in the new apartment a church van used to come around the neighborhood and pick up the kids for church. I decided to go and check it out. When approaching the church I heard an audible voice say to me: “You are my child and I love you dearly.” I was overwhelmed with an enveloping cloud of pure love that engulfed me. I’m unsure about it today, but at the moment, I thought to myself ,” Wow, God loves me.” During Sunday school I kept hearing male and female voices calling out my name, but looking around me I didn’t see anyone. My Sunday school teacher noticed my confusion and asked what was the matter. I told her, “Someone’s calling me.” But she just brushed it aside and told me to get back to reading the lesson. After feeling the love of God and learning that Jesus died to enable me to enter heaven, I wanted with all my heart to live for him and get to know him better. The church was going to baptize the older children one Sunday and I told my Sunday school teacher I wanted to be baptized as well. The pastor said to her, “Isn’t he a little young?” Does he understand what it’s all about?” My Sunday school teacher said” Yes, I think he understands”. The pastor approved and I was baptized that day. My memory is murky, but I remember feeling something changed when I came up out of the water.” (Martin Decker, Jr., *Death of a Sorcerer*, 3-4 (Kindle Edition); Victoria, BC, Canada; FriesenPress)

Sadly, Simon the sorcerer did not remain faithful as a Christian for long. He went back into the world of sorcery, as history documents. Yet as a baptized believer, he could be forgiven of sin if he would simply repent and confess that sin to God in prayer (Acts 8:22). Why not become a Christian yourself by believing in Jesus and being baptized into Him as you repent (Acts 2:38)? Or if you are a baptized believer who has fallen away, will you not repent and pray the Lord for forgiveness (1 John 1:9)?

The churches of Christ stand ready to assist you.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.