

# THE FALL OF SIMON MAGUS IN EARLY CHRISTIAN COMMENTARY\*

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It is a well known fact that Simon Magus's aerial flight and subsequent fall—the result of apostolic intervention—is the most frequently recalled apocryphal New Testament event in the art and literature of the Middle Ages, even in the Baroque era. The medieval reception of this apocryphal legend was derived both from the «Acts of Peter» (*Acta Petri*) and «The Passion of Peter and Paul» (*Passio*) and from the commentary of the Church Fathers of this episode<sup>1</sup>. This article brings together the patristic exegesis of the Fall of Simon Magus to ascertain the reception of the apocryphal material and its pedagogical adaptation by the Church Fathers. It also identifies the major themes which the Church Fathers promoted through the use of the Fall of Simon Magus even though written across many centuries, from disparate geographical regions, and representing distinct ecclesial communities.

Any discussion of Simon Magus in the patristic era must begin with Justin Martyr and his contemporaries of the second century. Justin says nothing about Simon Magus and Peter engaging in an all for nothing confrontation in the presence of Nero. He does, however, place Simon Magus in Rome where Simon astonished the crowds, the sacred [Roman] senate, and presumably

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1. Two studies which are very useful are by C. CECCHELLI, *Gli Apostoli a Roma, Gli «Apocrifi» e la tradizione della venuta di S. Pietro a Roma*, «Archivio della Reale Diputazione Romana di Storia Patria» 66 (1942) 1-57 and a collection, though not exhaustive, concerning the Fall of Simon Magus is in P. LUGANO, *Le memorie leggendarie di Simon Mago e della sua volata*, «Nuovo Bulletinino di Archeologia Cristiana» 6 (1900) 29-66. I am using the editions by R.A. LIPSIUS-M. BONNET, *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha*, Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1972 and Lipsiae, 1891, pp. 45-103 and 119-177, respectively.

the emperor, too, by his magic<sup>2</sup>. Even so, the magician's presence at Rome places him in direct confrontation with the apostles Peter and Paul. Already in Justin's day it was increasingly believed in the West and East that Peter and Paul had been martyred at Rome and were buried there<sup>3</sup>. There would be no question in the mind of the reader of the *Apologia* who it was that Simon Magus challenged at Rome. What of the omission of the Fall of Simon Magus in this crucial and earliest of sources? We need recall that Justin's *Apology* dates within decades, if not the very same decade, as the *Acta Petri* was written. Most agree the latter to have been written around 180-190<sup>4</sup>. It is entirely probable that Justin had no knowledge of *Acta Petri* either because he wrote before the latter was penned, or because it had yet to circulate widely enough to be read by a larger audience. What is fascinating and telling about the *Apologia* and *Acta Petri* is what they have in common notably if they originated without direct influences on each other. The major point of convergence is the placement of Simon Magus at Rome with the apostles Peter and Paul present. The two accounts were drawing from an already established oral tradition that Peter and Paul died at Rome and were buried there. A shrine is attested to be at Rome in the 160s in honor of the apostles and like the literary sources reflecting earlier oral traditions<sup>5</sup>. It is not

2. There are two references: «qui sub Claudio Caesare, cum magica miracula, daemonum in eo operantium arte, in regia vestra urbe Romae edissiser, deus existimatus est, et a vobis, tanquam deus, statua honoratus», I, 26, and «Nam cum apud vos in regia urbe Roma, ut jam dixi, imperante Claudio Caesare, Simon versaretur, et sacrum senatum et populum Romanum ita admiratione perculsitus», I, 56, *Apologia*, PG 6: 367 and 414.

3. Consult on this matter, H. LIETZMANN, *Petrus und Paulus in Rom. Liturgische und Archäologische Studien*, Walter de Gruyter, 1927, pp. 169-179; M. Cagiano DE AZEVEDO, *Le memorie archeologiche di Pietro e Paolo a Roma*, in *Pietro et Paulus Martyres*, «Vita et Pensiero» (1969) 31-57; E. VILLA, *Il culto agli apostoli nell'Italia settentrionale alla fine del sec. IV*, «Ambrosius» 33 (1957) 245-264, G. CELI, *Sulle memorie e i monumenti dei SS. Apostoli Pietro e Paolo a Roma*, «La civiltà cattolica» 86 (1935) 247-257 and 587-594, and F. GERKE, *Petrus und Paulus*, «Rivista di Archeologia Cristiana» 10 (1933) 307-329.

4. A discussion of dating and manuscript transmission of *Acta Petri* is in, Edgar HENNECKE, *New Testament Apocrypha* (ed.), W. SCHNEEMELCHER, vol. 2, Westminster Press, 1965, pp. 259-275 with significant bibliography.

5. See the discussion by M. GRANT, *Saint Peter: A biography*, Scribner, 1995, pp. 152-158. On the relics and monuments of the apostles see E. VILLA, *Il culto agli apostoli nell'Italia settentrionale alla fine del sec. IV*, pp. 245-264.

unreasonable to accept as historical fact Justin's belief that Simon Magus traveled to Rome to promote his sect over and against the apostles. Some scholars have doubted the historicity of *Acta Petri* mainly on the basis of all its hagiographical embellishments. We should not hasten to dismiss in this literary genre the possibility that *Acta Petri* records an actual historical presence of Simon Magus at Rome in the first century, minus the spectacular touches, as did Justin in his *Apologia*. I agree with contemporary opinion that Justin informs us of actual historical events and information regarding Simon Magus, as meager as they might be<sup>6</sup>. If so, the contemporaneous *Acta Petri* and the *Apologia* mutually endorse one another on this particular point: that Simon Magus and Peter and Paul very likely crossed paths at Rome. Simon was effectively refuted by the apostles and they in turn suffered martyrdom undoubtedly for reasons other than discrediting an upstart Samaritan Messiah/magician<sup>7</sup>.

In the second century tradition, after Justin Martyr, the contributions of Irenaeus of Lyon are profound. Insofar as the eventual demise of Simon Magus by the apostles, as told by the *Acta Petri*, it is also absent in Irenaeus's *Adversus haereses*<sup>8</sup>. Again, there may exist the probability that Irenaeus simply was not aware of *Acta Petri* given they are relatively close to one another in terms of date of composition. Moreover, I have demonstrated in a previous article that Irenaeus was intent on establishing a connection between Simon Magus and Gnosticism which he did so successfully. His typological portrait of Simon Magus became the standard point of departure in the next several centuries in the writings of

6. See G. LÜDEMANN, *The Acts of the Apostles and the beginnings of Simonian Gnosis*, «New Testament Studies» 33 (1987) 420-426. See also, Tamás ADAMIK, *The image of Simon Magus in the Christian tradition*, in J.N. BREMMER (ed.), *The Apocryphal Acts of Peter. Magic, Miracles and Gnosticism*, Studies on the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles, 3. Peeters, 1998, pp. 52-64.

7. Discussion about messianic expectations among the Samaritans is in, G. ORY, *Simon (dit le magicien) Dieu sauveur des Samaritains*, «Cahiers du cercle Ernest-Renan» 2 (1955) 1-16, G. QUISPTEL, *From mythus to Logos*, «Eranos» 39 (1970) 323-340, W.C. VAN UNNIK, *Newly Discovered Gnostic Writings*, «Studies in Biblical Theology» 30 (London 1960) 23 and J. FOSSUM, *The Origin of the Gnostic concept of the Demiurge*, «Ephemerides Theologicae Lovaniensis» 61 (1985) 142-152.

8. *Adversus haereses*, I, 23, SC, 264, pp. 312-321. ADAMIK, *The image of Simon Magus*, pp. 52-64.

heresiologists<sup>9</sup>. On the other hand, the independent tradition of *Acta Petri*, although contemporaneous to Justin and Irenaeus, is further accentuated by the absence of any direct «gnostic» associations of Simon Magus and any mention of his companion Helena. What of the placing of Simon Magus at Rome, as did Justin? Irenaeus for reasons that we are not able to explain did not make any reference to Rome and the confrontation with Simon Peter. His agenda steered him in different directions thus establishing one of several «traditions» about Simon Magus which converged in the medieval centuries.

Tertullian, who perhaps could have integrated the *Acta Petri*, and especially Justin's *Apologia* apparently did not. He was, however, attracted to promote and build upon Irenaeus's «gnostic» Simon Magus, Helena, and their alleged idolatry. In *De praescriptione Haereticorum* he refers to the *Acts of the Apostles* incident<sup>10</sup>. Tertullian had nothing to say about Simon's defeat by Peter and Paul. It may well be the Fall of Simon Magus contained in *Acta Petri* was still not diffused enough so that Tertullian as Irenaeus could not have availed himself for inclusion. Fundamental still, the more pressing issue of gnosticism explains his reliance on Irenaeus and his indifference to *Acta Petri*, assuming he knew of the work, which does not lend itself to formulating anti-Gnostic diatribes.

Undoubtedly the most voluminous documents from the third century which relate debates between Simon Magus and Peter are the Pseudo-Clementine *Homilies* and *Recognitiones*<sup>11</sup>. They apparently betray little evidence of being influenced by *Acta Petri*. What they share in common is the mutual hostility of Simon Magus and Simon Peter. The identification of Rome as the major

9. See my discussions in, *Jerome's polemic against Priscillian in his Letter* (133, 4) to Ctesiphon, «Revue des Études Augustiniennes» 39 (1993) 309-332 and in, *Simon Magus: The patristic-medieval traditions and Historiography*, «Apocrypha» 7 (1996) 147-165.

10. *De praescriptione haereticorum*, 33, 32-34, CSEL, 70, p. 42. See also his, *Adversus omnes hereses*, I. 1. 4-8 and I. 3. 1-3, CCSL, II, II, p. 1401.

11. For full accounting of sources and studies see, *Recognitiones «Pseudo-Clementines»*, *Die Pseudoklementinen II. Rekognitionen in Rufinus übersetzung* (ed.), B. REHM, GCS, 51. Berlin, 1965 [hereafter *Recog.*] and for the homilies, *Die Pseudoklementinen I. Homilien* (ed.), B. REHM, GCS, 1. Academie Verlag, 1992, [hereafter *Hom.*] Useful on historiography of these texts is, F. STANLEY, *The Pseudo-Clementines: A history of Research*, part I, «Second Century» 2 (1982) 1-33 and 63-96.

site of confrontation is anticipated in the *Recognitiones* (I, 74)<sup>12</sup>. As in the case of Justin, all of these writers are drawing upon a firmly established oral tradition about Rome which pre-dates the written sources. What of Simon's demise? In *Recognitiones*, Simon Peter parts with Simon Magus after lengthy public disputes, while the latter hurls curses at the apostle. The *Homilies* closes with Peter embarking upon an apostolic mission to Antioch to oppose Simon Magus, who has had great success in converting many through his magical powers<sup>13</sup>. No question exists in either the *Recognitiones* or *Homilies* regarding the superior authority of Simon Peter over the magician, who truly speaks for God, and the ultimate fate of those who cling to the teaching of Simon Magus. Curiously, the enmity between the apostle and the magician is left open ended, resembling the Acts of the Apostles confrontation, and the reader is not given any finality as we find so dramatically in *Acta Petri*. We do get in *Recognitiones* (II, 9) an indication that Simon Magus boasted that among his many magical powers he had the ability to fly. The author(s) chose to ignore the *Acta Petri* altogether on this score<sup>14</sup>.

We do not see in the third century a markedly increased influence of *Acta Petri* on the developing Simon Magus tales as found in the Church Fathers. Hippolytus and Origen made an ever brief reference to the meeting of Simon Magus and Simon Peter at Rome, but without any further elaboration. Neither of them has anything to say about Peter's ultimate victory over Simon Magus—even though that matter is beyond a shadow of a doubt—via the dramatics of *Acta Petri*. Since Hippolytus and Origen center the confrontations at Rome, the see of the Apostles Peter and Paul, as does *Acta Petri*, together they will contribute greatly to the rise to primacy of the See of Peter at Rome, the *Acta Petri* making extraordinary contributions in this regard<sup>15</sup>. In the

12. Usquequo deo favente perveniantur ad ipsam quo iter nostrum dirigendum credimus urbem Romam, *Recog.* I, 74, p. 50.

13. *Recog.* III, 73, p. 144, and *Hom.* XX, 23, p. 281.

14. «In aerem volando inuehar», *Recog.* II, 9, p. 56.

15. «Verum vel usque ad Romanam progressus incidit in apostolus, cui multum Peter adversatus est praestigiis seducenti multos», ORIGEN, *Haer.* VI. 20, *PG* 16, 3: 3225 and HIPPOLYTUS, *Refutatio omnium haeresium* (ed.), P. WENDLAND, 3 vols, *GCS*, 3, Leipzig 1916, 3:148. [hereafter *Haer.*], VI. 20, p. 148. The Flight of Simon

end, while Hippolytus and Origen seem not to have been directly acquainted with *Acta Petri* they foster awareness of Rome as the central site of the Simon Magus-Simon Peter debates. As we enter the fourth century we definitely see not only the presence of the tradition initiated by Justin and Irenaeus, we witness the explicit influence of *Acta Petri*.

The anonymous *Constitutions of the Apostles* most definitely relies heavily upon the apocryphal material. It recounts vividly the demise of Simon Magus in Rome and his ability to fly with the aid of demons<sup>16</sup>. Peter's imploration of God to confound Simon's mockery of Christ's Ascension results in his fall onto the pavement where he breaks his hip and ankle. In *Acta Petri* Peter is said to have specifically prayed that Simon Magus would only be disabled, but not die<sup>17</sup>. That Simon Peter acts alone in the *Constitutions* with Paul absent and Simon Magus does not die on impact testifies to the heavy dependency on *Acta Petri* by the authors of the *Constitutions*<sup>18</sup>.

Eusebius in a section of *Historia*, where he extolled the primacy of Peter, could on the surface seem to summarize in broad contours the *Acta Petri* account of the defeat of Simon Magus at Rome without any mention of the flight and fall<sup>19</sup>. He has both Simon Magus and Peter at Rome, for which he cites Justin as his source, but his statement that Peter vanquished the magician the-

Magus even influenced the development of the Mani prototype as found in the *Acta Archelai*, see M. SCOPELLO, *Simon le Mage, prototype de Mani selon les Acta Archelai*, «Revue de la Société Ernest-Renan» 37 (1987-1988) 67-79. ADAMIK, *The Image of Simon Magus*, pp. 52-64. See also for further influences in Pseudo-Hegessipus and the *Nereus and Achilleus*, Christine M. THOMAS, *Revivifying resurrection accounts: techniques of composition and rewriting in the «Acts of Peter» cc. 25-28*, in *The Apocryphal Acts of Peter*, pp. 65-83.

16. In *Les Constitutions Apostoliques*, tome II, livres III-VI. (ed.), M. METZER, SC, 329, VI, 9, 1-6, pp. 316-321.

17. In the *Passio*, Simon Magus dies on impact, 56, p. 167. In *Acta Petri*, Peter specifically prayed, «citus ergo, domine, fac gratiam tuam et ostende omnibus qui me adtendunt uirtutem tuam. sed non peto ut moriatur, sed aliquid in membris suis uexetus. et continuo caecidit ad terram, fregit crus in tres partes. tunc eum lapadantes omnes fidentes et conlaudantes dominum», 33, 17-21, p. 83.

18. *Constitutions*, VI, 9, 1-6, p. 319.

19. «Igitur cum Dei doctrina Romanos adventu suo illustrasset Simonis quidem vis ac potentia cum ipso simul autore breui existincta atque deleta est», *Historia*, II, 15, PG 20:171.

re is not in itself necessarily an allusion to *Acta Petri*<sup>20</sup>. It merits here to signal that elsewhere Eusebius expressed his disapproval of apocryphal books such as the «Acts» of Andrew, John, and other «Acts». These unidentified «Acts» could have conceivably included *Acta Petri*, since his version of the events, as mentioned before, for what he related about Simon Magus and Peter is based on Justin. By the fourth century, however, the «vanquished at Rome» could only be understood in light of the *Acta Petri*<sup>21</sup>.

In Cyril of Jerusalem we see the emergence of what made the *Passio* a preferable version and which caused it to far surpass the *Acta Petri* in popularity in medieval times; namely, the cooperative work of Peter and Paul against Simon Magus at Rome<sup>22</sup>. Among other distinctive features, Cyril described Simon Magus as being, «borne through the air in a demon's chariot». The only other source where an actual vehicle in place of demons takes up Simon Magus —reminiscent of Elijah's chariot— is in the Celtic-Irish Mog Ruith Legends<sup>23</sup>. Cyril also described both apostles on their knees beseeching God to bring the «fake god» down. In the *Passio*, Peter will ask Paul to bend the knee and pray while he assumed the lead role invoking God's power against the magician<sup>24</sup>.

20. *Historia*, II, 13 and 14, PG 20:167-171.

21. «Pro spuriis habendi sunt etiam *Actus Pauli*, et liber *Pastoris* titule inscriptus, et *Revelatio Petri*: Barnabae item *epistola*, et quae dicuntur *Institutiones apostolorum*», and «tum alios sub apostolorum nomine ab haereticis evulgatos, qui Petri, Thomae, Matthiae, et quorumdam aliorum *Evangelica*, Andreae quoque, Joannis, aliorumque apostolorum *Actus continent*», *Historia*, III, 25, PG 20:270. For Eusebius's rejection of apocryphal *Acta*, see B. PEARSON, in «Eusebius and Gnosticism», *Eusebius Christianity, and Judaism*, «*Studia Post-Biblica*» 42 (Brill 1992) 291-310.

22. «Cum vero error se latius spargeret, vitum illud correxit egregium par vivorum, Petrus et Paulus Ecclesiae prasules, illuc appulsi», and «de qua Jesus dixerat: "Si duo ex vobis concordarint, de omni re quamcumque petierint, fiet eis": concordiae telo per precationem adversus Magus immisso, praecipitem ad terram dejecerunt», *Catechesis*, VI, 15, PG 33: 562-563. Compare with the *Passio*, 53-56, pp. 164-167.

23. «Nam cum pollicitus esset Simon se sublimem in coelos elatum ici, ac *daemonum vehiculo* [emphasis mine] sublatus per aera ferretur; genibus prooluti servi Dei, concordiamque illam demonstrantes», *Catechesis*, VI, 15, PG 33: 563. For Mog Ruith see, K. MÜLLER-LISOWSKI, *Texte zur Mog Ruith Sage*, «Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie» 14 (1923) 145-163. ID., *La Légende de St. Jean dans la tradition Irlandaise et le Druid Mog Ruith*, «Études Celtiques» 3 (1938) 46-70. For Elijah see, 2 Kings 2: 11-12.

24. *Passio*, 55, pp. 164-167.

Cyril added that Peter was the keeper of the «keys of heaven» while Paul was the one who was «caught up to the third heaven», a sign of his apostolic authority<sup>25</sup>. The primacy of Peter is evident throughout. Cyril did not write a descriptive account of Simon's death other than to note that he crashed to the earth and was led from there to beneath the earth, Hell<sup>26</sup>. We can safely presume death on impact and thus see a departure with *Acta Petri* on this crucial aspect of the legend. In closing, Cyril called Simon Magus «the first dragon of wickedness» whose head has been cut off. Simon's wickedness, however, has managed to manifest itself in many headed ways, hence, the numerous heretics which proceed from Simon's teachings<sup>27</sup>. In Cyril there is a wonderful convergence of the Justin-Irenaean and *Acta Petri* traditions with some nuances which became central to the *Passio* version. Moreover, Cyril has made an important affirmation: Peter's triumph over Simon Magus is an assurance of the ongoing victory of the Church against heretics through the successors of the apostles.

Epiphanius of Salamis in his otherwise lengthy exposition of the Simonian doctrines made a brief statement about Simon Magus's end. He said, «And how does it happen that Simon died at Rome one day when his turn came, when the wretched man fell down and died right in the middle of Rome»<sup>28</sup>. He perpetuates the climactic theme that Simon Magus died having fallen from heaven as reflected in the *Acta Petri* and *Passio* narratives.

The lesser known Theodoretus in *Hereticarum fabularum Compendium*, signals Simon Magus's arrival to Rome, the deception he provoked, and the statue raised to worship him. Justin is apparently his source and like him had nothing to add about his flight and fall<sup>29</sup>.

25. «Petrus namque erat, is qui coeli claves circumferebat. Nihil quoque miri: Paulus enim erat, is qui in tertium coelum atque in paradisum raptus erat», *Catechesis*, VI, 15, PG 33:563. See II Corinthians 12: 1-4.

26. «Ex sublimi aere illum existimatum deum ad terram dejecerunt ad subterranea deprimendum», *Catechesis*, VI, 15, PG 33: 563.

27. «Hic primus malitia draco. Uno autem absciso capite, muticeps denuo pravitatis deprehensa est radix», *Catechesis*, VI, 15, PG 33: 563.

28. Epiphanius, *Ancoratus und Panarion*, 1-33. vol. 1. (ed.). K. HOLL, GCS, 1. Leipzig, 1915, *Panarion haer*, XXI, 5, 1, pp. 243-244.

29. «Romam veniret (Simon) Romanos autem praestigiis suis sic obstupfecit, ut aenea illum statua honorarint», I, 1, PG 83: 343.

As the fourth century unfolded the pervasive common knowledge about Simon Magus's death at Rome from the fall resulted in some Greek Church Fathers not being felt obliged to relate this event. In addition to Eusebius and Theodoreetus, as noted already, Gregory of Nazianzus, and even John of Damascus much later say nothing explicitly about the flight and fall of Simon Magus. I think this can be explained perhaps by the explicit petrine primacy that the increasingly popular *Passio* version espoused and which the Greek Fathers no doubt noticed and had no intention of propagating the theme as it was in the West<sup>30</sup>. The western Church Fathers continued to spread legends about Simon Magus and the apostles at Rome particularly through the *Passio* precisely because it favoured the particular authority of Peter and his successors at Rome.

Among western writers, Arnobius and Prosper of Aquitaine are brief in their remarks about Simon Magus. Arnobius simply notes that Peter opposed and confounded Simon Magus<sup>31</sup>. Prosper in *Chronicon* noted Nero's persecution of the apostles at Rome without naming Simon Magus<sup>32</sup>. In a second entry in the same source he identifies the Simonian origins of the doctrines of Basiledes, a clear influence of the Irenaean tradition<sup>33</sup>. In a previous study I have already shown how the *Acta Petri* was minimally used by Jerome and totally ignored by Vincent of Léirins. There does exist one reference to Peter's victory over Simon Magus by Jerome in *De viris Illustribus* (I), where he declared that Peter went to Rome and «expelled Simon Magus». That is all we get, but clearly *Acta Petri* seems to be the provenance of this statement<sup>34</sup>. Other western Church Fathers and sources demonstrate greater dependency on the *Acta Petri*.

30. GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS, PG 37:1029-1166 and 1166-1227 and JOHN OF DAMASCUS, *De haeresibus liber*, 21, PG 94: 690.

31. «Viderant enim currum Simonis magi, et quadrigas igneas Petri ore difflatas, et nominato Christo evanuisse», *Adversus gentes*, II, 12, PL 5: 828.

32. «Primus Nero, super omnia sclerata sua, etiam persecutionem in Christianos facit, in qua Petrus et Paulus apostoli gloriose Romae occubuerunt», *Chronicum*, PL 51: 555.

33. «Hoc autem Basilides distabat a Simonis dogmate», *Chronicum*, PL 51: 560.

34. «Ad expugnandum Simonem magum», *De viris illustribus*, I, PL 23: 638. See my article in note 9 and *ibid*, *Simon Magus and Priscillian in the Commonitorium of Vincent of Léirins*, «Vigiliae Christianae» 49,2 (1995) 180-188.

Ambrose and Augustine were clearly the two most significant Church Fathers in the West, so we begin with what they had to say about Simon Magus and his demise. Ambrose in *De excidio Urbis Hierosolymitanae*, recalled the Fall of Simon Magus even mentioning the Capitol and his dying at Aritiam and that Peter acted alone<sup>35</sup>. In his *In epistolam ad Romanos* he talked about the flight where he compared Simon Magus to Satan. This is likely an allusion where Jesus in Luke's Gospel said, «Behold, I see Satan falling from heaven», as his disciples went about casting out demons. He also likened Simon Magus's magic to Jannes and Mambres the court magicians of Pharaoh. This comparison is absent in *Acta Petri*, but appears later in the *Passio* version<sup>36</sup>. Augustine boasted about Peter's victory at Rome over Simon Magus in *De haeresibus*, a symbolic statement of the triumph of the Church which Augustine extends to heretics in his own day and for that matter in the future pilgrim Church<sup>37</sup>. In *Sermon 202*, he is more explicit about Simon's flight and his demise as the result of the prayers of Peter and Paul<sup>38</sup>. Once again in *Letter 36*, Augustine recalled how Peter, the head of the apostles, brought Simon Magus down from heaven and extinguished him. In two lines in this document Augustine echoed the belief that Simon Magus was the «devil» and ultimately the representative of the Evil One<sup>39</sup>. It becomes clear that Augustine promoted more so than Ambrose, at least in these very brief statements —the primacy of Peter—.

We also find additional evidence of the growing proliferation of the *Acta Petri* as we enter into the period in which the *Passio* was written. Sulpicius Severus, one of the most well known chroniclers, included an entry about Simon Magus. Peter and Paul set out to oppose the magician who flew with demonic aid. After the

35. «Concendit statuto die montem Capitolium, ac se de rupe dejiciens, volare coepit. Mirari populus et venerari... sed fracto debilitato crure Aritiam concessit, atque ibi mortuus est», III, 2, *PL* 15: 2170 and 2171.

36. *In epistolam ad Romanos*, 8, 39, *CSEL*, 81, 1, pp. 298-301. *Passio*, 34, 9-12, p. 149.

37. «In qua urbe apostolus Petrus eum uera uirtute dei omnipotentis extinxit» [in Rome], *De haeresibus*, I, *CCSL*, 46, p. 290.

38. *Sermo*, 202, *PL* 39:2121.

39. «Petrus etiam» inquit, apostolorum caput, caeli ianitor et ecclesiae fundamentum, extincto Simone, qui fuerat diabolus... magus Simon figura erat diaboli», *Epistula*, XXXVI, 21, *CSEL*, 34, pp. 50-51.

apostles prayed, the demons fled, Simon fell into shame, but Sulpicius did not describe his death<sup>40</sup>. In view of the common knowledge about this incident it was hardly necessary for him to dedicate any more space. Relevant to the emerging *Passio*, where both apostles work together, is that increasingly sources from the fourth century rarely speak about Peter acting alone. Even so, as established before, Peter clearly occupied the preeminent position even when accompanied by Paul.

We now turn to make a brief comparison of the two principal texts which perpetuated the Fall of Simon Magus and shaped the thinking of the Church Fathers. In the opening scenes of the encounter leading up to the flight of Simon Magus there exist some prominent points of departure. In the *Acta Petri*, Simon Magus and Simon Peter hold a public debate in full view of a large crowd. It is there, in the middle of the throng, that Simon Magus announces that the next day he will «fly up to God»<sup>41</sup>. In the *Passio* the dispute unfolds in the presence of the Emperor Nero and a throng of people. Furthermore, the apostle Paul, unlike in the *Acta Petri*, accompanies Peter at every step of the ensuing dispute. The *Passio* has Simon Magus complaining that he wished to be separated from «these madmen». He also boasts that he will do so by performing an extraordinary miracle to prove the veracity of his claim to have the «Power of God». Simon Magus asked Nero to order a high tower constructed so that from there he could leap and fly in the air with the aid of angels sent by God<sup>42</sup>. Nero, not able to resist his zeal, ordered the tower built in the *Campus Martius* and issued a decree demanding that the common people

40. «Etenim tunc illustris illa adversus Simonem Petri ac Pauli congressio fuit, qui cum magicis artibus, ut se Deum probaret, duobus suffultus daemonis evolasset, orationibus Apostolorum, fugatis daemonibus, delapsus in terram populo inspectante, disruptus est», SULPICIS SEVERI, *Chronicorum*, II, 28, 5-9, CSEL, 1 (ed.), C. HALM, Vindobonae 1866, p. 83.

41. «Sed crastina die volabo ad dominum cuius uirtutem noui, quia uos caecidistis me, et ego uado ad patrem omnium et dico illi: 'Iniuriam mihi fecerunt filii tui; ego ad te ideo reuersus sum», *Acta Petri*, 31, 30-31 and 1-3, pp. 81-83.

42. «Simon dixit: Iube turrim excelsam fieri ex lignis et trabibus magnis, ut ascendam in illam; et cum in illam ascendero, angeli mei ad me in aëra uenient: non enim in terra inter peccatores ad me uenire possunt. Nero dixit: Volo uidere, si imples quod dici», *Passio*, 50. 4-8, p. 163.

and prominent citizens be present<sup>43</sup>. The *Acta Petri* mentions a «high place» upon which Simon Magus stood, but there is no detailed description of a high tower made of wood. Moreover, it identifies the place of confrontation as the *Sacra Via* in Rome (Alia autem die turbe magna conuenit ad platea quae dicitur sacra via, ut uideret eum uolantem, *Acta Petri*, 32, 4-5, p. 83). The *Acta Petri* notes that it is only after Peter arrived in Rome that Simon Magus stood on the «high place» from where he denounced Peter and then proceeded to fly. Simon Magus was seen by all at Rome as he flew over its temples and hills and those who followed Peter awaited the apostle to do something against him<sup>44</sup>.

In the *Passio*, Nero is presented as being fully in control of the duel between the apostles Peter and Paul and the magician. Nero, for example, ordered Peter and Paul to present themselves the next day for the contest. The apostle Paul, then, tells Peter that he will bend the knee and pray for Peter as they await to see what Simon Magus will do. Simon Magus not only promised Nero that he would expose the apostles as frauds, but he would even give Nero the power to fly as well. Nero much like an excited adolescent hastily responded, «do quickly what you have just said»<sup>45</sup>.

The *Acta Petri* relates that Peter called upon God to remove Simon's power (demonic) so as to make him fall. Peter also petitioned God that Simon Magus be crippled only, not die, and that he break his legs in three places<sup>46</sup>. After the fall, the people threw stones at Simon Magus as they chased him out of town. Some of his followers carried him wounded on a stretcher to the outskirts of Rome to a place called *Aricia*. Immediately he was taken to a

43. «Tunc Nero praecepit in campo Martio turrim excelsam fieri et praecepit ut omnes populi et omnes dignitates ad istud spectaculum conuenirent», *Passio*, 51, 9-11, p. 163.

44. «En subito in alto uisus est omnibus uidentibus in tota urbe sup omnia tempa et montes. respiciens autem Petrus et ipse mirabatur talem uisum», *Acta Petri*, 32, 11-13, p. 83.

45. «Simon dixit: Vt scias, imperator, istos fallaces esse, mox ut in caelum ascendere mittam ad te angelos meos et faciam te ad me uenire. Nero dixit: Fac ergo, quae dicis», *Passio*, 53, 8-10, p. 165.

46. «Citius ergo, domine, fac gratiam tuam et ostende omnibus qui me adtentent uirtutem tuam. Sed non peto ut moriatur, sed aliquid in membris suis uexetur. Et continuo caecidit ad terra, fregit crus in tres partes. tunc eum lapadantes omnes fidentes et conlaudantes dominum», *Acta Petri*, 32, 17-21, p. 83.

sorcerer/physician named Castor. Castor without delay performed an unsuccessful surgery on Simon Magus that resulted in his death. The narrative closes morbidly, «the angel of the devil ended his life»<sup>47</sup>.

In the *Passio* Simon Magus climbed the tower wearing a laurel on his head and then began to fly over the crowd. Nero was so dazzled by the feat that he taunted Peter and Paul and accused them of being deceivers. Peter undaunted rebuked Nero while a tearful Paul implored Peter to do something about this mocking display of demonic power. Peter looked up at the airborne Simon Magus, rebuked the angels of Satan and commanded them to release him at once. The demons immediately were rendered powerless, they let Simon Magus loose and the magician fell on the pavement in the place called *Sacra Via*. The *Passio* adds the detail that Simon Magus was «divided» into four parts and perished<sup>48</sup>. After this incident Nero ordered Peter and Paul arrested. He also commanded that the body of Simon Magus be kept for three days believing that he would rise from the dead, as predicted by the magician. Peter denounced Nero for believing that Simon Magus would rise from the dead and he told the Emperor that Simon Magus was condemned to suffer eternal punishment. The entire episode was an ill-fated attempt by Simon Magus to replicate the resurrection of Jesus Christ<sup>49</sup>.

The *Passio* and *Acta Petri* although differing considerably in numerous details they likewise share common basic features in the retelling of this encounter between Peter and Simon Magus. They both have Simon Magus flying about over Rome mocking the apostles, Peter's prayer bringing him down, and in the end he

47. «Simon autem male tractatus inuenit qui eum tollerent in grauato extra Romanam Ariciam. et ibi paucos dies fecit et inde tultus est quasi exiliaticum ab urbe nomine Castorem Terracina. et ibi duo medici concidebant eum, extremum autem die angelum satanae fecerunt et expiraret», *Acta Petri*, 32, 4-9, p. 85.

48. «Et continuo dimissus cecidit in locum qui Sacra Via dicitur, et in quattuor partes fractus quattour silices adunauit, qui sunt ad testimonium uictoriae apostolicæ usque in hodiernum diem», *Passio*, 56, 9-12, p. 167.

49. «Tunc Nero teneri fecit Petrum et Paulum in uinculis; corpus autem Simonis iussit diligenter tribus diebus custodiri; putans eum resurgere tertia die. cui Petrus dixit: Hic iam non resurget, quoniam uere mortuus est et in aeterna poena dampnatus», *Passio*, 57, 13-17, p. 167.

not only dies a shameful death, he is exposed as a demonic fraud. In both versions of the story the setting is in the city of Rome, the seat of the Chief Apostles, Peter and Paul. After the encounter, the *Passio* and *Acta Petri* relate the events leading up to the martyrdom of Peter and Paul at the hands of Nero.

THE MAJOR STRIKING DIFFERENCES ARE:

*Passio*

1. Peter and Paul prominent
2. Debate takes place in the presence of Nero and a crowd
3. Simon Magus wears a laurel
4. Simon Falls, breaks into four parts and dies
5. Name place *Aricia* not mentioned
6. The place where Simon Magus dies is called *Sacra Via*

*Acts of Peter*

1. Paul is absent
2. Nero is absent, but a large crowd present
3. Simon Magus does not wear a laurel
4. Simon Magus falls and breaks a leg in three places, but survives
5. He is carried to a place called *Aricia*
6. Simon Magus dies after being operated by a sorcerer/physician Castor

Although all of these sources made their own specific contribution to the proliferation of the Fall of Simon Magus, they were not the principal ones to do so. *The Passio*, which became the standard narrative for sermons preached during the Feast of Peter and Paul on 29 June, more than these others spread the story both to popular and theological audiences, illiterate and literate, and rural and urban clergy. It is this same source which Jacobus of Voragine will principally utilize in the *Golden Legend* to tell of Pe-

ter's life, ministry, and martyrdom<sup>50</sup>. The Fall of Simon Magus which is the apogee of the *Acta Petri* and *Passio*, and all subsequent writers with a few exceptions, made certain to enshrine that event in their versions. Simon Magus's Fall served the Church Fathers well to warn against magic, pride, arrogant opposition to the clergy, and heresy. Even the Church Fathers, for that matter, who did not avail themselves of this incident, on account of unavailability or willful omission likewise used the Simon Magus figure for similar purposes. Another development we witness is that in spite of expressed reluctance by some Church Fathers about the veracity of alleged «Acts» of the apostles —other than the canonical Acts— certain material, in this case the Fall, nevertheless entered into the mainstream image of Simon Peter through their writings. Significantly, the Fall of Simon Magus at the hands of the apostles —especially the intervention of Peter— should not be underestimated in view of its profound influence on arguments of papal primacy which were promoted at Rome. It would be misleading to view the *Acta Petri* and the *Passio* as reflecting only popular piety that somehow developed distant from or unrelated to the more sophisticated realms of theology, canon law, and episcopal authority.

50. See my analysis in, *Simon Magus and Simon Peter in a Baroque altar relief in the Cathedral of Oviedo, Spain*, «Hagiographica» 5 (1998) 141-158.