CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

THE ACCOUNT OF SIMON MAGUS IN ACTS 8

[735] Professor Wolfson's lucid analysis of the intellectual make-up of gnosticism has cleared the way for a restudy of the historical traditions concerning the individual gnostics, of whom Simon Magus was often said to have been the earliest.¹ The first major element in the Christian tradition about Simon is the story in Acts 8:4ff., probably written about 80 A.D. In the Revised Standard Version it reads as follows:

Now those who were scattered (from Jerusalem by the persecution which arose after the death of Stephen) went about preaching the word. Philip went down to a city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ. And the multitudes with one accord gave heed to what was said by Philip, when they heard him and saw the signs which he did. For unclean spirits came out of many who were possessed, crying with a loud voice; and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. So there was much joy in that city. But there was a man named Simon who had previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the nation of Samaria, saying that he himself was somebody great. They all gave heed to him, from the least to the greatest, saying, 'This man is that power of God which is called Great.' And they gave heed to him, because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic. But when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Even [736] Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed. Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit; for it had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit. Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, saying, 'Give me also this power, that

any one on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.' But Peter said to him, 'Your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. Repent therefore of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity.' And Simon answered, 'Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me.'

This is a piece of Christian propaganda against the followers of Simon. Its primary object is to show that the cult of Simon is inferior to that of Jesus because Simon himself was converted to Christianity and baptized by a Christian. Moreover, it intends to show that Simon was inferior to the apostles, as well as to Jesus, because he never received the power to communicate the holy spirit to his followers, though he tried to buy it, and was publicly rebuked by the apostles and accepted their rebuke and asked them to pray for him. Just for good measure it adds that Simon had a shady past: He had previously been a magician and it was his magical prowess which had made his followers believe that he was the Great Power of God.

Of criticisms of the story to date, the most challenging has been one which takes as its point of departure the break in the middle.2 [737] After Simon's baptism the narrative jumps to Jerusalem whence Peter and John are sent down to Samaria and by their prayers and laying on of hands bring down the holy spirit on those whom Philip had already baptized. Since there is a similar incident in Acts 19:1ff. where Paul by rebaptism and laying on of hands gives the spirit to a group of disciples in Ephesus (who had hitherto been baptized only into the baptism of John) critics have supposed the notion that only apostles could give the spirit was a special concern of the author of Acts, who remodeled the story of Simon to introduce it. Originally the story represented Simon as trying to buy from Philip the power to do miracles, and getting his rebuke for that.

But Acts sometimes3 represents the spirit as given without laying on of apostolic hands, so this theory of its motivation is dubious, and the internal evidence for remodeling is not conclusive. In particular, it is not likely that Simon the magician should be represented as bidding for the power to do miracles. Let us therefore turn from the question of the laying on of hands to the story of the baptism.

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2 Most effectively presented by A. Loisy, Les Actes des Apôtres (Paris, 1920), ad loc.