

## Magic in Greco-Roman Era: A Historical Context for Magic in the Acts of the Apostles

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Received: 29 August 2019/Revised: 12 November 2019/Accepted: 12 December 2019

### Abstract

Magic is an essential topic in the New Testament. Still, compared to other items of discussion in New Testament Studies, the significance of the theme of magic has been unjustly undermined, as indicated by David E. Aune. From all eight occurrences of magic in the New Testament, four are found in the Acts of the Apostles. Therefore, the Acts of the Apostles is the most significant source to understand magic in the New Testament. The purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate the significance of magic in the Greco-Roman era as the historical context to understand magic in the Acts of the Apostles. Since Christianity flourished in the Greco-Roman period, the understanding of magic in the Greco-Roman era is necessary to understand its confrontation with Christianity in the Acts of the Apostles. This article will examine the definition of magic, the positive and negative judgment of magic, the aspects of magic, which are the philosophy and sacraments related to the Acts of the Apostles, and the relation between magic and religion in the Greco-Roman Era.

Keywords: Magic, Acts, Greco-Roman, Religion

### Abstrak

Sihir adalah topik penting dalam Perjanjian Baru tetapi dibandingkan dengan topik diskusi lainnya dalam Studi Perjanjian Baru, pentingnya tema sihir telah diabaikan secara tidak adil sebagaimana ditunjukkan oleh David E. Aune. Dari delapan kali kata sihir dalam Perjanjian Baru, empat ditemukan dalam Kisah Para Rasul. Maka Kisah Para Rasul adalah sumber yang paling signifikan untuk memahami sihir dalam Perjanjian Baru. Tujuan dari artikel ini adalah untuk mendemonstrasikan signifikansi sihir di era Yunani-Romawi sebagai sebuah konteks historis untuk memahami sihir dalam Kisah Para Rasul. Karena Kekristenan berkembang di era Yunani-Romawi, maka pemahaman sihir di era Yunani-Romawi sangat penting untuk mengerti konfrontasi sihir dengan Kekristenan dalam Kisah Para Rasul. Artikel ini akan mengkaji definisi sihir, penilaian positif dan negatif sihir, aspek sihir yang merupakan filosofi dan sakramen yang terkait dengan Kisah Para Rasul, dan hubungan antara sihir dan agama di Era Yunani-Romawi.

Kata-kata Kunci: Sihir, Kisah Para Rasul, Era Yunani Romawi, Agama

## Introduction

Magic is significant in the New Testament and early Christianity, but it has not been sufficiently examined. Even though scholars have addressed the topic of magic, the discussion is still general. Mary Mills has reviewed the reality of cosmic power behind the miraculous acts in which magic is involved.<sup>1</sup> In the collaboration works on the theology of Acts, the significance of magic is still not visible.<sup>2</sup> Francois Bovon puts magic within the contexts of the miracles of the Apostles in the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles.<sup>3</sup> Stephen Haar specifically examines Simon Magus.<sup>4</sup> While Hans-Josef Klauck's<sup>5</sup> exposition is insightful, but still, he undermines the importance of magic.<sup>6</sup> For Klauck, magic is not the chief concern in Acts because it does not provide a complete description of magic.<sup>7</sup> He argues that "the definition of the relationship with Judaism is much more urgent for Luke's eyes."<sup>8</sup> Such conclusions are highly questionable since Judaism is also not described in Acts. Luke's concern is to exhibit the outspread of God's word. How should magic be understood in the Acts of the Apostles is essential. This article will examine magic in the Greco-Roman Era to understand magic in the Acts of the Apostles<sup>9</sup> The main research question

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<sup>1</sup> See Mary E. Mills, *Human Agents of Cosmic Power in Hellenistic Judaism and the Synoptic Tradition* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), 21-35. In pp. 109-23, she does examine magic in Acts but focuses merely on the human as the agents of cosmic power to perform miraculous work.

<sup>2</sup> See I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson, eds., *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Francois Bovon, *Studies in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 253-66.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Haar, *Simon Magus: The First Gnostic?* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2003), 2. Although the discussion is insightful, the primary concern of Stephen Haar is on Simon Magus.

<sup>5</sup> Hans-Josef Klauck, *Magic and Paganism in Early Christianity: The World of the Acts of the Apostles* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> He argues that "We may begin conceding that the confrontation with magic and the Gentiles is not the only concern, nor indeed even the chief concern, of the Acts of the Apostles." As in Klauck, *Magic and Paganism in Early Christianity*, 119.

<sup>7</sup> Klauck, *Magic, and Paganism in Early Christianity*, 119.

<sup>8</sup> Klauck, *Magic, and Paganism in Early Christianity*, 119. Joshua W. Jipp relates the ritual of Xenia to understand Luke's ethnic reasoning rather than to magic. See Joshua W. Jipp, "Hospitable Barbarians: Luke's Ethnic Reasoning in Acts 28:1-10." *Journal of Theological Studies*, NS, Volume 68, Pt. 1, 2017: 35-40. In very recent work, Michael Kochenash related the myth of Pentheus with name Paul that with magic. See Michael Kochenash, "Better Call Paul 'Saul': Literary Model and a Lukan Innovation," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 138, no. 2, 2019: 440-4.

<sup>9</sup> The reason to focus on the Acts of the Apostles is that Acts, to a certain degree, represents the history of early Christianity.

is, how should magic be understood in the Greco-Roman world in understanding the Acts of the Apostles?

Magic is usually related to miracles, the supernatural phenomenon in a negative sense in the book of Acts.<sup>10</sup> By understanding magic in the Greco-Roman world, Christians can understand magic appropriately when they confront it. Miraculous acts<sup>11</sup> Are found substantially throughout the Acts of the Apostles.<sup>12</sup> This treatise is to demonstrate that magic is a cosmic power to be overcome by the saving power of the word of God. Magic should be understood within the apologetic purpose of the Acts of the Apostles.<sup>13</sup>

## Theory

From the eight appearances in the New Testament, the word magic is found four times in the Acts of the Apostles. However, David Aune points out that “Considered about early Christianity, magic has generally received a bad press.”<sup>14</sup> Based on Aune’s observation, it is more obvious now to claim that the study of magic in the New Testament and early Christianity is a necessity as it will provide a significant contribution to the scholarly discussion regarding magic.

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<sup>10</sup> Mills, *Human-Agent of Cosmic Power*, 11-9; See also Bovon, *Studies in Early Christianity*, 253-66; although Bovon places magic within the Apocryphal of the Acts of the Apostles, it does not negate the significance of magic; instead it indicates its importance strongly in the canonical Acts of the Apostles.

<sup>11</sup> Which include wonders, signs, and exorcisms, refer to the supernatural phenomenon with both positive implications, such as awe and joy, and negative implications, such as fear and anger. In Acts, the apostles and the magicians are identified as these wonder-workers. Mary E. Mills argues rightly that in the level of a phenomenon, the magicians are similar to the apostles. See Mills, *Human-Agent of Cosmic Power*, 109-23.

<sup>12</sup> See for instance Acts 2:6; 3:6-8; 4:30-31; 5:1-11, 5:12-16; 6:8; 7:55-56; 8:6-7, 8:18; 9:17, 9:40-41; 10:44-46; 12:5-11; 13:10-12; 14:8-12; 15:12; 16:25-31; 18:9-10; 19:6-8, 19:11-20; 20:9-12; 21:10-11; 23:11; 24:25; 26:28; 27:10, 27:23-25; 28:3-6.

<sup>13</sup> The penitent is in two senses. First, the Acts of the Apostles was written to defend the existence of Christianity against its opponent, and second, to exhibit the further triumphant actions of Jesus through his apostles, beginning from Jerusalem, then Judea, Samaria, and to the end of the earth, as recorded in Acts 1:8. The second sense is identified as an evangelistic purpose. See I. Howard Marshall, “How Does One Write On the Theology of Acts?” In *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts*, ed. I. Howard Marshall, and David Peterson (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 11; for a more comprehensive discussion of the purpose of Acts of the Apostles, see Robert Maddox, *The Purpose of Luke-Acts* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982).

<sup>14</sup> David E. Aune, *Apocalypticism, Prophecy, and Magic in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 368. He further says that many Biblical theologians seem to undermine the role of magic in the world of early Christianity. Aune provides a broader understanding of magic with the purpose that appears to be a guideline for furthering the study on magic in the New Testament and early Christianity.

## Method

The method of research used in this article is a literature study.<sup>15</sup> The primary source is the Greek Magical Papyri in translation. Since the collection of the magical papyri is abundant within a long period from the first till the fourth century. Selection of this primary source will use three criteria: 1) The relevance of the magical papyri to magic in the Acts; 2) The period in which the magical papyri were written (the closest to the time when the Acts was written will be prioritized) and; 3) The completeness of the magical papyri text.

## Discussion

Scholars have recognized that in the Greco-Roman culture, magic and religion are indispensable though they are not the same.<sup>16</sup> Magic and religion are significant to the study of the New Testament since such beliefs and practices surrounded Christianity.<sup>17</sup>

## Definition

To define magic (*Mageia* in Greek) is a complex task either in the methodology.<sup>18</sup> Employed or in the relationship of magic with religion and science or technology.<sup>19</sup> Still, it is necessary to define the term as a

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<sup>15</sup> Diana Ridley, *The Literature Review: A Step-by-Step Guide for Students*, Sage Study Skills (London: Thousand Oaks, Calif: SAGE, 2008).

<sup>16</sup> See Sarah Iles Johnston, ed., *Religion of the Ancient World: A Guide* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 2004), 139-42; Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays* (Illinois: Waveland Press, 1992), 17; Aune, *Apocalypticism, Prophecy, and Magic in Early Christianity*, 377.

<sup>17</sup> See Klauck, *Magic and Paganism in Early Christianity*, 1-2; Mills, *Human Agents of Cosmic Power*, 12; Naomi Janowitz, *Magic in the Roman World: Pagans, Jews and Christians* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 1-2. Clinton E Arnold, *Power and Magic: The Concept of Power in Ephesians* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1989) provides the practices of magic and the powers that surrounded Christianity in Ephesus, a very significant city in Asia Minor for Paul in proclaiming the gospel.

<sup>18</sup> The meaning of "method" is whether magic has to be explicitly described or generally. "Specifically" means that it is limited to specific categories, while "generally" means that the definition can be applied to any situation. The general description has received an objection from some scholars. See, for instance, Dickie, *Magic, and Magicians*, 18-45; also Johnston, *Religion of the Ancient World*, 139-42. Aune in *Apocalypticism, Prophecy, and Magic in Early Christianity*, 370-4 provides a helpful discussion.

<sup>19</sup> See Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion*, 85-90; Also Jacob Neusner, ed., *Religion, Science and Magic: In Concert and In Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 3-7. For a brief discussion on the methods and aspects involved in magic, see Aune, *Apocalypticism, Prophecy, and Magic in Early Christianity*, 370-7. The attempt to distinguish magic from science seems to miss the context of Greco-Roman life since the term science

boundary in this article. There will be no perfect definition that can work in any situation.<sup>20</sup> Also, Acts does not provide any definition of magic.<sup>21</sup> The semantics of magic (*Mageia*) originated in Persia.<sup>22</sup> Magic is understood as the art of a magician (*magoi*).<sup>23</sup> In the very outset of its appearance in Greek culture,<sup>24</sup> Magicians (*magoi*) are the Persian priests who affiliate with the supreme sacrifices and rites and are experts in astrology, divination, and the interpretation of dreams.<sup>25</sup> The evidence is evident in prominent Greek figures<sup>26</sup> Such as Plato, Aristotle, and Pliny, the elder.

Scholars have proposed various definitions of magic. Mills refers to magic to power (*dunamij*).<sup>27</sup> Betz understands magic as art to persuade people,<sup>28</sup> Matthew Dickie considers magic in conflict with religion.<sup>29</sup> In this article, magic is defined as a set of specific phenomena corresponding to the divine beings or powers whose purpose is to alter nature to fulfill human interest.<sup>30</sup> Such a definition cannot be applied universally as it depends on the context.

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itself is very different from our modern understanding of science. Although Jacob Neusner in *Religion, Science, and Magic*, 3-7, tried to give a very general definition of "science," it seems to be an anachronistic imposition of our modern interpretation of science into ancient times rather than perceiving the old time in its setting.

<sup>20</sup> See Dickie, *Magic, and Magicians*, 18-9; Dickie, in pp. 22, proposes different reasons for the need to define magic.

<sup>21</sup> See Klauck, *Magic, and Paganism in Early Christianity*, 119.

<sup>22</sup> See for instance Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World*, 20; Dickie, *Magic and Magicians*, 13-4; Also Haar, *Simon Magus*, 35-6

<sup>23</sup> See Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World*, 20.

<sup>24</sup> Betz also points out the influence of Egyptian beliefs in Greek Magical Papyri in Hans Dieter Betz, ed., *Greek Magical Papyri in Translation: Included the Demotic Spells*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., vol. I: Texts (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), xlv, lv-lvii.

<sup>25</sup> See William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, BAGD (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), 484-5. The term BAGD will be used when this lexicon is referred to in the following notes. See also Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World*, 20; Haar, *Simon Magus*, 35.

<sup>26</sup> to See, for instance, Haar, *Simon Magus*, 35-71; Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World*, 20-63; also Dickie, *Magic and Magicians*, 46-76. They all provided the recognition of magician by these Greeks figures.

<sup>27</sup> Mills in *Human Agents of Cosmic Power*, 35, defines "magic is the attempt to put the energy (*dunamij*) available in these stories of myth and ritual to work."

<sup>28</sup> Betz in *The Greek Magical Papyri*, xlviii, states "magic is nothing than the art of making people believe that something is being done about these things in life about which we all know that we can do nothing."

<sup>29</sup> See Dickie, *Magic and Magicians*, 26, who mentions magic as "a set of specific circumstances in which different forms of religious practice came into conflict." Therefore, he has emphasized the conflict between magic and religion from his definition.

<sup>30</sup> Here, I agree with Dickie and Aune that magic in itself is a (specific) phenomenon. But distinct from both of them in the following explication of their

### Positive Judgment on Magic

The favorable judgment of magic in Greco-Roman culture is because it is practiced widely by all levels of society. The intention of practicing magic is positive in its claim.<sup>31</sup> Originally, magic was applied mainly for the goodness of human life.<sup>32</sup> The importance of magical practices in the Greco-Roman culture is evident in two ways. First, it was practiced by the majority lower class, which represented 90% of the population.<sup>33</sup> Second, the upper-class society, even Caesar, also practiced magic. Tiberius was said to study occultism from his astrologer Thrasyllus, Nero, and Emperor Vespasian.<sup>34</sup> The reference of “magoi” is the priests of Persian religion<sup>35</sup> with their wisdom and knowledge. However, it is highly questionable that this view can be maintained.<sup>36</sup> The negative connotation of magic is more evident than the positive image, both politically and socially.

### Negative Judgment on Magic

Besides the positive, the negative connotation is present.<sup>37</sup> Plato labeled the magicians as “beggar Priests.”<sup>38</sup> The cause of this negative

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definitions since it is more significant to highlight the two features of magic which have consistently appeared in its earliest form than to relate it with religion.

<sup>31</sup> Most parts of the Greek Magical Papyri are intended to fulfill the need of human life. Though the interpretation of all these Satanic practices could be positive and negative, the attempt to meet a social demand is visible enough.

<sup>32</sup> See, for instance, the positive judgment of “magoi” in Matthew 2:1; despite the distinction between miracle and magic, Moses in the Greco-Roman era is also famous as a great magician. It is almost sure that in his time, Moses had learned all sorts of magic in the royal circle in Egypt. Several aspects, such as astrology, wisdom to interpret dreams, and knowledge of nature is part of this understanding of magic.

<sup>33</sup> In the Greco-Roman age, the negative reputation of magic is said to be promoted by the upper level of Roman society since magic is much more prevalent in the lower class rather than the high quality. The evidence for the popularity in the lower class is found in the language used in magical papyri, which is a universal language rather than an official or educated dialect. See, for instance, Aune, *Apocalypticism, Prophecy, and Magic in Early Christianity*, 382; *Greek Magical Papyri*, xli. Such a notion does not mean that magic is practiced only by the lower class since the upper level also practiced magic though privately. See Haar, *Simon Magus*, 134-9, who provides evidence of the practice of magic by the high class, even the Roman Emperor. Following the social division, see also Lee A. Johnson, “Paul’s Letter as Artifacts: The Value of the Written Text among Non-Literate People.” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 46, no. 1, 2016: 26. Johnson showed that in the Greco-Roman early period, the significant population was the lower level, and only 5 percent of the rural population was literate.

<sup>34</sup> Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars* III.14, as cited by Haar, *Simon Magus*, 137.

<sup>35</sup> As contended by Haar, *Simon Magus*, 65.

<sup>36</sup> See Haar, *Simon Magus*, 70-1.

<sup>37</sup> See Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World*, 21-6; Haar, *Simon Magus*, 37-69.

<sup>38</sup> Plato in *The Republic*, as cited by Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World*, 22.

connotation is related to political and social aspects rather than religious issues.<sup>39</sup> The extremely subjective and individual determination of rites and mystical knowledge of the deity. It is also a threat to the beliefs accepted by a society that even believed in many gods. The negative reputation of magic was not only attached to the socially deviant, but even more; magic was forbidden in the Roman Empire.<sup>40</sup> Magical Books were burned,<sup>41</sup> Magicians were expelled, the practice of magic was considered evil, and magicians were condemned.<sup>42</sup> The oppression and persecution of magicians took place in cities throughout the Roman territory. Though magic had received a bad image, it still provided an alternative solution when religion itself did not meet the life needs of people.<sup>43</sup> There is a contradiction found in practicing magic. The Roman authorities regarded magic as illegal and requiring to restrain,<sup>44</sup> but magic was still practiced widely even by Caesar.<sup>45</sup> When magic was politically beneficial, the Romans even exalted those who practiced magic.<sup>46</sup>

## Fundamental Aspects

Two significant and fundamental aspects, namely philosophy and the use of sacraments or rites, will be addressed.

### *Philosophy*

Several significant assumptions underlie the use of magic: First, magic requires that many invisible divine beings or gods control nature.<sup>47</sup> The reality of this divine nature has various levels, the higher and the

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<sup>39</sup> Haar followed the contention that the negative view of magicians was found in the post-Persian Wars authors.

<sup>40</sup> See for instance Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World*, 4; Dickie, *Magic and Magician*, 137-147, who also provides substantial evidence on how severe is the oppression against magic by the Roman authority; see also Susan R. Garrett, *The Demise of the Devil: Magic and the Demon in Luke's Writings* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 11.

<sup>41</sup> As recorded in Acts 19:19.

<sup>42</sup> See Dickie, *Magic, and Magician*, 146; 137-55;

<sup>43</sup> See the definition of magic in the previous section under the subtitle "Definition"; see also Dickie, *Magic, and Magician*, 124-136; Elizabeth S. Fiorenza, ed, *Aspects of Religious Propaganda in Judaism and Early Christianity* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976), 6.

<sup>44</sup> See Haar, *Simon Magus*, 138.

<sup>45</sup> See Acts 13:7 that records the influence of magic on the proconsul Sergius Paulus; Also Acts 16:13-20 that indicates implicitly the knowledge of the magistrate, the upper class, about the magic practiced by the female slave. Thus, the notion that only the lower level practiced magic cannot be accepted.

<sup>46</sup> See Janowitz, *Magic in the Roman World*, 2.

<sup>47</sup> See Mills, *Human Agents of Cosmic Power*, 13; also Aune, *Apocalypticism, Prophecy, and Magic in Early Christianity*, 377.

lower orders of divinity.<sup>48</sup> Each divine being has its role and specific authority over nature. Magic adopts many gods in all religions, including Christianity, Judaism, and the Egyptian deities.<sup>49</sup> Magic does not exclusively have its gods.<sup>50</sup> Second, magic assumes that nature is an open system of life.<sup>51</sup> The intervention of the gods to alter and fix nature is ultimate. All these powers develop social situations from prosperity to harming others, offering a higher spirituality to becoming invisible. Third, the magician can have communion with the gods to acquire their powers through specific knowledge communicated in the sacraments. Fourth, the divine powers can be manipulated to perform miraculous acts for the benefit of humans.<sup>52</sup> These powers are the guarantee of the efficacy of magic. Therefore, magic is attractive since it offers an alternative to everything considered impossible on religion. The beliefs of magic seem similar to religion, except for that magic negatively manipulate the divine power. Thus, magic contrasts faith, which submits to the gods and relies on their ability.<sup>53</sup>

### *Sacrament*

The sacraments mainly include a set of actions that included the use of milk,<sup>54</sup> wine,<sup>55</sup> and honey,<sup>56</sup> and formula mentioning of the names and

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<sup>48</sup> Mills in *Magic and Human-Agent*, 13, points out that the highest level is the Supreme while the lower ones are daimonej (demons). Magic is then able to make use of the power of the Supreme or demons (daimonej).

<sup>49</sup> See, for instance, PGM XXIIb. 1-26 that claims the God of Israel; PGM XXIIa. 18-27 that makes use Helios, god over the heavens; PGM XIII. 215-25 that lists many Greek gods and their powers; PGM XII. 190-92 that uses the name of Jesus; PDM xiv. 430-5 that claims the control of Isis and Osiris, gods of the Egyptian; PGM I. 300-5 that claims the power of Zeus.

<sup>50</sup> Although Abrasax or Abraxas is a popular deity in magic, he is still not recognized as the main god in magic or used universally in all magical spells found in Greek Magical Papyri. See Betz, *Greek Magical Papyri*, 331.

<sup>51</sup> The contrast to this assumption is the close circle of view that does not allow any intervention of the divine into environment. The close system believes that quality is the only source to fix or alter the natural life. See Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World*, 30-2.

<sup>52</sup> See Mills, *Human Agents of Cosmic Power*, 13.

<sup>53</sup> See Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World*, 30-35 who provides significant evidence (critics by Heraclitus that those of the initiates and the *magoi* ...he considered as obscene, also Plato who ranks the sorcerer among "those ... deny the existence of the gods and believe them either negligent or corruptible". Another is the witness in the treatise *On the Sacred Disease* from the late fifth century BC. That mentioned "the claim to influence the laws of nature through their rites" as taking the "powers that belong to the gods," thus reduces the gods to nothing) that from the beginning magic has been labeled as forcing the gods to perform various miraculous actions rather than believing the gods.

<sup>54</sup> See, for instance, PGM I.5-10; PGM III. 380-5; PGM III. 410.

<sup>55</sup> PGM II. 70-4; PGM III. 325-30; PGM IV. 1335; PDM xiv. 920.

<sup>56</sup> PGM III. 187-90; PGM III. 325; 425-30; PGM IV. 755; PDM xiv. 930.



gods' power. Sacraments manipulate gods' power and are also a channel to reach a higher spirituality.<sup>57</sup> In Christianity, the sacrament is not only to have a relationship with God but also to partake in the community.

The first account of magic practiced by Simon is not entirely clear. However, Justin Martyr reported that Simon practiced magic "through the agency of demons."<sup>58</sup> Irenaeus also recorded that Simon's followers practiced exorcism.<sup>59</sup> Presuming these reports are trustworthy; the Greek Magical Papyri provide magic practices that are used by Simon. We can then understand Simon's claim as "the great power of god."

The claim "the great power of god" indicates that Simon acquires for the most powerful demon assistant.<sup>60</sup> The Greek Magical Papyri (PGM) I.1-42 and PGM I.42-195 are two representative instances to understand the magic "through the agency of demons" performed by Simon. The result is that the magician "will be [worshiped] as a god" (I.190-5) since such people "have a god as a friend" (I.190-5). These descriptions, which presumably occur at Simon's magic, have demonstrated the appeal to the various powers of many gods and the results. The claim as "great" must correspond to the manipulation of these many gods. This is evident in the demand Simon made and the inscription written on Simon's statue that he is god.<sup>61</sup> Simon's followers are said to practice exorcism and dream sending, which likely originated with Simon.

The recognition of "the great power of god" closely related to many gods and their powers is something that Simon might claim to acquire. The reason is perhaps that Simon was the first one in Samaria who had successfully demonstrated the manipulation of as many powers of the divine beings as were there in Samaria. Then, the claim of "the great power of god" is negative in Luke's perspective. The demand of Haar that the portrait of Simon is positive before the Roman period might be right, but

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<sup>57</sup> See, for instance, PGM IV. 850-929 that is intended to produce a trance or achieve a higher spirituality and PGM IV. 930-1114, a charm to produce direct vision with the introduction of prayer for the divine alliance.

<sup>58</sup> See Haar, *Simon Magus*, 85, who cites Justin Martyr, *Apology* I. 26, 3.

<sup>59</sup> See Haar, *Simon Magus*, 93, who also cites Justin Martyr, *Apology* I. 18, for the use of dream senders.

<sup>60</sup> See PGM I. 1-42; the phrase "breathing fire" in PGM I. 30-5 suggests the reference to the sun god. See Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation*, 4, note 8. Another god in this magical spell is Ra-Atum, the Egyptian god emerging from the sea of chaos, in I.35; see note 9; Also PGM I. 42-195, recites the spell of Pnouthis. Mainly is I.50-55 that recorded the period of Pnouthis who "has the power to persuade the gods and all goddesses." Besides this Pnouthis, their many gods listed as well, such as the angel Helios who "can stand for the celestial body or for the deity representative of that body" in Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation*, 335.

<sup>61</sup> See the following subtitle "Magic and Religion" and note 99 ff for the discussion of Simon's sculpture.

not in Luke's view. Luke intended to demonstrate that only the Christian God is true and most powerful.

In PGM IV.1227-64, several names in the spoken formula correspond to biblical people<sup>62</sup> Such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Jesus *Chrestos*<sup>63</sup> The Holy Spirit, and the Son of the Father. The exorcism formula is "I conjure you, daemon, whoever you are, by this god... Come out, daimon, whoever you are, and stay away from him..."<sup>64</sup> The use of all these names suggests a close connection between Christianity or Judaism and exorcism. The seven sons of Sceva in Acts 19:13-20 who were familiar with the Old Testament figures may have practiced this magic.

The magic performed by Elymas corresponds with the epithet as a false prophet.<sup>65</sup> And the identity as a Jew. As a Jew, he was presumed to have known about the miraculous acts in the history of Israel. Such as the renowned acts of Moses as a great magician.<sup>66</sup> The epithet of false prophet implies that his main task is to prophesy, but the attribute of "false" may have two meanings, the prophecy is fake in the sense of not fulfilled,<sup>67</sup> Or the origin of the office and prophecy is not from the true God.

The Eighth Book of Moses, as found in PGM XII.1-734, may help us to figure out the negative image of Elymas' magical practices. There are references to "ABRASAX," the main god in magic, in PGM XIII.85, 155-60, two names of the Jews' God, IAO (PGM XIII. 75, 145-50, 205) and ADONAIE (PGM XIII. 80, 145-50, and the seven Greek gods such as Helios, Selene, Ares, Hermes, Zeus, Aphrodite, and Kronos in PGM XIII.215-25. The combination of these gods implies the syncretism, which is unaccepted in Judaism.<sup>68</sup> The epithet of Elymas as a false prophet suggests that his authority is not from God, as evidenced in the Eighth Book of Moses. Therefore, the image of Elymas is negative.

<sup>62</sup> PGM IV. 1230-5.

<sup>63</sup> this "Chrestos" means excellent one instead of "Christos," which is an "anointed one."

<sup>64</sup> See PGM IV. 1240-5.

<sup>65</sup> See Jeremiah 14:14, who notified that a false prophet did prophesy, but their office did not originate in God as the sender.

<sup>66</sup> Pliny, *Natural History* 30.1, even credited Moses with starting his school of magic as Betz in *The Greek Magical Papyri*, 172, note 2, cites Pliny. See also J. Gager, *Moses in Greco-Roman Paganism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1972), 134-61.

<sup>67</sup> See Deuteronomy 18:22 that recites the way to distinguish the true and false prophet.

<sup>68</sup> All these types of mantras are highly probable to impress Elymas to influence the proconsul. Among the many practices in this lengthy magical book, several methods that could be relevant to the context of Elymas in Acts 13:6-8 are invisibility (PGM XIII.235), exorcism (PGM XIII. 240-5), healing (PGM XIII.235), to fix a thing in its place (PGM XIII. 250), to restrain anger and to break spells (PGM XIII. 250-5), the resurrection of a dead body (PGM XIII. 275-80), to release from bonds (PGM XIII. 285-90), and to send dreams (PGM XIII. 310).

The spirit of divination in Acts 16:16 is likely the spirit of Python. According to Strabo<sup>69</sup> and Plutarch,<sup>70</sup> Python is a serpent or dragon, lived in Pytho beneath Mount Parnassus, and guarded the Delphic oracle.<sup>71</sup> The further development of the spirit of Python to the spirit of divination is understandable. Though this Python was slain by Apollo, the name Python was applied to those who prophesied under the inspiration of Apollo. Thus, the name of Python corresponds closely to Apollo, the god of prophecy.<sup>72</sup>

Two significant spells in PGM IV.1227-64<sup>73</sup> and PGM LXXXV.1-6,<sup>74</sup> Are relevant to the practice of the seven sons of Sceva. The exorcism suggests the use of various person's or gods' names. In Jewish circles, the name of Solomon was employed to exorcise demons.<sup>75</sup> The PGM LXXXV.1-6 is a helpful resource to understand the exorcism. The incomplete phrase "THAE ..." is highly referred to a god's name since the following words "... drive away, make the daemons ..." is likely to cast out the demons. Therefore, the use of Jesus's name by these seven sons of Sceva demonstrated syncretism and was unacceptable in Christianity.

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<sup>69</sup> See BAGD, 728, who cites Strabo 3, 9, 12.

<sup>70</sup> See I. Howard Marshall, A. R. Millard, J. I. Packer, and D. J. Wiseman, eds., *New Bible Dictionary*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Downers Grove: IVP, 1996), 992 who cites Plutarch, *De Defectu Oraculorum*, 9, p. 414E.

<sup>71</sup> See Dean Deppe; *All Roads Lead to the Text: Eight Methods of Inquiry into the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book, 2011), 167-9. Apollo then slew this Python. The episode of Python in magic is also attested in a hymn in PGM III.235-55, which is a part of PGM III.187-262, a spell for revelation. The hymn is likely written to Apollo, whom the magician had previously adjured to "Send me the daimon who will give a response to me about everything which I order him to speak about" as in PGM III.225-30. The authority of Apollo over the Delphic oracle is also evident in PGM I. 262-347, which is an Apollonian invocation. In this invocation, mainly PGM I. 295-300, the god Apollo was invoked to "Give answer to my questions, lord, O master. Leave Mount Parnassos and the Delphic Pytho whene'er my priestly lips voice." Also, in this source, there are requests on prophecy, divination, sending dreams, obtaining revelation in hopes, causing disease, and even "about everything that is part of magical knowledge."

<sup>72</sup> See James S. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1999), 93, who provides the list of the Greek gods.

<sup>73</sup> This is a Greek and Coptic exorcism spell; see Betz, *The Greek Magical Papyri*, 62.

<sup>74</sup> This PGM LXXXV.1-6 is highly significant because of its date, which is first or second century A.D, though this spell is not fully disclosed, for it is taken from only three tiny fragments.

<sup>75</sup> Josephus, in *Antiquities* 7.2, reports that Solomon himself was so powerful that even demons could be exorcised in his name.

## Magic and Religion

Greco-Roman religion is complicated. There were many religions in the Roman Empire. No religion can be called an official Roman religion.<sup>76</sup> Religion was understood as the communal obedience to the gods and was expressed mostly by regularly participating in worship rites as experienced in the public cult.<sup>77</sup> The concept of religion as communal is contrasted with magic, which is individual in its manifestations,<sup>78</sup> thus magic was viewed as deviant to the Greco-Roman religious practices. However, the presence of miracles is essential to acclaim a religion's authenticity and authority.<sup>79</sup> It is then no surprise if miracles are abundant in religion as well, including Christianity.<sup>80</sup>

In politics, the recognition of many gods in Roman religion,<sup>81</sup> Particularly the worship of Caesar expressed the domination of the Roman empire over its cities. The stories about gods and the necessity to worship Caesar<sup>82</sup> were the vehicle of religious propaganda to ensure Roman authority over its territories. The necessity to worship Caesar meant subjection to Roman domination.<sup>83</sup> The rejection to partake in such worship could be viewed as an attempt to be in rebellion against Rome with the consequence of repression. When magic was politically

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<sup>76</sup> John Scheid, *An Introduction to Roman Religion*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2003), 19.

<sup>77</sup> See Scheid, *An Introduction to Roman Religion*, 18-22; also Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World*, 90-1.

<sup>78</sup> While aware of the possibility of anachronistic reading of Christian theology, still Eyal Regev attempted to apply the what he called New Religious Movements (NRMs) to identify Christian religion. See Eyal Regev, "Early Christianity in the Light of New Religious Movements." *Numen International Review for the History of Religion* Volume 63, issue 5-6, October 2016: 486, 93.

<sup>79</sup> Bovon, *Studies in Early Christianity*, 253-265, particularly 258; 260; 265; Fiorenza, *Aspects in Religious Propaganda*, 2.

<sup>80</sup> Two visible pieces of evidence that show a close similarity between magic and miracles in Christianity are Acts 19:12 and the Apocryphal Acts of Peter 9, which records a speaking dog, as cited in Bovon, *Studies in Early Christianity*, 255. Similar evidence of miracle and magic are found mainly in the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles such as Acts of Thomas, Acts of Andrew, Acts of John, Acts of Paul, and Acts of Philip; See also Fiorenza, *Aspects in Religious Propaganda*, 2.

<sup>81</sup> Jeffers in *The Greco-Roman World*, 93, provides numbers of either Greek or Roman gods. Besides all these gods, there are many cities or local gods worshiped by the inhabitants. For instance, the famous goddess in Ephesus is Artemis, while in Thessalonica, it is Cabirus.

<sup>82</sup> See Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World*, 100-3. See also, Drew J. Strait, "The Wisdom of Solomon, Ruler Cults, and Paul's Polemic against Idols in the Areopagus Speech." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 136, no. 3, 2017: 611.

<sup>83</sup> See Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World*, 100-1.

beneficial, it is tolerated, but when magic was a threat, the result is repression.

Both religion and magic have a social impact.<sup>84</sup> Religion must give benefit to society.<sup>85</sup> The emphasis on the social benefit is understandable in a Roman society where standards for moral conduct do not exist. The ambivalent response toward magic explains the statue of Simon erected by the Roman authority in honoring him as reported by Justin Martyr,<sup>86</sup> Irenaeus,<sup>87</sup> And Eusebius,<sup>88</sup> But absent from Hippolytus.<sup>89</sup> There is a dispute over this statue, whether it points to Simon as recorded in Acts 8 or another Simon.<sup>90</sup> The conjecture that Justin has misinterpreted the

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<sup>84</sup> See Janowitz, *Magic in the Roman World*, 3. A good parallel to the case of Simon is the temple of the goddess Artemis in Ephesus, which is built to honor her. The temple of Artemis demonstrates that the significance of Artemis is not merely religious. Artemis is significant because her worship benefited the economic welfare of society.

<sup>85</sup> The advantage of faith lies in the reasons to worship many gods with their control over nature; See Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World*, 93, who provides a list of Roman and Greek gods and their association with nature or life.

<sup>86</sup> Justin Martyr, *Apology* I.26,3, as Haar cited him in *Simon Magus*, 85. Justin Martyr also reported that Simon was glorified as a god. By identifying Simon as a god is likely to say that Simon is powerful.

<sup>87</sup> Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* I 23,1-4 as cited by Haar in *Simon Magus*, 118. Irenaeus is said to use the report of Justin Martyr when he mentioned the phrase "It was said" regarding the statue of Simon.

<sup>88</sup> See Eusebius, *Church History* I.13 in *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1: Eusebius: *Church History, Life of Constantine the Great, and Oration in Praise of Constantine*, Philip Schaff, and Henry Wace, eds. (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), 113-4. The inscription of the statue provided by Eusebius is "Simoni Deo Sancto," which means "To Simon, the Holy god."

<sup>89</sup> Hippolytus in *Book VII.15*, reported the death of Simon Magus as cited by Schaff, *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, 114. The absence of the report of Simon's statue was said as a significant argument against the release of Justin Martyr and Irenaeus. The erection of a statue to Simon demonstrates that the state recognized the power of a magician. The context in Ephesus is helpful to understand that the figure of Simon reflects more than just religious convictions but also illustrates the political and the social aspects of magic. A good parallel to the case of Simon is the temple of the goddess Artemis in Ephesus. Which is built to honor her. The temple of Artemis demonstrates that the significance of Artemis is not merely religious. Artemis is significant because her worship benefited the economic welfare of society. Acts 19:21-39 reflects the honor of Artemis involves religious, social, and political aspects.

<sup>90</sup> The key to understanding this issue lies in the inscription of a statue found in 1574 in the place described by Justin Martyr. See Schaff, *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, 113-4, note 10 and 11. The statue was erected on the island, which is in the middle of the Tiber river as in Schaff, *Nicene and Post Nicene*, 114, note 10. The inscription in Latin, reported by Eusebius, is "Simoni Deo Sancto," which means "To Simon the Holy God." The text of the inscription found in 1574 is "Semoni Sanco Deo Fidio." The accuracy of the report on the statue of Simon by Justin, Irenaeus, and Eusebius has been doubted. It is not entirely clear whether the inscription found in 1574 is the inscription Justyn Martyr points to. Therefore, there is always a possibility that Justyn Martyr refers to another dedication

inscription is still disputed.<sup>91</sup> Simon's statue demonstrates the Roman state recognition of the magician's power. A good parallel to the case of Simon is the temple of the goddess Artemis in Ephesus, which was built to honor her. The temple of Artemis demonstrates that the significance of Artemis was not merely religious but also benefited the economic welfare of society.<sup>92</sup> Just as all religions in Greco-Roman society, so too magic, though the individual in its manifestation but has a religious, political, and social dimension.

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that is unknown to us now. The arguments against the erection of a statue to Simon Magus have been proposed. First, Justin Martyr is believed to have misinterpreted the inscription, which is supposed to refer to the "Sabine divinity Semo Sancus." as in Schaff, *Nicene and Post Nicene*, 114; Also Haar, *Simon Magus*, 84-6. The reference of the inscription to Semo Sancus is likely apparent, but it could be that Justin Martyr refers to another dedication that is unknown to us yet. Also, it is said that Justin's report on Simon "appears to have been derived from other sources." As in Haar, *Simon Magus*, 85.

Moreover, Justin is said to grapple with "misunderstandings and prejudice of his contemporaries," as in Haar, *Simon Magus*, 84. Therefore, "the reasons for the testimony of history and the account of Justin's hand had more to do with rhetoric than reality." as in Haar, *Simon Magus*, 86. Second, Justin is said to have no personal contact with Simon. It is said that "The report of Justin has little historical worth because Justin had no direct contact with Simon or Simonians." as argued by Haar, *Simon Magus*, 89. Third, the additional episode of Simon traveling to Rome is said to be propaganda, making the historicity of the event of Simon unreliable, as again argued by Haar, *Simon Magus*, 102.

<sup>91</sup> See Schaff, *Nicene and Post Nicene*, 114. The witness of both Irenaeus and Eusebius, who confirm the report of Justin, should not be neglected since their era is the closest to the age of Simon. The misunderstanding and prejudice of Justin Martyr are questionable. In every other area, he is seen to be an excellent witness to the conflicts between Christianity and the different religions and sects in the Roman world. Therefore, the accusation of prejudice and misunderstanding against Justin Martyr is not convincing. The absence of "direct contact" of Justin Martyr and Irenaeus. Simon does not necessarily prove the unreliability of the historicity of Simon's episode. Simply put, both Justin and Irenaeus lived after Simon. But the distance of time between all of them is so narrow that it is sensible to maintain that the report of Justin and Irenaeus is reliable and accurate. To doubt the statement of Justin and Irenaeus seems to be more problematic than to retain it. The conclusion is that it is more plausible to maintain the report of Justin, Irenaeus, and Eusebius on the statue of Simon than against it. For instance, Justin's identity as an original Samaritan is strong evidence that his report is more reliable than others, which are not Samaritans. Also, Justin is the first Christian who provides a record of the person of Simon found in the book of Acts. The absence of other documents of Simon from Justin's contemporaries is evident that Justin's interest in Simon is more profound than others. Therefore, his report is highly reliable and of historical worth. Dependence on other sources and a polemical rhetorical purpose do not necessarily mean that the historicity of the account is unreliable. Thus, the judgment against Justin's report as historically inaccurate based on his dependence on other sources is not convincing as well.

<sup>92</sup> See Acts 19:21-39 reflects the honor of Artemis involves religious, social, and political aspects. It means that the temple building demonstrates the involvement of these three aspects.

## Implication

The implication of magic is evident in the context of the Christian mission, especially in the context of Indonesia. There are many local religions that believe in the existence of divine beings with their authority over nature. Although these beliefs may not be magic exactly, their similarities with magic are apparent. In Indonesia, the views of many divine beings are evident in so many districts. Therefore, understanding of magic in Acts must provide a clear guide in preaching the gospel in such an area. Also, the issue of syncretism when preaching the gospel can be well anticipated if magic in Acts is adequately understood. The victory of Christianity over magic must strengthen every Christian when they must face the beliefs opposed to Christianity.

In pastoral services, especially occult services, it is often seen that magic works so that people who are possessed by demons are obtained. Occultism is caused by sorcery and witchcraft. Therefore, God's servants must believe in the existence of magic so that in service, they can prepare themselves against the power of darkness with the power of Jesus Christ.<sup>93</sup>

## Conclusion

This research concludes that magic consists of a set of specific phenomena correspond to the powers assigned to divine beings to alter nature to fulfill the human needs. The evidence from the time before and during the Roman period and the Greek Magical Papyri demonstrates several characters of magic: First, the manipulation of all divine beings for the benefit of the magician and those who ask for the service is obvious in its philosophy. Second, magic is practiced by all levels in the Roman Society, including Roman Caesars, but it is also repressed during the Roman period. Third, for Christianity, magic is always negative. Fourth, magic and religion are intertwined since magic manipulates all divine beings.

Magic should be understood in two ways: 1) Magic is a syncretism of all beliefs system as in the Greco-Roman era. Thus, it must be overcome by Christianity. 2) In the context of the Christian mission, magic should be understood in the apologetical purpose of Acts. Although magic may seem to be beneficial, it is always opposed to the Christian faith. When the confrontation between Christianity and magic happened, victory is the Christian faith. Every Christian must hold on this truth that the gospel

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<sup>93</sup> Rahel Jum Juld and I. Ketut Enoch, "Okultisme Dalam Pelayanan Pastoral," *Jurnal Jaffray* 11, no. 2 (October 2, 2013): 165, <https://doi.org/10.25278/jj71.v11i2.83>.

cannot be restrained even by magic. When magic is overcome, then the gospel is widely spread.

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