

Death, Resurrection, and Legitimacy in the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles

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Abstract:

In the Areopagus speech in Acts 17, Paul asserts that the resurrection of Jesus is proof that the man from Nazareth had been appointed by God and would one day judge the world. Paul believes that Jesus was the authoritative agent of divine proclamation, because he had conquered death by coming back to life. Accounts of resurrection also play a key role in establishing legitimacy in some of the apocryphal acts. This essay explores how being raised from the dead or raising others from the dead both functions in these texts as a marker of legitimacy for the apostles Peter and Paul and undermines the false claims to divine authority of Simon Magus.

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COMING BACK TO LIFE

The Permeability of Past and Present, Mortality and Immortality, Death and Life in the Ancient Mediterranean

Edited by
Frederick S. Tappenden and Carly Daniel-Hughes



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I. INTRODUCTION: LEGITIMACY, RESURRECTION, AND ACCOUNTS PERTAINING TO JESUS

In [Mark 10:35–41](#), James and John come to Jesus and ask for the right to sit at his right and left hand in the coming kingdom. The brothers fail to comprehend the foreboding nature of Jesus’s response that they must “drink the cup” that he drinks and go through the “baptism” that he will experience. They do not understand that exaltation can only follow suffering. This was, however, to become a recurring motif in early Christian literature. Following the example of Christ to one’s death was proof of one’s authenticity as a representative of Christ, and in some cases walking in the savior’s footsteps even includes rising from the dead, or raising others from the dead, as the ultimate proof of one’s authority. This essay will demonstrate that in some early Christian literature, and particularly in the apocryphal acts, the image of resurrection serves to establish a figure’s divinely recognized legitimacy as a type of Christ.¹

Any discussion of Christian notions of resurrection must begin with Jesus. Studies on the accounts of Jesus’s resurrection in the Gospels and Paul are numerous and represent a variety of

¹ For the sake of this essay, I am focusing on examples of bodily resurrection, that is, cases in which the revived person is described as having some kind of recognizable body. Whether or not resurrected bodies in early Christian texts are meant to be understood as *fleshly* is a matter of ongoing debate grounded in passages such as [1 Cor 15](#). That broader discussion is outside the scope of this essay.

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methodological approaches (e.g., Lüdemann 1994; Koch 1959; Charlesworth 2006; Koester and Bieringer 2008; Perkins 1984; Perrin 1977; Bryan 2011; Davis, Kendall, and O’Collins 1997; Stewart 2006; Carnley 1987; Licona 2010; Swinburne 2003), so there is no need to rework that same ground here. Rather, our focus is on how this tradition was received and interpreted specifically as evidence of Jesus’s exaltation and legitimacy. A clear articulation of this theological reading appears in two of the most important speeches in the Acts of the Apostles: Peter’s sermon on the day of Pentecost ([Acts 2:14–36](#)), and Paul’s speech on the Areopagus ([Acts 17:22–31](#)).² In the midst of Peter’s sermon in Acts 2, he turns directly to proofs of Jesus’s legitimacy:

You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know—this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up,³ having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power. ([Acts 2:22–24](#))⁴

After quoting [Ps 16:8–11](#) (= [Ps 15:8–11 LXX](#)) as proof that David had prophesied about Jesus’s resurrection, Peter continues, “This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses” ([Acts 2:32](#)). He

² The passages analyzed here are meant to be illustrative, not comprehensive. There are also references to Jesus’s legitimacy through his resurrection in Peter’s speech to Cornelius ([Acts 10:34–43](#)) and in Paul’s sermon in Pisidian Antioch ([Acts 13:16–41](#)).

³ The Greek construction here is somewhat unusual, leading Barrett (1994, 1:143) to suggest that it “may be drawn from an early formulation of belief (cf. [Phil. 2.6](#); [Col. 1.15](#); [1 Tim. 3.16](#)).” However, as I note elsewhere in this chapter, the specific reference to *resurrection* as proof of legitimacy is absent in the other passages cited by Barrett.

⁴ All biblical quotations are from the NRSV. All translations of other early Christian writings are my own unless otherwise noted (cf. Eastman 2015a). On the wider significance of reference to the kerygma in Acts, see Bauckham 1996.

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then concludes his sermon with the statement, “Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified” ([2:36](#)). Jesus was attested by God through his deeds of power, but the ultimate sign of his legitimacy was that God raised him from the dead and made him “both Lord and Christ” (Messiah). The resurrection of Jesus is the ultimate seal of divine action and divine approval,⁵ and Peter proclaims these things as one who has witnessed the events.⁶

Later in Acts, Paul comes to Athens and attempts to contextualize his gospel message to an audience of philosophers (Epicureans and Stoics are mentioned by name). After appealing to their concept of “the unknown god,” he finishes his speech with a reference to the impending judgment: “while God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead” ([Acts 17:30–31](#)). Jesus is never named specifically in Paul’s speech, but the implication is clear.⁷ God has guaranteed that, on account of this man’s resurrection from the dead, he will preside

⁵ As Bruce (1988, 64) comments, “if his suffering and death were ordained by the determinate counsel of God, so were his resurrection and glory.” Liggins (2016, 121–22) has summarized Peter’s logic in this way: “Jesus through his resurrection and ascension better corresponds with the person described in these Psalms [those alluded to by Peter] than does David who died, whose tomb is well known, and who did not ascend to heaven. Only through the resurrection could a son of David rule forever.”

⁶ The element of Petrine witness is critical to the narrative. As Witherington (1998, 147) notes, “Peter does not merely proclaim the resurrection, he claims with the Eleven to have been a witness of the resurrection appearances. Thus Peter himself is in a double sense a witness—one who has seen and one who reports or bears witness.”

⁷ “All that the absence of the name means is that, at this stage, the speaker is more interested in the theme of judgment than in the details of the process. The next clause effects the identification—for the reader” (Barrett 1998, 2:853).

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over the final judgment.⁸ The resurrection is the proof of Jesus's authority and legitimacy, and it is this precise claim about resurrection that prompts the crowd to break into different groups: those who mock, those who remain uncertain and want to hear more, and those who believe ([Acts 17:32–34](#)).⁹

The framing of the speeches in Acts makes them especially significant for our consideration of the reception of the resurrection story. Peter, the apostle to the Jews, declares this message in Jerusalem. Paul, the apostle to everyone else, delivers his speech in Athens. The twin pillars of the church take the message to the center of Jewish faith and practice and to the center of Greek philosophical thought. There is a symmetry to these speeches that reveals the centrality of the resurrection narrative to the Lukan account of the earliest Christian missionary preaching. Jews and Gentiles should pay attention to, and ultimately surrender to, Jesus because he had come back to life.¹⁰

II. JESUS, DEATH, AND RESURRECTION

That Jesus served as a model for later Christians and for the stories told about later Christians has been recognized for a long time. This appears as early as the account of Stephen's stoning in [Acts 7](#) and his final words, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" ([Acts 7:60](#));¹¹

⁸ Thus, the resurrection of Jesus proves his legitimacy as a divine messenger and the future judge. See, e.g., Witherington 1998, 531–32; Gaventa 2003, 253; Conzelmann 1987, 146–48.

⁹ Dunn (1996, 237) sees the judgment motif of [17:30–31](#) as the rhetorical setup for this fracture: "Luke cannot have been unaware of the offensive character of such an abrupt and bald declaration. It is almost as though he wanted to set in the sharpest possible contrast the fundamental claim of Christianity and the mocking rejection of the Athenian sophisticates."

¹⁰ Strangely, the particular linking of resurrection with legitimacy does not appear in the Christ Hymn of [Phil 2:5–11](#). There, Paul mentions the crucifixion and exaltation of Jesus without any reference to resurrection.

¹¹ There has been considerable scholarly debate on whether this quotation was original to the text or added by a later scribal hand (see Pervo 2009, 198–99).

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as early as the enumeration of Paul's ordeals in the latter chapters of Acts, which are clearly parallel to Jesus's ordeals in the final chapters of the Lukan Gospel (Meeks and Fitzgerald 2007, 171–72; Pervo 2009, 533–34, 592–93; Witherington 1998, 627–28; Talbert 1974, 17–18; Neyrey 1985, 98–107; Longenecker 1981, 515); and as early as the production of the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, in which the aged bishop is described as being one of the “imitators of the Lord” whose death “took place according to the gospel of Christ” ([Mart. Pol. 17.3; 19.1](#)).¹² Christians describe their venerable figures as following in Christ's footsteps, even as “Other Christs,” as Candida Moss (2010, esp. 54–59) has put it. These figures and others like them are remembered as types of Christ. Yet, all these examples also point to a fundamental distinction from the speeches in Acts that we saw above: the authority of these other Christ-like figures comes from their deaths, not their resurrections.

For other martyr examples of the late first or early second century, authority also comes through their deaths. A tantalizing passage on Peter and Paul in 1 Clement does not tell us many things we would wish to know about the apostolic deaths—though it might tell us more than is traditionally understood (Eastman 2014; Cullmann 1962, 91–110; cf. Tajra 1994, 79–84)—but the author does specify that their legitimacy is directly tied to their deaths:

On account of jealousy and envy the greatest and most righteous pillars were persecuted and fought to the death. Let us place before our eyes the noble apostles. Because of unjust jealousy Peter endured hardships, and not once or twice but many times. Thus, after bearing witness he went to the place of glory that was due him. On account of jealousy and conflict Paul pointed the way to the prize for perseverance. After he had been bound in chains seven times, driven into exile, stoned, and had preached in both the East and in the West, he received the noble glory for his faith, having taught

¹² Indeed, Polycarp is so much a Christ figure that a certain Nicetes even warns the magistrate to dispose of the body, lest the Christians “abandon the crucified one and begin to worship this man” ([17.2](#)).

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righteousness to the whole world and having gone even to the limit of the West. When he had borne witness before the rulers, he was thus set free from the world and was taken up to the holy place, having become the greatest example of perseverance. ([1 Clem. 5.2-7](#))

Peter is credited with enduring many hardships and then going to “the place of glory that was due him.” Many of Paul’s ordeals are enumerated, and then he is described as “the greatest example of perseverance.”¹³ The twin apostles are the “greatest and most righteous pillars” because of what they endured, even to the point of death. This model is particularly relevant for a Christian community at risk of suffering persecution (Welborn 2004), but there is no mention of resurrection.

III. RESURRECTION IN THE “APOCRYPHAL” ACTS¹⁴

Where, then, does the concept of coming back to life in the mold of Christ enter the martyrological tradition? The first text in which it plays a major role is the Acts of Peter (ca. 180 CE).¹⁵ In this account Peter comes to Rome to strengthen the Christians there after the departure of Paul. The particular threat comes from Simon Magus, a sorcerer who had first appeared in [Acts 8](#). In Acts this local conjurer hears the preaching of Philip and comes to believe. He is baptized and travels around with Philip, amazed at the signs and wonders that Philip performs. When Peter and John arrive and confer the Holy Spirit by the laying on of hands, Simon offers them money if they will grant him this ability. Peter rebukes him, telling him to repent and beg God for forgiveness. Simon does repent and even

¹³ For further discussion concerning this list of apostolic trials, see Lona 1998, 158–67.

¹⁴ The term “apocryphal” is used here because it is widely employed in reference to stories about the apostles written in the second century and later, but it is problematic on several counts (see Eastman 2015a, xviii–xxii).

¹⁵ This text survives in Greek and in the Latin Vercelli Acts. On the relationships between these texts, see Baldwin 2005, Thomas 2003, and Poupon 1988.

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asks the apostles to use their influence with God to ask for forgiveness on his behalf. Simon is left a sorrowful recent convert.

However, by the time of the Acts of Peter, Simon is back with a vengeance.¹⁶ He has once again taken up his wicked ways and is claiming to be the “great power of God” ([Acts Pet. 4](#)).¹⁷ He has come to Rome (for no apparent reason) and built a significant reputation for himself. He is now in the company of the emperor himself and has been attacking the church, particularly Peter.¹⁸ Simon Peter ends up having a showdown with Simon Magus, and in the Acts of Peter this occurs in a triple resurrection cycle.¹⁹

In the first scene, the prefect Agrippa decides to use one of his slaves to settle the Simon versus Simon dispute. He tells Simon (Magus), “Take him and kill him.” Then he says to Peter, “And you bring him back to life” ([Acts Pet. 25](#)). (We can only imagine the poor

¹⁶ Klauck (2000, 23) explains this condemnation of Simon in the Acts of Peter and elsewhere: “The common understanding . . . was that one whose conversion to the faith was motivated by sheer hypocrisy could not be capable of genuine repentance. Simon Magus is lost for ever to the Church; all he is fit for now is to be head of all heretics and founder of all heresies.”

¹⁷ The embedded hyperlinks connect to the older translation of the Acts of Peter produced by M. R. James (1924); the numbering corresponds to the Latin version (i.e., Vercelli Acts). For the Martyrdom of the Holy Apostle Peter, see Eastman 2015a, 1–25.

¹⁸ This conflict also features prominently in the Pseudo-Clementine literature (see Bockmuehl 2010, 94–113, and Kelley 2006, 135–78).

¹⁹ Thomas (1998, 80) suggests that these three resurrection stories were crafted from different versions of the same *Vorlage*: “the author may have heard or read different versions of a single resurrection story that remained distinct in his or her mind: a version concerning the favorite of the emperor, in which Simon slays the boy, and Peter raises him; a version in which Peter raises the son of a poor widow, as Jesus did at Nain; and a version in which Simon demonstrates his insufficiency by moving only the head of the corpse, and Peter challenges him angrily before performing the act correctly. The author filled out these materials as well as could be done.” However, this does not change the impact of the cycle for the reader of the Acts of Peter or the eager adaptation of the stories, such as in the history of Pseudo-Hegesippus and the Acts of Nereus and Achilles (both discussed by Thomas).

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slave's response to this proposal.) Simon whispers something into the slave's ear, presumably some kind of curse, and the boy falls over, dead. Even before Peter can raise him, a widow bursts in and cries out that her only son has died but had asked for Peter with his waning breaths. Peter sends her with some men to bring back her dead son, but in the meantime he must deal with the dead slave. He prays to the Lord to raise the slave and then tells Agrippa to take the boy's hand. As soon as he does, the boy comes back to life, and all proclaim the truth of Peter's God: "There is only one God, the God of Peter" ([Acts Pet. 26](#)). In this first encounter, Peter is affirmed as an agent of the true God, because his power to bring the boy back to life is perceived as greater than the power to kill possessed by Simon, the other would-be conduit of divine power.

Then Peter turns his attention to the widow's son, who is brought to him in the Forum. Peter prays over the boy and raises him, causing the people to exclaim, "You are God the savior! You, the God of Peter, are the invisible God and the savior!" ([Acts Pet. 27](#)). Soon after, the third scene unfolds, as the mother of a senator named Nicostratus comes seeking Peter's help for her dead son. Peter announces to the crowd that the credit should go to God, not to him, and proposes a contest with Simon. If Simon can raise Nicostratus, then the Romans should recognize him as the messenger of God. If not, then Peter will raise the dead man and prove that Simon is a fraud. Simon's incantations are ineffective, but Peter raises Nicostratus from the dead. "From that time on," the author says, "they worshipped Peter like a god" ([Acts Pet. 29](#)). The apostle's ability to bring people back to life on three occasions is the proof of his legitimacy. Indeed, this power even grants him divine status in the eyes of the crowd, and Peter never says anything to discourage this enthusiasm ([Acts Pet. 28-29](#)).²⁰ This triple resurrection cycle has proven his legitimacy as the agent of the true God.

²⁰ Compare with [Acts 14:12-15](#), where Paul and Barnabas tear their garments when the people of Lystra identify them with the gods Hermes and Zeus.

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Peter's final act of resurrection is his own, in a manner of speaking. After his death by inverted crucifixion, he appears in a dream to a certain Marcellus, a former follower of Simon Magus who had turned to follow Peter and had prepared the apostle's body for burial. This is indeed a peculiar scene. Peter does not come back to Marcellus as proof of his authority or the power of God; rather, he comes back to rebuke Marcellus for wasting money on his burial. Thus, this "resurrection" scene has no obvious function, except perhaps serving as a critique of those who may want to aggrandize a traditional Petrine burial site ([Acts Pet.](#) 40 [= *Mart. Pet.* 11]). At the very end of the Acts of Peter, an unnamed figure appears to Nero in a dream to castigate and warn him to leave the Christians alone. This figure is not identified in the Greek text but probably should be read as Peter ([Acts Pet.](#) 41 [= *Mart. Pet.* 12]), for although the Latin version (the Vercelli Acts) identifies the figure as "an angel of God,"²¹ the fourth-century Latin translation and expansion of the Acts of Peter (wrongly ascribed to Linus) identifies this figure as none other than Peter himself. Peter *redivivus* in Nero's dream thus serves as the agent of divine retribution.

The Martyrdom of the Holy Apostle Paul, which in its final form probably dates a bit later than the Acts of Peter, near the end of the second century, presents a different scenario related to resurrection.²² Paul does raise someone from the dead—Patroclus, the imperial cupbearer. Patroclus is a member of the crowd that comes to hear Paul preach outside Rome. He is forced to sit in a

²¹ For a detailed comparison of the Greek and Latin texts of the martyrdom account, see Baldwin 2005, 251–301.

²² The Martyrdom of the Holy Apostle Paul is the third part of the Acts of Paul and very likely circulated independently before being incorporated into the larger text, as argued by Snyder (2013, 54–65). On the complicated relationship of possible dependence and interdependence between the Acts of Peter and Acts of Paul, and its importance for the dating of both texts, see MacDonald 1992, Valantasis 1992, and Perkins 1993. The second-century reception and reimagination of Paul has been the subject of important studies by MacDonald 1983, Pervo 2010, and White 2014, as well as a volume of collected essays, Bird and Dodson 2011.

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window, eventually falls asleep, and tumbles to his death.²³ Nero is deeply saddened by the news of the loss of his trusted servant, but in the meantime the apostle has raised Patroclus from the dead. Patroclus returns to the service of the emperor, yet rather than causing the fame of Paul to grow among the Romans—as resurrecting the dead did for Peter—this event brings the apostle into direct conflict with Nero when Patroclus says that Paul serves a rival king, “Jesus Christ, the king of the whole world and the ages” ([Acts Paul](#) 10.1–2 [= *Mart. Paul* 1–2]).²⁴ Nero threatens Paul with death, but the apostle responds: “Caesar, it is not for a short time that I live for my king. Know that even if you cut off my head, I will do this: I will appear to you after I have been raised again, so that you may know that I did not die but am alive in my king Jesus Christ (cf. [Rom 14:8](#)), who judges the entire world” ([Acts Paul](#) 10.4 [= *Mart. Paul* 4]). This is meant as both a promise and a threat. Paul will not just appear to Nero in a vision or haunt him by night; he predicts that he will come back to life and visit the emperor.

Undeterred, the emperor has Paul killed. When Paul’s head is severed, milk spurts onto the clothes of the executioner, and everyone, including Nero, is amazed at the report of this event. Soon Paul makes good on his promise to Nero:

While Caesar was still amazed and at a loss, Paul came at around the ninth hour,²⁵ when many philosophers and leaders—both rich and distinguished—were standing with Caesar, and when the centurion²⁶ was present. Appearing to them all, Paul said, “Caesar, see that the soldier of God did not die but lives. There will be great evil for you on account of

²³ The comparison to the story of Eutyches in [Acts 20:7–12](#) is evident (Eastman 2015a, 121–29).

²⁴ The embedded hyperlinks connect to the older translation of the Acts of Paul produced by M. R. James (1924). For the Martyrdom of the Holy Apostle Paul in Rome, see Eastman 2015a, 121–37.

²⁵ That is, around 3:00 p.m.

²⁶ A centurion named Cescus had been identified among Nero’s entourage earlier in the text and would later become a convert.

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the many righteous people whose blood you poured out, and these things will happen to you after not many days.” Nero was troubled and ordered that all the prisoners be set free, including Patroclus and all those remaining. ([Acts Paul](#) 10.6 [= Mart. Paul 6])

This story is qualitatively different from the account in the Acts of Peter. Paul does not return to complain about his burial arrangements; he comes back to prove to Nero that he is the authorized servant of the true king. Paul’s legitimacy is the primary issue at hand, and here resurrection is the proof of that legitimacy. Notably, this is not presented as a dream or a vision. Nero is fully awake in the middle of the afternoon, and he is not alone. Philosophers and other prominent Romans are present and witness the event, for Paul appears “to them all” (*καὶ πᾶσιν φανεῖς ὁ Παῦλος*).²⁷ As he had predicted, it is not his ghost but Paul himself: “Caesar, see that the soldier of God did not die but lives.” Decapitation did not end Paul’s life, for he has come back to life and is alive.

Paul’s public and physical visit to the imperial court is the closest comparison to Jesus’s resurrection that we find anywhere in Christian literature from any period.²⁸ The author of the Acts of Paul, like the authors of the Gospels, inserts narrative elements to emphasize that this is not a dream. Paul appears in the middle of the day, not at night like Peter did to Marcellus, and there are multiple witnesses, also unlike Peter’s castigating visit to Nero. It is not clear what kind of body Paul has, but he is clearly recognizable to those in

²⁷ Greek text from Eastman 2015a.

²⁸ In [Acts Thom.](#) 169–70, Thomas appears posthumously three times, but these are clearly visions, not the result of a bodily resurrection. The author specifies that Thomas “appears” (*φαίνω* and *ἐπιφαίνω* in the Greek text) and is not actually present, because he has ascended into the presence of God: “I am not here, but I have gone up and received everything that I was promised” (169).

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attendance.²⁹ And this Paul, like Jesus in the Gospels, had predicted that he would come back. The remembered Paul in the Acts of Paul not only shares in the sufferings of the remembered Jesus but also shares in his resurrection. Perhaps this is meant to be a literalistic fulfillment of Paul's desire to partake in Christ's suffering and resurrection, as stated in [Phil 3:10-11](#): "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead."³⁰ In any event, just as Jesus was validated and exonerated by his resurrection—according to the words of Paul in Acts no less—so is the apostle himself validated and exonerated in Rome by his own resurrection.³¹

In the accounts discussed so far, Peter and Paul are presented as dying and being raised separately, yet in later layers of the tradition there is an increasing emphasis on showing the harmony and collaboration of these two apostles (*concordia apostolorum*).³² In one text this close connection between Paul and Peter extends beyond their deaths. According to the pseudonymous author of the Epistle of Blessed Dionysius the Areopagite to Timothy concerning the Death of the Apostles Peter and Paul, the apostles are condemned together in Rome and separated only moments prior to

²⁹ Bolyki (1996, 103) emphasizes the reality, even physicality, of Paul's appearance by highlighting that "the martyr Paul comes (not: appears) to the court of Caesar."

³⁰ Lalleman (1996, 133) argues that in the Acts of Paul, "the resurrection of the believers," in this case Paul himself, "cannot be separated from that of Christ."

³¹ Gregory (2011, 188) concludes, "thus, whereas the canonical Acts concludes by depicting Paul as preaching freely in the heart of the Roman empire, the *Acts of Paul* concludes by depicting him as sharing in the death and resurrection of his Lord, and so embodying the message that he proclaimed."

³² See Huskinson 1982. In some cases, the apostles are so closely connected that they are confused with each other in literature and art (see Eastman 2015b).

their deaths.³³ However, “after their deaths I saw them one after the other entering the gates of the city hand in hand, and I saw them dressed in garments of light and adorned with bright and radiant crowns. I was not the only one who saw this, but Lemobia, a handmaid in the service of the emperor and a disciple of Paul, also saw it” (Ep. Tim. Dion. 8). Thus, although they had died apart from each other, the two apostles make a common posthumous appearance to a few of the faithful. Walking into Rome together hand-in-hand, they demonstrate their legitimacy as divine ambassadors, the unity of their teaching, and their equal victories over death.

IV. FALSE RESURRECTION, FALSE CHRIST

The apostles are not the only ones with claims to resurrection in the apocryphal acts, however. Their archnemesis, Simon Magus, also claims to have resurrection power because he is the Christ. In the *Passion of the Apostles Peter and Paul*, Simon attempts to prove his identity as the Christ to Nero by coming back to life—or at least seeming to come back to life (Pass. Apost. 1–2).³⁴ After inviting Simon into his court, Nero asks him about his background, and Simon says that he was sent by the divine majesty to the Jews. They rejected and killed him, but on the third day he rose again. Nero does not believe such a fantastic story, so Simon offers to reproduce the feat. He tells the emperor to have an executioner cut off his head in his presence, and he will rise again. Nero is finally convinced to do this and tells an executioner to take Simon, kill him somewhere else, and put his head in a basket that the emperor will seal with his own ring. Simon asks for this beheading to be done in a dark place, and in the dimness he tricks the executioner into cutting off the head of a ram and placing it in the basket. Nero seals the basket without checking its contents, and on the following day he opens it to look at

³³ I analyze this text in more detail elsewhere (Eastman 2015a, 343–65; 2016a, 464–80); for text and translation, see Eastman 2015a, 343–65.

³⁴ This text dates from the late sixth or early seventh century; for text and translation, see Eastman 2015a, 317–41.

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Simon's head but finds the ram's head instead. Nero is amazed and reports this to the Senate. On the third day after this failed execution, while Nero is in the Senate chamber, Simon walks in: "addressing the emperor he said in a loud voice, 'I am the one whom you ordered to be decapitated three days ago. Behold, I have been raised.'³⁵ Nero and all those who were with him were all the more amazed, and he ordered that a statue for Simon be set up in honor of this deed" (Pass. Apost. 3).³⁶

A major theme that runs through the remainder of this text is the denunciation of Simon and his claims to being the Christ, first by a relative of Pontius Pilate who happened to be in the Senate, and then by Peter and Paul. Yet, Nero defends Simon to the very end, when Simon falls from the sky to his death because of the prayers of Peter. In Nero's eyes, Simon's apparent resurrection is proof that he is who he says he is and that he was indeed sent by God. The legitimacy that Peter and Paul ascribe to Jesus in Acts based on his resurrection is ascribed here to Simon by the emperor. Interestingly, Simon's claims to be the Christ appear in several of the apocryphal acts,³⁷ but only in this text does Simon go to this extreme to prove his identity. This late antique author is therefore reviving the ancient theme of resurrection as proof of authority, yet here it is Simon's failed resurrection that reveals his illegitimacy.³⁸

³⁵ Hippolytus recounts that Simon attempted to prove that he was Christ by having his followers bury him alive, claiming that he would rise again on the third day: "he remained there to this day . . . for he was not the Christ" (*Haer.* 6.20.3 [= [6.15](#) in *ANF*]).

³⁶ Justin Martyr records that a statue for Simon stood between two bridges on the Tiber (*1 Apol.* 26). He probably misinterprets the inscription on the statue, but it is not impossible that followers of Simon used this statue as a focus of worship (see Zwierlein 2010, 129–34).

³⁷ For more on Simon's claims that he is the Christ, here and elsewhere, see Eastman 2016b.

³⁸ On the theme of failed resurrection, perhaps the author of this later Passion of the Apostles Peter and Paul is indebted to the passage from Hippolytus discussed in n. 35 (above).

V. CONCLUSION

The rhetoric of resurrection permeates early Christian literature and is linked to the example of Jesus as the prototype. What had separated Jesus from other teachers and would-be messiahs and affirmed his identity as unique in history was his resurrection, for it was the ultimate stamp of divine approval and authenticity.³⁹ In several of the apocryphal acts, we see this same status being applied to the apostles Paul and Peter, while their rival Simon Magus fails to prove himself through the same means. The final evidence of divinely-sanctioned legitimacy, therefore, was not just living well or dying well, but coming back to life.

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³⁹ My argument here is that the authors of these texts present Jesus's resurrection as a unique event in history, not that the claim itself has no parallels. Cotter (2001), Smith (2006), Miller (2014), and Matthews (2016) are among those who have compared the resurrection accounts in the Gospels to Greek and Roman apotheosis traditions. Such traditions, as these authors note, are informative but not exact analogues to the Gospels.

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