

Acts 12:25-13:12: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Acts chapter 12 verse 25 to chapter 13 verse 12. And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark.

Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon, who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manion, a lifelong friend of Herod the Tetrarch, and Saul.

While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them. Then, after fasting and praying, they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

So being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus. When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews, and they had John to assist them.

When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they came upon a certain magician, a Jewish false prophet named Bar-Jesus. He was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence, who summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God.

[1 : 08] But Elemas the magician, for that is the meaning of his name, opposed them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith. But Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him and said, You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord?

And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and unable to see the sun for a time. Immediately, mist and darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking people to lead him by the hand.

Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord. Acts chapter 13 begins Paul's first missionary journey.

It is part of a transition from Jerusalem and out into the wider world. With it comes a shift in focus, a movement into travel. There are several missionary journeys which accent travel much as we see in the book of Luke, as over a third of the book is concerned with the movement from Galilee down to Jerusalem.

Barnabas and Saul going down to Jerusalem at the end of chapter 11, and returning at the end of chapter 12, bookends the story of Peter's deliverance from prison. It also marks a sort of passing on of the baton.

[2 : 26] Whereas the focus has been upon Peter to this point, now the narrative focus shifts to Paul and his companions. John Mark accompanies them from Jerusalem. He is the son of Mary in whose house the Jerusalem church met for prayer.

The church in Antioch was introduced to us back in Acts chapter 11, verses 19 to 26. There the church had been founded primarily among a diaspora population, but the message of the gospel had been spread further by some Cyrenians and Cypriots.

Barnabas, a Levite of Cyprus himself, was sent there from Jerusalem at a later point. Here we learn of the prophets and the teachers in the Antioch church. They clearly have a number of gifted men working there.

The church has a number of leaders, perhaps overseeing different constituent communities of the larger Antioch church. One of the features of the early church, as we see it in Acts, is to have a number of teachers and leaders in each church, rather than simply one.

Some suggest that there are two different groups mentioned here, the first set of three, Barnabas, Simeon and Lucius, being prophets, and the second set of two, Mannion and Saul, being teachers.

[3 : 32] As Craig Keener claims, however, this is likely too neat a division, not least because we see Paul exercising prophetic gifts at various points. The earliest church had more charismatic forms of ministry, prophecy and other things like that, alongside more institutional forms of ministry, and the Antioch church provides an example of this.

The list of prophets and teachers is a diverse one. The cosmopolitanism of the early church is something that should always strike us as we read the book of Acts. Many of the leaders of the church were extremely widely travelled, familiar with several different cultural settings, able to speak in a number of different languages, and certain of them were also very well connected.

Barnabas, of whom we have heard several things so far, is one of them. Simeon, called Niger, is another. Many have reasonably speculated that, given his name, he might have been a black African.

Niger was a common name among Romans, so this doesn't prove his ethnicity one way or another. If he was an African, however, he wasn't the only one, as Lucius, who was most likely one of the founders of the church, was from Cyrene in present-day Libya.

The Roman Empire included within it much of the very north of Africa. The empire surrounded the Mediterranean on all sides. As it is often a matter of modern concern, we should note that the groups populating Roman North Africa would in many cases be very similar to those found in other parts of the Mediterranean part of the empire.

[5 : 00] Cyrene was originally a Greek settlement, with a sizeable Jewish population. Much of the population of many parts of Roman North Africa would have consisted of Romanised North Africans, living alongside Greeks, Romans, Jews and others.

However, there would have been darker-skinned Africans in many of these places, so we shouldn't be surprised at the possibility that Simon might have been one. We've already encountered a black African, the Ethiopian eunuch, as the first Gentile convert back in chapter 8.

Some have identified Lucius with Luke, an identification that has a long history in the church. It is, however, an unlikely one. Mannion is another important figure.

As he was raised with Herod Antipas, he was likely an older man of some social status, although it's possible that he was a higher-class slave, who might later have become a freed person. The Antioch church was engaged in worship and fasting when the Holy Spirit instructed them, most likely through prophecy, to set apart two of their most valuable men for a work appointed to them.

They fasted and prayed for them, and then they laid their hands on them, appointing and charging them for their mission, and sending them forth. The church, directed to send them by the Spirit, and laying their hands on them, is the means by which the Holy Spirit himself sends out Saul and Barnabas upon their journey.

[6 : 19] They begin by going to Seleucia, nearby on the Syrian coast, and then they sail to Cyprus, a large island in the eastern Mediterranean, beneath modern-day Turkey. Barnabas, we should remember, came from Cyprus, and the church of Antioch had strong Cypriot connections.

As Paul will generally do on his missionary journeys, he proclaims the word of God in Jewish synagogues on the island. His message is to the Jews first, and then later to the Greeks. We should recall that most of the Jewish population at this period lives outside of the land of Palestine, in many parts of the Roman Empire.

In practically every city the early church missionaries would visit, there would already be Jews to be found. Barnabas and Saul are assisted and accompanied by John Mark, who is Barnabas' cousin, who would join them in Jerusalem.

They arrive at Salamis, the main port city, and they make their way throughout the island. Salamis may have had as many as 150,000 inhabitants, something that's derived from the fact that it had a theatre that could sit 15,000.

With its large population of Jews, there are a number of synagogues there, and after spending some time there, Barnabas and Saul go through the entire island, as far as Paphos, which is about 115 miles away, by the southern coastal route.

[7 : 37] At Paphos, they encounter a Jewish magician and false prophet named Bar-Jesus. He is associated with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus. Apparently word of the mission of Barnabas and Saul had spread, because Sergius Paulus wants to hear from them about the word of God.

Yet this Jewish magician associated with him, Bar-Jesus, also called Elnias, seeks to oppose them and to prevent the proconsul from turning to the faith. Jeff Myers has highlighted the fact that this is a Jewish sorcerer.

He's a false prophet who's providing false counsel to a Gentile ruler. He's like the character of Wormtongue with Theoden in The Lord of the Rings. He's leading someone astray and making it hard for him to see the truth.

In this particular conflict, we're seeing a broader conflict between the church as the counsellor of the rulers of the nations, and the false Jewish counsel that is provided by unbelieving Jews like Bar-Jesus or Elnias.

We've previously seen conflicts with magicians in the story of Simon the sorcerer, back in chapter 8. There, Simon was juxtaposed with Philip, and here Elnias or Bar-Jesus will be juxtaposed with Saul.

[8 : 43] Elnias has two names within the text, Bar-Jesus and Elnias. And here we see that Saul has another name. He's also called Paul, and hereafter that will be the name that Luke uses of him.

Luke is always attentive to the names that he gives to characters, and when he uses two different names for a character, those names are seldom used without close consideration. It is noteworthy that Saul is called Paul in the same narrative in which we encounter Sergius Paulus, who has the same name.

In verse 9 we read, But Saul, who was also called Paul, and we might wonder what the also refers to. Does it mean that Paul had two names, Saul and also Paul?

Or is it rather about connecting the name of Paul with the name of Sergius Paulus, who is also called Paul? I think that might be the case. In this context there are significant word plays with names.

The name of the sorcerer, Bar-Jesus, does not seem to be the same word as Elnias. Bar-Jesus seems to mean the son of Jesus, much as Bar-Nabas is referred to as the son of encouragement.

[9 : 49] Why is he called Elemas? What's going on there? How do you get from Bar-Jesus to Elemas, and what's the significance of these names? That is one question to consider. Another question is what sort of play is going on with Paul's name?

Should we focus upon the meaning, which means small? Perhaps he is called that because he is the least of the apostles, not worthy to be called an apostle because he persecuted the church. Maybe that's part of it.

But more likely in this immediate context is that it is related to the name of the proconsul. There is the conflict between a false counsellor and a true counsellor. Now it would seem that if your name is Sergius Paulus, your fitting counterpart might well be called Paulus too.

And so Paul is the fitting counterpart and counsellor to the man who is his namesake. Bar-Jesus is also an interesting name. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus is the name that we associate with Christ almost exclusively.

In the book of Acts, there are a couple of occasions where we see another character called Jesus. We have a reference to Joshua as Jesus, in the Greek form of that name. But it seems strange that we would have Bar-Jesus mentioned at this point, only for him to be called immediately afterwards by another name.

[11 : 00] His name seems to connect him with Jesus, or with the Jesus movement. Maybe his name, literally Son of Jesus, highlights this falsehood. It might indicate that he is someone who is seemingly affiliated in some way with the early church, but he is a false Jewish prophet and an opponent.

His opposition to Paul is framed along these lines. You have a false Jewish prophet who has an identity, a name that threatens the movement of the church because of its proximity to the name of Christ Jesus.

And he is named as if he was the son of Jesus. But he is in fact no son of Jesus. He's not a disciple of Jesus at all. Later on, we encounter the sons of Sceva, who try to cast out demons in the name of Christ.

And then the demons attack them and drive them away, wounded and naked. Earlier on, we have Simon the sorcerer, who's confronted by Peter. He claims to be a magician, and he wants the power of the Holy Spirit.

Once again, there is a conflict with someone who is close, but in some way claims to represent or be associated with the Jesus movement, but who is actually false. He's actually an opponent.

[12 : 04] Paul's conflict with Bar-Jesus here might highlight plays of identity, indicating that he is the true counsellor to Sergius Paulus, because he is Paulus himself, and on the other hand, that he is the one who reveals the true identity of the magician, not as Bar-Jesus, a true son of Jesus, but as Elimus the sorcerer.

Now, what does Elimus mean? Rick Strelin has suggested a connection with the character of Elam, who is a descendant of Shem. Elam is the one whose line leads to the Persians, and the Medes and the Persians are associated with magic.

They were famed for it. This name, then, would present him not as part of the Jesus movement, not as someone associated with Jesus Christ, a son of Jesus, but as a false magician, like the magicians of Pharaoh, or the false advisors that were in Herod's court in Matthew chapter 2.

Beyond playing their names off against each other in different ways, there is also a play of the character of Paul over against the character of Elimus. Saul's name is switched to Paul in the narrative in the immediate context in which Paul speaks the word of judgment to Elimus the sorcerer, and what he says is quite arresting.

[13 : 24] In Acts chapter 9, Ananias is instructed to lay his hands upon Saul so that he would regain his sight. In this chapter, the hand of the Lord rests upon the false prophet Elimus so that he loses his sight.

Elimus is said to make crooked the straight paths of the Lord. We saw a street called Straight back in chapter 9 of Acts. It was the street to which Saul went after his vision.

We saw a similar juxtaposition between Philip and Simon the sorcerer back in chapter 8. Paul, having his name changed, is dissociated from the old Saul, the false persecutor.

The juxtaposition of Saul or Paul and Bar-Jesus sets up Paul as the true counsellor to Sergius Paulus, the Christians as the true counsellors to the rulers of the Gentiles.

The false Jewish prophet, who in spite of his other name is not in fact associated with Jesus, but is a son of the Elamites, associated with the magicians, the Persians, and that sort of false religion, he's judged.

[15 : 40] Looking at the references to the Holy Spirit in this passage, how can we see the Spirit working in the mission of Saul and Barnabas? 