

# OpenTheo

## Saul Versus Bar-Jesus

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In Acts 13, Saul conflicts with the Jewish false prophet Bar-Jesus and is called by the name Paul for the first time. I explore the literary dynamics of this account a bit more closely.

I've previously commented on Paul's name change here:

<https://adversariapodcast.com/2019/07/19/saul-saul-why-do-you-persecute-me/>. I've addressed the literary and typological dynamics of Acts 12 here:

<https://adversariapodcast.com/2019/07/19/saul-saul-why-do-you-persecute-me>.

My blog for my podcasts and videos is found here: <https://adversariapodcast.com/>. You can see transcripts of my videos here: <https://adversariapodcast.com/list-of-videos-and-podcasts/>.

If you have any questions, you can leave them on my Curious Cat account:

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## Transcript

Welcome back. Yesterday, with a talent night, we completed the Trinity term of the inaugural Junior Fellows Program for the Theopolis Institute. It's been absolutely fantastic.

We've enjoyed going through the text of Scripture from Genesis to Revelation, getting

into depth in every single part of the biblical witness, and giving some principles for hermeneutics, learning how to chant, and having every single day punctuated by times of worship, Matins, Sexts, and Vespers. Every single day where we sing a liturgy and just have time exploring Scripture, not just as a text for study, but as a text for guiding our lives. It's also been wonderful to meet students from various parts of America.

And we're going to be continuing in our discussions with online seminars for the next few months before joining each other again in January. One of the things that we got into yesterday with Jeff Myers was the book of Acts and some of the broader patterns and themes that play out within the book. His talk was absolutely fantastic, along with some of his other talks on the Gospels, some of the wisdom literature, and the book of Genesis.

I would highly recommend, if you want an overview of Scripture to really give you a grasp of the entire text, that you consider attending the Junior Fellows programme at some point in the future. We'll be having another one next year. So mark your diaries.

It's worth attending. One thing we explored that fit in with some themes that I was mentioning a couple of days ago was the incident between Paul and Sergius Paulus, the proconsul. In Acts, chapter 13, verse four following, you have a conflict with Bargeses or Elamus, the sorcerer, and Paul.

And Elamus, the sorcerer, seems to be some sort of advisor or counsellor to Sergius Paulus and is leading him astray, seeking to oppose the word of God and the message of Paul. And Jeff Myers highlighted the way that within the overarching themes of the book of Acts, this is a significant conflict. This is a Jewish sorcerer, a false prophet who's providing false counsel to a Gentile leader, a Gentile ruler.

He's like Wormtongue with Theoden in the story of the Lord of the Rings. He's someone who's leading someone astray and making it hard for them to see the truth. And this conflict is a broader symbolic conflict between the church as the counsellor of the rulers of the nations and the false Jewish counsel that is provided by people like Bargeses or Elamus.

There are a number of other details about this narrative that maybe jump out at us. It happens at a significant moment within the overarching theme of the text. There is a transition here, as Jeff Myers highlights.

There is a movement from Acts 1 to 5 and then from 6 to 12 and then 13 starts a new movement in a new stage of the story leading up, among other things, to Paul's trials and his shipwreck. But within this particular account, there are ways in which we can see clever literary plays that highlight identity. I've noted a few days ago that Paul's name is changed at this point, narratively changed, not actually changed.

Saul is his name and Paul is his name. But from this point onwards in the narrative, he is called Paul. It's interesting that he's called Paul in the same narrative as we encounter Sergius Paulus, who has the same name.

In verse 9, where we read, but Saul, who is also called Paul, we might wonder, what does the also refer to? Does it mean that Paul had two names, Saul and Paul, and that he was also called Paul, namely that he was called Saul, but he was also called Paul? Or does it mean that there is this procouncil called Sergius Paulus and Saul is also called Paul or Paulus? I think it might actually be the latter. And it would help us to understand some of what's taking place here, where there are significant word plays with the names. The name of the sorcerer is perhaps one that has received significant attention.

Bargesas does not seem to be the same word as Elemus. Bargesas seems to mean the son of Jesus, like Barnabas is spoken of as the son of encouragement earlier in the narrative of Acts. So why is he called Elemus the sorcerer? What's going on there? That's one question.

How do you get from Bargesas to Elemus? And what is the significance of the name Elemus? Where does that derive from? The other question is what sort of play is going on with Paul's name? Should we focus upon the meaning as small? Well, perhaps he's the least of the apostles, not worthy to be called an apostle because he persecuted the church. Perhaps that's part of it. Quite likely.

But within the context, it's likely related to the name of the procouncil, that there is this conflict between a false counsellor and a true counsellor. Now, it would seem that if your name is Sergius Paulus, your counterpart might well be called Paulus too. So Paul is the fitting counsellor to the man who's his namesake.

Maybe that's part of what's going on. Bargesas is also an interesting name. Jesus throughout the Gospels is a name that we associate with Christ almost exclusively and 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. But it seems odd that we would have Bargesas mentioned at this point and then mentioned by another name.

Why mention some name that connects him seemingly with Jesus? Or with the Jesus movement? He's a false prophet. He's a Jew. Maybe his name as literally son of Jesus is highlighting that falsehood.

That he is someone who's identifying or seemingly identifying his name suggests some affiliation or even narrative affiliation with the movement of the early church. And he's a false Jewish prophet within that context. And the opposition with Paul is framed along those lines.

You have a false Jewish prophet who has an identity that threatens the movement of the church because of its proximity to Christ. He presents himself as a son of Jesus. But he is in fact no son of Jesus.

No disciple of Jesus. Later on, you'll have the sons of Sceva who tried to cast out demons in the name of Christ. And then the demons attack them and drive them away wounded and naked.

Earlier on, you have the character Simon Magus who's confronted by Peter among the Samaritans. He claims to be a magician and he wants the power of the Holy Spirit. And once again, there is a conflict with someone who's close to, who's claiming to represent or associate with the Jesus movement.

But is actually an opponent who's actually false. And Paul's conflict with that one, that character, Paul's conflict maybe highlights plays of identity. That he is the true counsel to Sergius Paulus as Paulus himself.

And on the other hand, he is the one who reveals the true identity of the magician, not as Bar Jesus, but as Elamus the sorcerer. Now, what does Elamus mean? Rick Strelland has suggested a connection with the character of Elam, who's the descendant of Shem. And Elam is the one who leads to the Persians.

And the Persians, of course, are associated with magic. The Medes and the Persians and their magic were famed. And so he's maybe connected more with that as a result of his name.

His name then presents him not as it would so appear to be part of the Jesus movement or associated with Jesus Christ. But as a false magician, like the magicians of Pharaoh or the false advisers that are in Herod's court in Matthew, chapter two. There are further ways in which these characters play off each other.

Saul is also called Paul. He receives a new name at this point. Later on in the chapter, we read about the character of Saul being replaced by David, who is the one who leads to the Davidic kingdom.

And the Messiah, that connection maybe highlights further why Saul's name would be changed to Paul in the context that he is now associated with Jesus, with the true David. He's not just someone who's bearing the same name as the wicked king that inaugurated the kingdom of Israel. No, he's the one who is associated with the new council of the pro council.

The new one who gives wisdom to the nations. He's the one who gives wisdom where the others that preceded him led astray. So there's a play on his name there.

There's also a play on his character and certain of the events that befall both. So Elamus,

the sorcerer, as a result of his sin is judged. Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him.

It says actually, Saul's name is changed to Paul in the narrative in that immediate context as Paul speaks this word of judgment to Elamus, the sorcerer. And what he says to Elamus, the sorcerer, is quite arresting. What he declares is a judgment that is almost exactly the same as the judgment that befell him on the road to Damascus, struck blind.

And he has to be led by the hand. And that is exactly what happens to Saul earlier on in the story. There are other details that might recall that previous story.

He's accused of making crooked the straight paths of the Lord. We've encountered a path that is straight earlier on in the story. The Lord said to him in a vision, Ananias.

And he said, here I am, Lord. And the Lord said to him, rise and go to the street called Straight. And at the house of Judas, look for a man of Tarsus named Saul.

For behold, he is praying. And he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hand on him so that he might receive his sight. So there's a laying of hands on persons, laying of hands on Saul so that he will receive his sight.

And then later on, there's the laying of the hand of God upon the false prophet, the false magician, the false teacher of the proconsul. And he has an experience and a judgment very similar to Saul earlier on in the story. Saul had the hand of the Lord laid upon him to restore his sight.

Elimus has it to remove his sight. So there's a play with Saul's older identity and his new identity. The judgment that falls upon Elimus is the judgment that fell upon Paul's old identity as Saul.

It's one that looks forward to some of the reversals. He makes crooked the straight paths. In Saul, there is a movement to a street called straight.

There's a twist. So he's no longer making the straight places crooked. But now there is a change as a hand of the Lord comes upon him in a street called straight.

And this juxtaposition between the two characters, between Saul and Elimus, really comes to the foreground in the narrative as the two are held off against each other as Saul judges Elimus, the sorcerer. There are similar things in the earlier story of chapter eight where there is a conflict again between an apostle and his namesake or some encounter that plays with the names. Simon is the magician and Simon is one who conflicts with Peter, who's also called Simon in chapter eight.

And Peter places the power of the Holy Spirit upon people by laying on the hands of them. And Simon wants that power himself. He wants to be like the other Simon.

He seeks to imitate him. And so there's a play on identities as well. It says, Simon saw that the spirit was given through the laying on of the apostle's hand.

He offered the money saying, give me this power also so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit. But Peter said to him, may your silver perish with you because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money. You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God.

So there's a juxtaposition between Simon, Peter, and Simon, the magician, just as there is a juxtaposition between Elymas, the sorcerer, and between Paul. Paul has his name changed within the narrative. He's no longer Saul, the false persecutor.

No, now he's had a conversion and his conversion is also a judgment on his old identity. A judgment upon persons like Barmeses who present themselves as false associates of Christ. They present themselves like the sons of Sceva or other characters like Simon who have the power of God but are not of Christ at all.

There are other ways that we can see a significance in the story. In chapter 12, there's a transition between Peter and Paul. I've talked about this in another video.

That in chapter 12, Peter dies and rises again. There's the time of the Passover. He's placed in prison.

He's about to be put to death. In the middle of the night, the angel opens the tomb or the prison. He's brought out through the doors and the guards are dazzled and they're prevented from stopping him.

He goes to the house where the disciples are praying and he appears to them and they think it's a ghost. He appears first to a woman and the woman tells the disciples and they don't believe her. And then he appears to the disciples and goes on his way and we don't see much of him from that point onwards.

But the passage is bookended by Saul and Barnabas going from Antioch to Jerusalem and then going back again. And then chapter 13 follows. And in that chapter, Paul or Saul has a very similar experience of conflict with the magician, with names and other ways that they're juxtaposed as individuals.

A very similar encounter as that which we see in chapter 8 of the Book of Acts between Simon and his namesake, Simon Peter. Looking at all of this, I think we're seeing a broader transition as Jeff Myers has highlighted between the false Jewish prophets and teachers and counsellors of the nations to the true counsel that will be offered by Paul and the apostles and the Christian disciples. There are themes of blindness.

The guide that supposedly guides the proconsul, that guides the Gentiles, he's proved to be blind himself. And then the blinded Saul is now made into the character Paul, who has

the power to bear this message. And that transition that occurs in his identity is associated with the movement from Peter to Saul and Barnabas and then later Paul and to that conflict with Sergius Paulus and Elemus.

Sergius Paulus is now going to be counseled by another Paulus, one who has his same name, and he will be advised well in the message of the kingdom. Whereas the false Jewish prophet, who is in fact not associated with Jesus at all, as his name might suggest, but a son of Elemus, of the Elamites. He's someone who's associated with the magicians, with the Persians, with all that sort of false religion.

The false religion that we see in the conflict between Aaron and Moses and the magicians of Egypt or the magicians that we see later on that fail in the court of Nebuchadnezzar. Here we have a true wise man, a wise man that will bring counsel that will lead to the healing of the nations. Thank you very much for listening.

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