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June 10th: Ezekiel 15 & Acts 12:25—13:12

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Wood fit only for burning. The start of Paul's first missionary journey.

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Transcript

Ezekiel 15 And the word of the Lord came to me, Son of Man, how does the wood of the vine surpass any wood, the vine branch that is among the trees of the forest? Is wood taken from it to make anything? Do people take a peg from it to hang any vessel on it? Behold, it is given to the fire for fuel. When the fire has consumed both ends of it, and the middle of it is charred, is it useful for anything? Behold, when it was whole, it was used for nothing. How much less, when the fire has consumed it, and it is charred, can it ever be used for anything? Therefore thus says the Lord God, Like the wood of the vine among the trees of the forest, which I have given to the fire for fuel, so have I given up the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and I will set my face against them.

Though they escape from the fire, the fire shall yet consume them. And you will know that I am the Lord, when I set my face against them. And I will make the land desolate,

because they have acted faithlessly, declares the Lord God.

Ezekiel chapter 15 contains just one short oracle in which Israel is compared to a vine. Daniel Bloch suggests that some connection might be seen between this oracle and the second oracle of the preceding chapter in the words, How much less, of verse 5, which he sees as relating to chapter 14 verse 21. For thus says the Lord God, How much more, when I send upon Jerusalem my four disastrous acts of judgment, sword, famine, wild beasts, and pestilence, to cut off from it man and beast.

Bloch also sees verse 8, with its resemblances to chapter 14 verses 21 to 23, as giving further substance to these connections. The oracle consists of a metaphor, the wood of the vine, followed by an interpretation, concluding with a recognition formula, and you will know that I am the Lord. The house of Israel was compared to a vine on several occasions in scripture, most notably Isaiah chapter 5 and Psalm 80.

Isaiah chapter 5 verses 1 to 7. Let me sing for my beloved, my love song concerning his vineyard. My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines.

He built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it, and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard.

I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured. I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste, it shall not be pruned or hoed, and briers and thorns shall grow up.

I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting. And he looked for justice, but behold bloodshed, for righteousness, but behold an outcry.

Psalm 80 verses 8-16 You brought a vine out of Egypt. You drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it.

It took deep root and filled the land. The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches. It sent out its branches to the sea, and its shoots to the river.

Why then have you broken down its walls, so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit? The boar from the forest ravages it, and all that move in the field feed on it. Turn again, O God of hosts! Look down from heaven and see. Have regard for this vine, the stock that your right hand planted, and for the son whom you made strong for yourself.

They have burned it with fire, they have cut it down. May they perish at the rebuke of your face. Going back even further in scripture, Jacob uses vine imagery in his blessing of the tribes, especially in his blessing of Judah in Genesis chapter 49 verse 22.

Other instances of vine imagery can be found in places like Deuteronomy chapter 32 verse 32, Jeremiah chapter 2 verse 21 and Hosea chapter 10 verse 1. Vine imagery in several of these places is used to speak of Israel's failure in some manner, whether with its degeneration from a cultivated vine to a wild one, or to refer to the destruction of the vineyard. In the gospels, Jesus picks up on this imagery in speaking of himself as the true vine, and also in telling the parable of the wicked vinedressers. Imagery of a vine will reappear in a couple of chapters time with Ezekiel's parable of the eagle and the vine.

The vine imagery of this chapter develops a different comparison from those that we see elsewhere. Its focus is upon the useless character of the wood of the vine, for any purpose but burning. The chapter begins with a number of rhetorical questions about the wood of the vine, underlining its uselessness.

One couldn't even fashion a useful peg or pin from it. As Joseph Blenkinsop observes, the contrast between the way that the imagery of the vine is used here, and other places where it is used, is noteworthy. Typically the vine is an image of fruitfulness and growth.

However here the vine is dead. The question is whether the wood of the unfruitful vine is useful for any other purpose. The vine is short-lived.

It only lives for about forty years. Its wood is unsuitable to fashion any useful object from. You can't build with it.

Its only possible service is as firewood. Given the history of the use of the imagery of the vine for the house of Israel, the story implied by the dead vine would not be difficult to discern. Jerusalem's narrative has arrived at its terminus.

The vine has ceased to bear fruit and is dead, is being cut down, and the only question is what to do with its wood. As it has no practical value for construction, it will be used as fuel for the fire. And when the fire has burned much of it and what remains is charred, it is of even less use.

At this point Jerusalem is fruitless, dead, and what remains of it has been greatly charred by Babylonian invasions and mass deportations. What remaining value does Jerusalem have? The parts of Jerusalem that escaped the earlier fires of invasion would yet be consumed by later ones. The vineyard of the land would be desolated.

It has no residual purpose or practical use. A question to consider. Can you enumerate the different ways that vine imagery is employed in scripture? Acts 12.25-13.12 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. But Elymas 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. 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 19-26.

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, Manion and Saul, being teachers. 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.

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 Simeon 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. Manion 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. 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 messages 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. At Paphos they encounter a Jewish magician and false prophet named Bargasas. He is associated with the pro-consul, Sergius Paulus.

Apparently word of the mission of Barnabas and Saul has spread, because Sergius Paulus wants to hear from them about the word of God. Yet this Jewish magician associated with him, Bargasas, also called Elemas, seeks to oppose them and to prevent the pro-consul 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 Bargesas or Elemas. 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 Elemas or Bargesas will be juxtaposed with Saul. Elemas has two names within the text, Bargesas and Elemas.

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's 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, Bargesas, does not seem to be the same word as Elemas. Bargesas seems to mean the son of Jesus, much as Barnabas is referred to as the son of encouragement. Why is he called Elemas? What's going on there? How do you get from Bargesas 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.

Bargesas 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 Bargesas mentioned at this point, only for him to be called immediately afterwards by another name. 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 is 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 is 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 is actually an opponent.

Paul's conflict with Bargesas 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 Bargesas, a true son of Jesus, but as Elimus the sorcerer. Now what does Elimus mean? Rick Strullen 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 judgement to Elimus the sorcerer, and what he says is quite arresting. It's almost exactly the same as the judgement that befell him on the road to Damascus.

Elimus is struck blind, and he has to be led by the hand. And there are other details that might recall that story. 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. There is a play here with Saul's older identity and with his new identity, and this I believe is why his name is shifted at this point. The judgement that falls upon Elimus is the judgement that fell upon Paul's old identity as Saul.

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.

Now he is no longer making straight paths crooked. The hand of the Lord came 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 over against each other, as Saul judges the sorcerer.

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. His conversion was a judgement upon his old identity, a judgement on persons like Bar-Jesus, who present themselves as false associates of Christ, like the sons of Sceva or like Simon, but who are not of Christ at all. The juxtaposition of Saul or Paul and Bar-Jesus sets up Paul as the true counsellor to Sergius Paulus, the Christians that are the true counsellors to the rulers of the Gentiles.

And as the false counsellor is struck with blindness, something about his true spiritual state is revealed. Sergius Paulus can now be counselled by another Paul, one who has his same name, and now he will be advised well, taught the message of the kingdom, no longer guided by a blind man. The false Jewish prophet, who in spite of his other name is not in fact associated with Jesus, but is the son of the Elamites, associated with the magicians, the Persians and that sort of false religion, he is judged.

Here in Saul, who is also called Paul, we have the true wise man, a wise man who will bring counsel that will lead to the healing of the nations. A question to consider. 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?