**The Sorcerer of Israel**

(Acts 13:6-12)

By Pastor Ricky Kurth

A woman went to see a sorcerer one day, and asked, “Can you help me lift a curse that a man put on me 30 years ago?” He replied, “I think so. But it will help if you can tell me the *exact* words he used to curse you.” She said, “I can! He said: ‘I now pronounce you husband and wife.’”

Speaking of sorcerers, here in our text in Acts 13, the apostle Paul is now out preaching “the gospel of the grace of God” (Acts 20:24), and he’s about to bump into a *Jewish* sorcerer. Once he and Barnabas had worked their way through the isle of Cyprus (Acts 13:4), we read:

**“And when they had gone through the isle unto Paphos, they found a certain sorcerer, a false prophet, a Jew, whose name was Barjesus” (Acts 13:6).**

A *sorcerer* was kind of like a *magician.* Do you remember what happened when

**“Aaron cast down his rod before Pharaoh…and it became a serpent. Then Pharaoh also called the wise men *and the sorcerers:* now *the magicians* of Egypt, they also did in like manner with their enchantments” (Exodus 7:10,11).**

Do you see how those sorcerers are called magicians there?

But when they turned *their* rods into serpents, we’re not told if they did some kind of legitimate black magic miracle that Satan helped them perform, or if they just used slight of hand. After all, magicians can do some pretty impressive illusions. Years ago I saw a professional magician named Doug Hennig saw his sister in half. Ever after that, she was his half-sister!

But the point is, we’re *also* not told what kind of magic *this* sorcerer practiced here in our text. But we have a clue when verse 6 adds that he was *also* a “false prophet.” I think that means he practiced the kind of *religious* sorcery we read about in Galatians 3:1, where Paul told the Galatians,

**“O Foolish Galatians, whohath *bewitched* you, that ye should not obey the truth”**

If you know the story, you know the Galatians hadn’t been “bewitched” by men who sawed women in half. They’d been bewitched by false *teachers* who told them they were under the law, not grace. And that’s probably the kind of sorcery that a false prophet like this Jew would practice.

The sad thing is, he must have had good parents, for they named him “Bar-jesus.” That’s a good, godly Jewish name. The prefix “b-a-r” means *son of,* as it does when Mark 10:46 tells us about “Bartimaeus, *the son of Timaeus.”* It was kind of like how Irishmen are often named “O”-something in our own day. Chicago’s O’Hare Airport is named after an Irish/American named “Butch” O’Hare, who was a naval hero during World War II. “O’Hare” means *son of a man named Hare.*

And the name Bar-jesus means *son of a man named Jesus.* “Jesus” was a pretty common name in Bible days. Colossians 4:11 mentions a guy named “Jesus, *which is called Justus,”* a man who was obviously *not* the Lord Jesus Christ.

The reasonJesus was a common name is that it means “Jehovah Savior.” So lots of Jewish parents named their sons Jesus, in the hopes they would live up to the name “son of Jehovah Savior” by becoming a *saved* son of Jehovah Savior, a *true* son of God**.**

But this bozo here never became a believer. He became a false prophet instead—a false prophet who must have landed a government job, for it says

**“Which was with the deputy of the country, Sergius Paulus, a prudent man; who called for Barnabas and Saul, and desired to hear the word of God” (Acts 13:7).**

Now deputies were Roman officials who were supposed to settle the disputes that arose among Roman citizens, as we see when the town clerk in Ephesus said,

**“…if Demetrius, and the craftsmen…have a matter against any man, the law is open, *and there are deputies:* let them implead one another” (Acts 19:38).**

We know that deputies were kind of like *judges,* because of what it says in Acts 18:12,14,16:

**“…when Gallio was...*deputy of Achaia,* the Jews made insurrection... against Paul, and brought him to *the judgment seat….*And...Gallio...*drave them from the judgment seat”***

Only a judge of some kind sits on a judgment seat, so this deputy here in Acts 13 must have been a Roman judge of some sort.

And verse 6 says that this sorcerer was “with” him, which sounds to me like he *worked* for him in some sort of advisory capacity, like the sorcerers we read about in Daniel 2:2:

**“Then the king commanded to call the magicians, and the astrologers, *and the sorcerers …*for to shew the king his dreams…”**

Back in Bible days, kings and other government officials had advisers with whom they would confer before making decisions. And I personally think that the reason that Sergius was called “prudent” here is that he was smart enough to have a *Jewish* adviser on his advisory staff. Jews in those days were *despised* by other peoples, just as they often are today. But Sergius must have known that Jews worshipped the true God, so he wanted a Jew on his advisory staff, and he didn’t care what people thought about him because of it. But if Bar-jesus wasn’t saved, that means he couldn’t have been giving Sergius very good advice.

The sad thing about all this is that by this time in the Book of Acts, Jews like Bar-jesus were not supposed to be *advising* government officials. *They themselves* were supposed to *be* government officials, sitting on judgment seats judging the Gentiles, like they will someday in the kingdom of heaven on earth. The Apostle John wrote,

**“a Lamb…made us…kings and priests: *and we shall reign on the earth”* (Revelation 5:6,10).**

Now that makes it sound like Jews are *already* kings and priests, but that’s just how prophetic books like *Revelation* read. You see, God is so sure that something He’s predicting is going to happen that He has His prophets describe it using the past tense.

But someday in the kingdom, Jews *will* reign on the earth. And it should have started 2,000 years ago, here in the Book of Acts! But Israel lost their chance to reign as kings when they rejected their King and the kingdom He came to give them.

But do you really think that Bar-jesus was advising the deputy out of the goodness of his heart? Not likely! No, he was on the deputy’s payroll! He was *profiting* from misleading the poor man. And he knew that if Paul and Barnabas told his boss how to get saved, he’d soon be *off* his payroll and on the unemployment line. So after verse 7 says that Sergius called for Paul and Barnabas and desired to hear the Word of God, verse 8 says,

**“But Elymas the sorcerer (for so is his name by interpretation) withstood them, seeking to turn away the deputy from the faith” (Acts 13:8).**

Here we see that this unsaved Jew was not only giving the deputy bad advice, he withstood some *saved* Jews who tried to give him *good* advice about how to put his faith in Christ and be saved.

In this, he was a type of the entire nation of Israel. Look what the Lord said about Israel’s religious leaders in Matthew 23:13:

**“…woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! *for ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men:* for ye neither go in yourselves, *neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in.”***

That’s a perfect description of this false prophet! He’d heard the Lord and His 12 apostles preach the kingdom gospel, and he didn’t believe it and get saved. And he’d been keeping *the deputy* from believing it as well. And now he was trying to keep him from believing the gospel of the grace of God preached by Paul.

That makes him a type of what that whole apostate nation had become by this time in the Book of Acts. Look what Paul said about the nation in I Thessalonians 2:14-16:

**“…the Jews…both killed the Lord Jesus...and their own prophets… they please not God, and are contrary to all men: *Forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they might be saved,* to fill up their sins...for the wrath is come upon them to the uttermost.”**

Isn’t that what Elymas the Jew was doing here, forbidding Paul and Barnabas from speaking to a Gentile about the faith?

The wrath of God fell on the nation of Israel when they crucified the Lord and stoned His prophet Stephen, and God was about to *pour out* His wrath on them in the Tribulation. Instead, He poured out His *grace* on Paul, and introduced the dispensation of grace. But the wrath of God *remains* on that nation, to the uttermost, duringthe course of this dispensation. Jews are *not* the people of God today, they are what God called them in Isaiah 10:6, “the people *of My wrath.”*

Now as you see in verse 8, Bar-jesus was also called “Elymas,” and Elymas means *wise man.”* That’s the interpretation of the word *sorcerer* there. The word in the Greek text is *magos,* the singular form of the *Magi,* or wise men, who visited the Lord when he was a tot.

But the problem with *Elymas* claiming to be some kind of Magi wise man is that he was nothing like the queen of Sheba. Do you remember what the Lord said about her?

**“The queen of the south…came from the uttermost parts of the earth *to hear the wisdom of Solomon;* and, behold, *a greater than Solomon is here”* (Matthew 12:42).**

When Elymas rejected the Lord Jesus Christ, he rejected the wisdom of the man who was wiser than Solomon. Solomon was pretty wise, but the Lord knew His *Bible* better, and the Bible is the only source of *true* wisdom on the planet. Before I got saved, I was dumber than a bag of hammers. But 43 years of studying the Bible and having to teach it every week has helped me, and it will help you too, if you’re looking for a little wisdom of your own.

Well, Elymas was no wise man, but he was wise enough to try to keep his cash cow from getting saved here. But that didn’t sit well with Paul, as we see as we read on in Acts 13:

**“Then Saul, (who also is called Paul,) filled with the Holy Ghost, set his eyes on him” (Acts 13:9).**

Now when it says that Saul was also called Paul, some Bible teachers say that when Jews were born they were given two names, a Gentile name in addition to a Jewish name, to help them get along in a world of mostly Gentiles. They hold that as a self-righteous Jew, Saul just refused to *use* his Gentile name until God saved him and *sent him* to the Gentiles. And that could be, but there’s no Scriptural proof for it that I know of.

So I think the Lord *changed* Saul’s name to a Gentile name when He saved him and sent him to the Gentiles. There *is* some Scriptural precedent for that. God changed *Peter’s* name to reflect what He knew Peter would become later at Pentecost.

**“…Andrew, Simon Peter's brother….brought him to Jesus. And when Jesus beheld him, He said, Thou art Simon the son of Jona: *thou shalt be called Cephas,* which is by interpretation, *A stone”* (John 1:40,42).**

Notice the Lord called Peter “the son of Jona.” That agrees with what He called him in Matthew 16:17, where He addressed His apostle as “Simon *Barjona.”* Peter was named after the Old Testament prophet *Jonah.*

And what do we know about Jonah? He ran away from God when God called him to preach, right?—just as Peter ran away from the Lord when they arrested Him, right before *he* was supposed to start preaching in the Lord’s absence. So Peter lived up to his “Barjona” name, didn’t he? But the Lord predicted that someday Peter would *quit* running from God, and become as steady as a rock.

And I think that’s what happened to Saul. I believe *the Lord* gave him a Gentile name to reflect how he was *sending him* to the Gentiles. All we know for sure is that the name Saul means *desired,* while the name Paul means *small.* Let me ask you men, how would you like to go from being called “desired” to being called *small?* Most men wouldn’t agree to a name change like that.

But *Saul* did, because it reflected how he no longer wanted to be desired of men, he wanted men to desire *the Lord.* He wanted *Him* to look big in their eyes, and himself to look small. And that’s a pretty good attitude to have, I don’t care if your name is Spongebob Squarepants.

But when the Lord saved Saul back in Acts 9, He filled him with the Holy Ghost in a way that He *doesn’t* fill us. And you know that because after reminding us that Paul was filled with the Spirit here in verse 9, Luke goes on to tell us about something that Paul could do that we can’t do:

**“And said, O full of all subtilty and all mischief, thou child of the devil, thou enemy of all righteousness, wilt thou not cease to pervert the right ways of the Lord?**

**“And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon thee, and thou shalt be blind, not seeing the sun for a season. And immediately there fell on him a mist and a darkness; and he went about seeking some to lead him by the hand” (Acts 13:10,11).**

God filled Paul with the Holy Ghost in such a way that he was able to work *miracles.* And the first miracle He had Paul do was a miracle of *judgment—*judgment on a man who represented the unbelieving apostate nation of Israel. The reason God had Paul do that was to symbolize where Israel stands today—*under the judgment of God.*

And rightly so! I mean, they rejected the Lord because *they* were filled with all subtlety and mischief. That word “subtle” means *sneaky,* and that means that Jews back then were a chip off the old block, for you know who *else* was full of all subtilty:

**“…*the serpent* was more subtil than any beast of the field….*And he said unto the woman,* Yea, hath God said, *Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?”* (Genesis 3:1).**

That’s talking about *the devil.* He’s the *original* sneaky snake. And I don’t mean the kind that country singer Tom T. Hall used to sing about, the one that sneaks up on you and drinks all your root beer. The sneaky snake in the Garden of Eden doomed the human race to going to hell, and this sneaky snake here in Acts 13 intended to keep Sergius *on his way* to hell.

That word “mischief” in verse 10 means *evil,* as it does when Solomon wrote,

**“He that deviseth to do *evil* shall be called a *mischievous* person” (Proverbs 24:8).**

Do you see how that defines “mischief” as *evil?*

Put the two words together, and that’s what the nation of Israel had become back then, men filled with the Satanic subtilty and evil, “the enemy of all righteousness,” as Paul *also* called the man who symbolized the nation.

But before you decided to join all the conspiracy theory nut-jobs who think that Jews are *still* the enemies of all righteousness, and the root of all evil, and that there’s a secret room full of Jews somewhere plotting to rule the world, there’s something you should know about Jews—something *God* says about them in Romans 11:28,29:

***“As concerning the gospel,* they are enemies for your sakes: *but*...*they are beloved for the fathers’ sakes.* For the gifts and calling of God are without repentance”**

God called the Jews’ forefathers to serve Him, and promised them the *gift* of the kingdom, and he will *not* repent of it. Someday they’ll *get* their kingdom. And because of that, they are *beloved of God.* There is absolutely nothing in the Bible that justifies any kind of antisemitism. The only Jews who are your enemies are Jews who withstand the gospel, and they’re no worse than *Gentiles* who withstand the gospel.

Now when Paul asks this sorcerer why he won’t stop perverting the right ways of the Lord in verse 10, he’s actually quoting the end of something God said to Israel in Hosea 14. He began by calling on them to repent, saying,

**“O Israel, *return unto...God;* for thou hast fallen by thine iniquity. Take with you words, and turn to the LORD: say unto Him, *Take away all iniquity, and receive us graciously”* (Hosea 14:1,2).**

And God knew that someday believers in Israel *would* say that to Him, so He went on to talk about what He will do for them in the kingdom when they do:

**“I will love them freely: for Mine anger is turned away….Who is *wise*, and he shall understand these things? *prudent*, and he shall know them? *for the ways of the LORD are right,* and the just shall walk in them: *but the transgressors shall fall therein”* (Hosea 14:4,9).**

And that’s exactly what happened when transgressors like Bar-jesus here turned down God’s offer of the kingdom. They lost their chance to walk in the right ways of the Lord. But a *prudent* Gentile like Sergius ended up learning to walk in those right ways!

But when unsaved Jews rejected the kingdom, God predicted what He would do in response in Amos 9:4:

***“…I will set Mine eyes upon them for evil,* and not for good” (Amos 9:4).**

Hey, doesn’t that remind you of how Paul set his eyes on Elymas in verse 9 for the “evil” *of blinding him?* That was a type of how God set *His* eyes on the nation of Israel to blind *them* when they crucified the Lord and stoned His prophet, the *same* blindness that’s been on them ever since, as Paul wrote in Romans 11:7,8:

**“Israel hath not obtained that which he seeketh for; but the election hath obtained it, *and the rest were blinded*…God hath given them…eyes that they should not see…*unto this day.”***

But remember, the gifts and calling of God are without repentance, so Israel’s blindness won’t be permanent. Later in that same chapter, Paul wrote,

**“I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery…*that blindness in part is happened to Israel,* until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in” (Romans 11:25).**

The spiritual blindness of the nation Israel will end at the Rapture. That’s why Elymas wasn’t blinded *permanently* in this type here in Acts 13. When God works a miracle of judgment, it’s usually *permanent,* as we see in II Kings 15:5, where we read,

**“…the LORD smote the king, so that he was a leper *unto the day of his death.”***

But if the Lord smote Elymas with blindness to the day of *his* death, it would have ruined the picture that He was painting of Israel’s *temporary* blindness.

By the way, do you see where verse 11 of our text says that Elymas wouldn’t see the “sun” for a season? The sun that the nation of Israel can’t see today is the one Malachi talked about in Malachi 4:2 when he predicted,

**“…unto you that fear My name shall *the Sun of righteousness* arise with healing in His wings…”**

That’s talking about the rising of the Son of God in the kingdom! The kingdom will be the dawn of a whole new day in Israel—a day they won’t see until after the fulness of the Gentiles comes in at the Rapture.

Now the mist and darkness that fell on Elymas is a reference to hell. II Peter 2:1,17 says,

**“…false prophets…are wells without water…to whom *the mist of darkness* is reserved for ever.”**

But don’t be thinking that hell might be bad, but it’ll have a nice, cool, refreshing *mist* that will make it all better. The darkness of hell is compared to a mist in the same way that the *fire* of hell is compared to a *lake.* These images speak to the completeness of the darkness and the fire. You can’t see through a mist.

Back in 1988, I was watching a Chicago Bears game on television, and suddenly a fog blew in from Lake Michigan and enveloped the field. My screen literally went white, and you couldn’t see a thing that was happening. The announcers couldn’t call the game, and even the players could barely see to play. It became known as the Fog Bowl, and fans of both teams remember it well.

So the mist of darkness *in hell* just means they won’t be able to see anything. And the mist of darkness that fell on Elymas *while he was still alive* is a type of the mist of *spiritual* darkness the nation Israel has been experiencing in life for 2,000 years now. They’ve been enjoying hell on earth, instead of the heaven on earth they *should* be experiencing in the kingdom. If you don’t believe that, just ask Jews who lived through the holocaust, or study how many died of persecution over the past 2,000 years. Not to mention thedarkness of not knowing the God that spawned their nation!

But when Verse 11 says that Elymas went around seeking someone to lead him by the hand, that’s a picture of how *individual* Jews can still get saved today—because that’s what happened to an individual Jew named Paul when *he* got saved!

**“Saul arose from the earth; and…he saw no man: *but they led him by the hand,* and brought him into Damascus. *And he was three days without sight…”* (Acts 9:8,9).**

Paul was blinded temporarily, just like the nation Israel, but he was able to get saved, and so can other individual Jews, as we see pictured with him.

Well, as you can imagine, all of this had quite an effect on the deputy, who’s been standing by watching all this go down:

**“Then the deputy, when he saw what was done, believed, being astonished at the doctrine of the Lord” (Acts 13:12).**

Now here I want you to notice what it *doesn’t* say about Sergius there. It doesn’t say that he was astonished at the *power* of the Lord to blind a man. It says he was astonished at the *doctrine* of the Lord, the *teaching* of the Lord. That tells us that before Elymas started butting in to withstand Paul, the apostle must have been *telling* the deputy the doctrine of what’s happening today, in the dispensation of grace, how Jews are blinded while Gentiles like him are getting saved. Once he trusted Christ, Paul was sure to go on to tell him how he himself was a living picture of what’s happening today.

Do you know what else he was a picture of? How Gentiles today are getting saved *in spite* of Israel, instead of *through* Israel, as God told the Jews would happen in the kingdom. In Isaiah 60:1-3, He made a prediction about the coming of the Lord to Israel and said,

**“Arise, shine; *for thy light is come…*darkness shall cover the earth…but the LORD shall arise upon thee…*And the Gentiles shall come to…the brightness of thy rising.”***

That’s what was *supposed* to happen! But the people of Israel didn’t rise to the occasion, did they? Romans 11:11,12 says,

**“…rather *through their fall* salvation is come unto the Gentiles…*the fall of them* be the riches of the world.”**

—just like salvation came to the deputy through the fall of Elymas!

You can see *more* of the doctrine of the Lord illustrated if you’ll notice that there are *two* men named Paul in this passage, one a Jew, and one a Gentile. That’s a picture of the Body of Christ, where Jews and Gentiles are together in one body.

So Sergius saw *plenty* of the doctrine of the Lord. And if you’re as astonished at the doctrine of the Lord as he was, why not bow and thank God for writing such an amazing, faith-inspiring Book!