

## Acts 13:1-12 notes

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July 18, 2009

All passages are from the New American Standard Bible unless otherwise noted.

### Background

Antioch became an early hub for believers in Yeshua as the Mashiakh (Jesus as the Christ). The execution of Stephen scattered the believers to “Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch” (Acts 11:19). Men from Cyprus and Cyrene (northern Africa) went to Antioch to proclaim Yeshua (Acts 11:20). The assembly of Yerushalayim sent bar-Nabbus (Hebrew for “son of exceeding power”) to Antioch when he heard about that effort, which was involved with great numbers believing. Bar-Nabbus fetches Sha’ul from Tarsus to help in Antioch (Acts 11:25-26), and they stay for a year. The assembly of Antioch raises money for a famine in Yudea (Judea) and sent Sha’ul and bar-Nabbus to Yerushalayim with the gift. After Herod died, Sha’ul and bar-Nabbus return to Antioch with Yokhanan Marcus (Acts 12:19-25).

### Paul’s first mission (Acts 13:4-14:26)

#### Stopover on Cyprus (Acts 13:4-12)

- They go from Antioch to the Syrian port of Seleucia and take a ship to Cyprus. They land at Salamis on the east coast of the island and travel west across the island to Paphos on the west coast, proclaiming Yeshua in the synagogues.
- David Stern notes Paul is recorded to have started his work in a given location by preaching in synagogues, i.e. with the Yehudim, 10 times<sup>1</sup>.
  - His name, Paul, is of Latin origin and thought to derive from *παύω* *pauo* (Strong’s lexicon No. 3973), which means and means, “to stop, cease, restrain.”<sup>2</sup>
  - This is the first time that name is used and one of the last times *Sha’ul* is used<sup>3</sup>.
- In Paphos, the trio encounters a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named bar-Yeshua, a.k.a. Elymas, and proconsul Sergius Paulus (Acts 13:6-12).
  - Proconsul Sergius Paulus summons Paul, bar-Nabbus and Yokhanan Markus (v. 7).
    - *Paulus* is the Greek form of *Paul*.
    - Sergius Paulus is described as “a man of intelligence.”
    - He “sought to hear the word of God.”
  - Lukas says Elymas’ name means *magos*, or “magician.”
    - Thayer’s lexicon says the word derives from *Elymon*, Arabic for “wise,” and *’alima*, Aramaic for “powerful.”
      - Many ancient books of sorcery have been found in Babylon, mixing science and paganism, so Israel may have picked up magic before and after the exile<sup>4</sup>.
      - However, Israel also picked up occultic practices from Egypt (Yosef was described as using divination) and Canaan (witch of Endor).
    - Elymas opposed the three and tried to “turn the proconsul away from the faith” (v. 8).
      - Yeshua warned against false prophets as “ravenous wolves” that appear as innocent as sheep. “Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they? So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. So then, you will know them by their fruits.” (Matt. 7:15-20)
        - Another figure described as a “ravenous wolf” or “a wolf that tears” is Binyamin. “Benjamin is a ravenous wolf; In the morning he devours the prey, And in the evening he divides the spoil.” (Gen. 49:27; Yitskhak/Yisrael’s blessing of his 12 children and Yosef’s two sons)

1 Stern, David. “Acts 13.” *Jewish New Testament Commentary*. Jewish New Testament Publications Inc., Clarksville, MD. 1996. Stern notes the synagogue-first approach in Acts 13:5; 13:14; 14:1; 16:13; 17:1-2, 10, 17; 18:4; 19:8; 28:17.

2 *Strong’s Greek Dictionary of the New Testament*. Public domain. Bible Foundation e-Text Library and OakTree Software Inc. <[www.bf.org/bfetexts.htm](http://www.bf.org/bfetexts.htm)>.

3 Stern.

4 McKee, J.K. “The Effect of Mysticism and Gnosticism on the Messianic Movement - Part 1.” TNNOnline.net. Audio recording. Downloaded July 3, 2009.

- Ezekiel also records a Word of the LORD about leaders of Israel behaving like vicious beasts (Ezek. 22:23-31).
  - The rulers of Israel acted like the “tearing by wolves” (כִּזְעֻיִם טֹרְפֵי טָרֶף *ki-zeyvim torfey taref*) in killing people for “dishonest gain.”
    - The common Hebrew term for “unclean” food, *treif*, is the noun form of this verb.
  - “Prophets” were said to be “like a roaring lion” that has “devoured lives” (נֶפֶשׁ אֶכְלָה *nefesh akhalu*) by bilking the people and even making widows.
    - The “prophets” “smeared whitewash” for the rulers’ lethal greed via false visions and divination and putting the false stamp of authenticity, “thus says the LORD God,” on the rulers’ actions.
  - The priesthood had “done violence to My Law” and profaned holy things by:
    - Not distinguishing between the “holy and the profane” (לְכֹל *l’khol*, “for all,” i.e. for everything else).
    - Not teaching people the difference between “clean and unclean” (הַטְּמֵא לְטָהוֹר *ha-tamey l’tahor*).
    - “Hid[ing] their eyes from My *shabbatot* (sabbaths).”
- Moshe warned Israel that when they enter Canaan they shouldn’t mimic those people’s religious practices, which included child sacrifices and divination, or mystical communication for insight, also called prophecy (Deut. 12:29-13:5).
 

“If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder comes true, concerning which he spoke to you, saying, ‘Let us go after other gods (whom you have not known) and let us serve them,’ you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams; for the LORD your God is testing you to find out if you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.” (Deut. 13:1-3)
- Elymas was described as a “Jewish false prophet.”
  - Magic, sorcery, divination, etc. were known in places of authority in Israel before the Babylonian exile and after.
  - Gnosticism was a form of first-century syncretism (mixture of religions) that influenced the body of believers in Yeshua as Messiah in the first few centuries.
    - It is tied to two sources:
      - Alexandrian philosophy, mixing Greek philosophy — largely of Plato — and the Hebrew Scriptures. The Jewish commentator Philo of Alexandria used Greek philosophy to find hidden meaning in the Scriptures<sup>5</sup>:
        - There was a sharp division between man and God — flesh/matter and spirit — and only intermediaries such as angels and demons can interact with the material world.
        - The Logos was the embodiment of personified Wisdom in the opening of the Book of Proverbs.
          - Divine reason endowed with energy from all subordinate powers.
          - Impersonal yet the only “firstborn” of God, chief of the ministering spirits, viceroy of God, representative of mankind.
            - Perhaps, this teaching is what the author of Hebrews is addressing at the opening when describing Yeshua as not a ministering spirit.
        - God created the universe by gradually molding matter, but imperfections arose in the process, creating evil.
        - The soul, an eternal entity, is spirit imprisoned in the flesh, and the wise man seeks to break down a desire to be in the flesh to rise to ecstasy in the presence of God.
      - Zoroastrianism, an ancient Persian religion, two original and independent powers of good and evil, of light and darkness.
        - Ormuzd (Ahura-Mazda), the wise Lord.

5 Orr, James, gen. ed. “Gnosticism.” *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 1915 edition. Public domain.

- Ahriman (Angra-Mainyu), the wicked spirit.
- These powers were believed to be equal, and each supreme in his own domain.
  - The yin and yang of Buddhism derives from this idea.
  - Some say that the concept of haSatan derived from Ahriman. However, haSatan is described in all the Bible as a powerful yet subordinate being.
- The earth, created by Ormuzd, became the battlefield of the two powers.
- Ahriman led away the first man and woman from their allegiance to Ormuzd, and so all evils result to mankind.
- Major tenets of the various forms of Gnosticism are:
  - Special knowledge of the truth.
    - Knowledge is superior to faith.
    - Ordinary Christians did not possess this secret and higher doctrine.
  - Matter, which is the source of evil, and spirit are separate.
  - Evil arose because:
    - The creator of the world was distinct from the Supreme Deity.
      - The Hebrew Scriptures were the work of the Demiurge, the inferior creator of the world, who was the God of the Jews.
        - There were many Gnostic sects, but all their writings reflect this belief<sup>6</sup>.
      - Instead of God being אֶחָד ekhad, or “one, united,” Gnosticism taught a Greater LORD and a Lesser LORD.
 

“Gnosticism undermined Christian monotheism by its distinction of the Creator from the Supreme, Christian morals by its opposition of the philosopher to the unlearned, Christian practice by its separation of knowledge from action; and it cut away the very basis of the gospel whenever it explained away its history. In every case it had got hold of truth on one side — the reality of evil in the world, the function of knowledge in religion, the difference between the letter and the spirit — but fragments of truth are not enough for a gospel, which is false if all truth is not summed up in Christ. Therefore, there could be no peace between the Gnostic illuminati and the Christian churches.” (Gwatkin, *Early Church History*, II, p. 68)

        - This is a good lesson to beware of teachings that contain truth but reach erroneous conclusions.
    - Emanations extended between God and the visible universe.
  - Messiah as coming from God was not human so Yeshua’s earthly life and sufferings weren’t real.
  - The Supreme God isn’t a person.
  - Mankind doesn’t have free will, i.e. he is ruled by fate.
  - Subjugation of the flesh, i.e. asceticism.
    - Through it one attains spiritual communion with God.
    - What happens in the flesh isn’t important, so some embraced licentiousness.
  - Syncretism of deep teachings of the Bible with various elements from Near and Far Asian and Jewish mysticism.
- Some of the roots of Gnosticism developed in the Middle Ages (10<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> centuries) into the body of Jewish mysticism called *Kabbalah* (קַבְּלָה), which in Hebrew literally means that which is received, i.e. revelation.
  - The two major works are:
    - The סֵפֶר יִצִּירָה *Sefer Y’Tsirah*, or Book of Creation.
    - The זֹהָר *Zohar*, or Book of Light.
      - From *Zohar* we get the oft-cited four levels of Bible interpretation, a.k.a. PaRDeS from the Hebrew acronym.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> “Kabbalah” *Wikipedia*. Internet. Accessed July 18, 2009. <[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kabbalah](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kabbalah)>.

- *Peshat* (lit. “simple”): the direct, literal meaning.
- *Remez* (lit. “hint[s]”): the allegoric meaning (through allusion).
- *Derash* (from Heb. darash: “inquire” or “seek”): *midrashic* (Rabbinic) or comparative meaning.
- *Sod* (lit. “secret” or “mystery”): the inner meaning—a foundation of the kabbalah.
- A description of Kabbalah mysticism from Wikipedia<sup>8</sup>:  
 “It is a set of esoteric teachings that is meant to explain the relationship between an infinite, eternal and essentially unknowable Creator with the finite and mortal universe of His creation. In solving this paradox, Kabbalah seeks to define the nature of the universe and the human being, the nature and purpose of existence, and various other ontological questions. It also presents methods to aid understanding of these concepts and to thereby attain spiritual realization. Kabbalah originally developed entirely within the milieu of Jewish thought and constantly uses classical Jewish sources to explain and demonstrate its esoteric teachings. These teachings are thus held by kabbalists to define the inner meaning of both the Tanakh (Hebrew Bible) and traditional rabbinic literature, as well as to explain the significance of Jewish religious observances.”
- Paul shows the Cypriot proconsul who has real knowledge and power.
  - Paul calls Elymas on his falsehood.  
 “ ‘You who are full of all deceit and fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease to make crooked the straight ways of the Lord? Now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and not see the sun for a time.’ ” (Acts 13:10-11)
  - This blindness was a physical manifestation of a spiritual reality, Elymas was blind to the reality of where knowledge and power reside, with God alone.
  - A show of force is not a capricious act of God. It’s meant to correct and save.  
 “Then the proconsul believed when he saw what had happened, being amazed at the teaching of the Lord.” (Acts 13:12)

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8 *Ibid.*