

DAVID WENKEL

*From Saul to Paul: The Apostle's Name Change and
Narrative Identity in Acts 13:9*

Abstract

It has long been accepted as a safe conclusion that the difference between the names Saul and Paul in the Book of Acts merely reflects cultural accommodation in a Hellenistic milieu. This study challenges this conclusion by examining the literary pattern and narrative usage of names. This study concludes that the name change reflects the true identity of Paul amidst conflict with Bar-Jesus/Elymas. The name 'Paul' is significant because of its etymology and the information provided by the narrative.

Key words: Paul, Saul, etymology, narrative criticism

David Wenkel is a doctoral student at the University of Aberdeen.

1. Introduction

The meaning of the use of Paul (*Παῦλος*) and Saul (*Σαῦλος*) to refer to the Apostle Paul in the Book of Acts has long been settled as insignificant. In spite of the fact that many popular Christian education materials ascribe meaning to this name change, most scholarship has resolved that there was in fact no significance to this phenomenon beyond cultural accommodation. As Saul focused his ministry on the Gentiles, he used the name Paul because it fit best with his Greek audiences. According to this view there is no essential name change in Acts 13:9. Others view this change as a ‘minor detail.’¹ This study seeks to challenge this status quo. This study will demonstrate the significance of the name change from Saul to Paul in light of narrative structure and literary patterns and etymology. The name change is designed to reveal identity amidst conflict with the false Jewish magician Bar-Jesus/Elymas.

2. From Saul to Paul: A Brief Survey of Research

The presence of the names Saul and Paul in Acts was the topic of interest and speculation since the early centuries of Christianity.² A brief survey of approaches to this matter reflects a narrow methodological focus on historical concerns that lacks a sensitivity to literary and narrative patterns within the narrative of Acts.

William J. Larkin provides a three-fold schema for scholarly proposals about the name change: (1) *personal*: Paul proves he is Spirit filled and real leader of the apostles, (2) *environmental*: Paul is not operating in a Gentile environment, (3) *ministry*: the conversion of Sergius Paulus marks a new and direct approach to the Gentiles.³ The most popular is the environmental view, which Larkin himself takes. Its popularity is so strong that it represents a scholarly consensus. This consensus likely began with William Ramsay’s study of Paul in 1925. Ramsay explained the presence of Saul and Paul as an understandable cultural phenomenon that reflected the Hellenistic milieu. Roman citizens had a *nomen* and *praenomen*.⁴ The name Saul is a ‘Hebrew’ name and ‘Paul’ is understood to be a Greek name or title. I. H. Marshall explains:

As a Roman citizen Paul would have borne three names, the third of which (his *cognomen*) would have been the Latin ‘Paullus’; what his first two names were, we do not know. A Roman citizen could have a fourth name (his *signum* or *supernomen*) given at birth and used as a familiar name; in Paul’s case this could have been his Jewish name ‘Saul’, which he would use in a Jewish environment.⁵

As such there is no significance behind the name change other than the fact that Paul was using a name that suited his role as apostle to the Gentiles.

There were also pragmatic reasons for using Παῦλος as more people spoke Greek than the small population of Aramaic-speaking Jews.⁶ This view has been more or less accepted by most commentators on the Book of Acts.⁷ The problem with Larkin's schema is that positions 1) *personal* and 3) *ministry* are based in large part on literary and narrational considerations. They may reasonably be lumped together. For this reason I think it is better to use a two-fold schema of 1) historical and 2) literary categories. These two categories more accurately reflect the emphasis of the interpretative framework used to understand the name change in Acts 13:9.

Those who focus on literary considerations tend to focus on macro-level issues in the narrative of Acts.⁸ In other words, the change from Saul to Paul is significant within the *larger* narrative because of Paul's growing prominence, especially with respect to Barnabas and his leadership amongst the other apostles.⁹ This conclusion is plausible and in the opinion of this writer, correct. After this point in Acts, Paul does receive more focus and attention than either Barnabas or companions such as Silas. Those who view the name change as having literary significance from a macro-level perspective are still reluctant to see it having significance from a micro-level perspective (within the pericope). The legitimacy or even plausibility of the literary importance of the name change from Saul to Paul on a macro-level only strengthens the case for the literary importance of the name change on a micro-level.

There are two important critiques that can be raised against the status quo that denies that there is any significance to the presence of Saul and Paul. First, while historical considerations must not be denied, they must not overshadow or exclude narrative and literary considerations. The second critique is less methodological. Appeals to other Pauline literature such as 1 Corinthians 9:20-21 must not drown out the voice of the primary text of Acts.¹⁰ This study seeks a more integral approach that is sensitive to the literary dynamics of Acts 13:4-12.

3. From Saul to Paul: The Broader Pattern

The argument presented here is that the name change from Saul to Paul likely carries more significance than cultural accommodation. The narrative and literary characteristics of Acts 13 point the reader to more than this. Before examining Acts 13 specifically, it will be helpful to situate the discussion in light of the broader pattern of name changes in Acts.

The difficulty with the Lukan corpus is that sometimes names carry meaning and sometimes they do not. There are instances where more than one name is given for a character and there is no evidence that either name carries meaning. For example the narrator states that Peter went to the home of Mary, 'the mother of John whose other name was Mark' (Acts

12:12). Likewise, the narrator explains that John's 'other name was Mark' as the missionary journey to Jerusalem ends (Acts 12:25). The additional name of Mark seems to be for the purposes of identification or historical confirmation rather than rhetoric or literary function.

Before one concludes that names carry no meaning, the episode of Paul and Barnabas at Lystra must be considered. When Paul and Barnabas demonstrate the power of the Lord by healing the crippled man, the crowds view them as gods (Acts 14:11). Significantly they are given names that reflect their supposed identities. Barnabas is called Zeus but the narrator does not tell us why. Paul is called Hermes and the narrator explains: 'because he was the chief speaker' (Acts 13:12). Even though the Gentile crowds are mistaken, the names or titles carry meaning because they reflect identity.

Another important name change occurs in the episode detailing Paul's ministry in Corinth. In this pericope, the 'ruler of the synagogue' (*ἀρχισυνάγωγος*) who is named Crispus (Acts 18:8) undergoes a name change to Sosthenes (Acts 18:17) after believing in the Lord. Richard G. Fellows argues that Paul established this name change because 'Sosthenes' means 'saving strength.'¹¹ After presenting exegetical reasons for viewing Crispus and Sosthenes as the same person, Fellows argues that this name change is consistent with the Jewish pattern of 'marking significant moments' in life with a new name.¹² Fellows cites the name change from Joseph to Barnabas in Acts 4:36 (which means *υἱὸς παρακλήσεως*) as further evidence of a broader pattern.¹³ Extra biblical literature from Philo also reflects the use of new names to reflect 'betterment of character.'¹⁴

Paul's name change cannot be easily dismissed as mere cultural accommodation because there are other instances of name changes in the Lukan corpus and contemporary literature (i.e. Philo) that are significant. The broader pattern of Barnabas and Sosthenes bear witness to the concept that names reveal identity in Acts.

4. From Saul to Paul: Identity Amidst Conflict

While it may not be possible to resolve without dispute, there are good reasons for attributing meaning to the name change from Saul to Paul in the pericope of Acts 13:4-12. A reading that is sensitive to literary and rhetorical concerns will demonstrate that the presence of the change from Saul to Paul cannot be dismissed as merely cultural accommodation.

First, the context in which the names Saul and Paul are related is one of conflict.¹⁵ At this point the fledgling community of the 'Way' was at a critical juncture and survival was crucial. Other Jewish sectarian communities had claimed to follow a Messiah but had easily been dissolved. Luke frames the conflict with reference to the Isaianic New Exodus in which a 'path' (Acts 13:10) is made for the nations to worship YHWH.¹⁶ The Jewish false prophet

Bar-Jesus attempts to stop the spread of the 'word of God' (Acts 13:5, 7).¹⁷ The stakes are high in this face-off between the duo of Barnabas/Saul and Bar-Jesus.

Some commentators seem to have followed a red-herring by giving undue attention to the proconsul Sergius Paulus (Acts 13:7).¹⁸ But the critical name to consider is not Sergius Paulus but Bar-Jesus (Βαριησοῦ).¹⁹ Bar-Jesus is described in Acts 13:6-7 as 1) 'a certain magician,' 2) 'a Jewish false prophet,' and 3) someone 'with the proconsul.' This enemy of the 'word of God' in an opponent who is coming from within Israel. The contest is significant because of the stakes for who can claim the right to be the true People of God. The presence of Bar-Jesus with proconsul in conjunction with his later description as a 'magician' attributes power to this opponent of the faith.²⁰ Willimon and Tannehill are correct to place this episode as being on par with the contest between Elijah and prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel.²¹ This face-off is between the power of the false People of God (as Bar-Jesus) and the power of the true People of God.

The hermeneutical key to understanding Bar-Jesus stands out in the narrative because of its parenthetical nature and explicit appeal to the reader. The presence of the Greek proconsul required that Greek names be used. But there is more going on here than mere translation or transliteration. Here, names are likely masks that conceal and reveal one's true identity. The reader *must* understand that Bar-Jesus is to be identified by his correct name (Acts 13:8): 'Elymas the magician (for that is the meaning of his name).'²² The name Ἐλύμας is possibly a derivative of an Arabic word for 'skillful,' 'wise,' or 'expert.'²³ If Elymas is Jewish it is more likely that his name has Semitic origins and may mean '*magos*.'²⁴ Strelan argues that Elymas is etymologically related to Bar-Jesus vis-à-vis the Hebrew name Shem.²⁵ Whatever the case, in this conflict the name reflects who Bar-Jesus really is. Even if the Greek reader does not associate the name Bar-Jesus with the Aramaic name 'son of Jesus' or 'son of Joshua' the narrator has already explicitly identified him as a '*Jewish* magician.' The Jewish identity of Bar-Jesus compounds the situation and places the conflict within Israel even as the ramifications of this conflict go beyond this. In sum we might say that *the literary framework and the narrator himself attributes meaning to names because the nature of the conflict turns on identity.*

Immediately after the narrator explains that the true identity of this powerful imposter is that of a false magician, the narrator turns to the most prominent of the Spirit-filled duo. The narrator explains (Acts 13:9): 'But Saul, who was also called Paul.' In light of the narrative structure and explicit statement from the narrator about the meaning of Bar-Jesus' name, it is highly unlikely that this name change has no significance. The proximity of this name change to the name change of Bar-Jesus to Elymas is simply too

strong deny that there is a relationship. Within the narrative world, Saul's true identity is revealed in the name 'Paul' even as Bar-Jesus' true identity is revealed in the name 'Elymas.'

There are other characteristics of the narrative in Acts 13 that make it difficult to view Elymas' name change as significant and Paul's name change as insignificant. Tannehill provides the most literary sensitive reading of this episode. Although he does not use the term 'reversal,' Tannehill argues that Elymas functions as a mirror of what Saul used to be before his conversion/call on the Road to Damascus. Tannehill elaborates this argument with the following points: (1) Elymas receives the same judgment of temporary blindness that Saul received, (2) both become helpless and require others to lead them by the hand (*χειραγωγέω*; Acts 9:8; 13:11), (3) Elymas encounters 'the hand of the Lord' (Acts 13:11) whereas Saul encounters the 'Lord' (Acts 9:5, 10).²⁶ Furthermore, Tannehill points to Elymas' opposition to the 'straight path' of the Lord (Acts 13:10) which also parallels Saul's opposition to the 'Way' (Acts 9:2). Whereas Paul preaches the Isaianic gospel of 'recovery of sight to the blind' (Lk 4:18 // Isa 29:18), he also curses Elymas with blindness.²⁷ Tannehill doesn't relate these connections to the problem of Saul's name change to Paul in Acts 13 but they serve the argument that *the narrative framework creates a relationship between Paul and Elymas*.

5. From Saul to Paul: Minding the Gap

The difference between Bar-Jesus/Elymas and Saul/Paul is that while the former receives an explanatory statement from the narrator, the later does not. Because there is no explicit statement from the narrator identifying the meaning of 'Paul,' many have concluded that there is no significance at all. Having developed the narrative structure of the pericope, we have concluded that this is highly unsatisfactory. Here, Kathy Maxwell's thesis about the intentionality behind narrative gaps is helpful. Maxwell argues that Luke uses 'omissions in order to encourage audience participation.'²⁸

While the narrator explains the meaning of Elymas' name, he leaves a gap when it comes to the meaning of Paul's name so that the audience involves itself in attributing certain qualities to Paul's identity. The narrative continues by explaining that Paul was 'filled with the Holy Spirit' (Acts 13:9). His very gaze enables him to see who Elymas really is.²⁹ Paul wins this power contest by relying on the Holy Spirit to identify the imposter Elymas as a 'son of the devil' (Acts 13:10). Paul's words prevent Elymas from interfering with the New Exodus 'path' by making him blind (Acts 13:11).

Luke wants the reader to understand the significance of Elymas' name based on some sort of etymology. The narrator injects a comment to explain this significance. But when it comes to Paul, there is no explanation!

Amidst the conflict the gap serves to further the interest of the narrator: one wonders what the significance of Paul's name change is because it is not explained.³⁰ The audience participates in developing the identity of Paul. However, if one has been reading the narrative of Acts, it is clear that etymology is the key to understanding the significance of names such as Barnabas (Acts 4:36), Elymas (Acts 13:8) and later Sosthenes (Acts 18:17).

It is best to understand the significance of the name Paul as consisting of two components (etymology and narrative identity). The etymology of the name Παῦλος refers to one being 'small'.³¹ Hemer notes that common variants of the time included Paullus, Polus, and Pollus.³² Even if it was one of his previous names it may have taken on deeper or stronger significance. This is suggestive of Paul being the least or smallest (cf. 'for I am the least of the apostles' 1 Cor 15:9). This meaning is suggestive of the broad Lukan theme of double (bi-polar) reversal wherein the least is the greatest and the greatest is the least.³³ The other component to consider is the statement that describes Paul in the immediate context. Whatever the name 'Paul' means, the narrator wants the reader to associate it with the identity of the true People of God – the ones filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 13:9). Even if one misses the gap and provide the etymology of the name 'Paul,' the critical information is supplied by the statement about the Holy Spirit. We might say that Paul is to be identified as the 'least' one who is filled with the Spirit.

6. Conclusion

The force of the argument presented here is designed to be suggestive and provocative rather than absolutely conclusive. What is clear is that scholars have considered other characters besides Paul in the Lukan narrative to have undergone a significant name change. Many will acknowledge that a 'word-play' is going on with respect to Bar-Jesus while refusing to consider that a word play is going with Paul's name.³⁴ Even those who purport to be interested in literary and rhetorical concerns do not examine the name change in a manner that is sensitive to the narrative unit and conflict with Bar-Jesus/Elymas that turns on the issue of identity. This study challenges this status quo by providing a reading of Acts 13 that is sensitive to literary and narrative dynamics. The hermeneutical concerns of this study seeks to move from the inside of the narrative world to the outside historical context. The conflict with Bar-Jesus/Elymas highlights the importance of one's name and one's identity. The fact that Paul's name lacks an explanation may be best understood in light of narrative gap theory. The lack of explanation about the name change draws the audience into creating Paul's identity by providing etymology and information provided by the narrative. Paul is the apostle to the Gentiles: the least/little one who is filled with the Holy Spirit.

Endnotes

¹ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles* (AB 31; New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1998), 500.

² Origen, Rufinus, and Jerome investigated the name change. G. A. Harrer, 'Saul Who Also is Called Paul,' *Harvard Theological Review* 33:1 (1940): 19. Also see Michael Compton, 'From Saul to Paul: Patristic Interpretation of the Names of the Apostle,' in *Dominico Eloquentio/in Lordly Eloquence: Essays on Patristic Exegesis in Honor of Robert Louis Wilken*, eds. Paul M. Blowers, et al (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2002), 50-68.

³ William J. Larkin Jr., *Acts* (IVPNTCS; Downers Grove, IL/Leicester: IVP, 1995), 195.

⁴ William Ramsay, *St. Paul: The Traveler and Roman Citizen* (1925 reprint; Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2001), 80.

⁵ I. H. Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary* (TNTC; Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1980), 234. For elaboration see Colin J. Hemer, 'The Name of Paul,' *TjynB* 36:1 (1985): 179-183.

⁶ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Living Paul: An Introduction to the Apostle's Life and Thought* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP/SPCK, 2009), 22.

⁷ F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 249; Marshall, *Acts*, 234; Kenneth O. Gangel, *Acts* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 1998), 213; William S. Kurz, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Collegeville, MN: Order of St. Benedict, 1983), 62; William Barclay, *The New Daily Study Bible: The Acts of the Apostles*, 3rd ed. (Louisville, KY: WJKP, 2003), 117; John Stott, *The Message of Acts* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1990), 219; Larkin, *Acts*, 195.

⁸ The one exception to this is Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: The Acts of the Apostles: A Literary Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1994), 162-4.

'The change indicates that Paul is becoming the prominent and leading member of the group.' Darrell L. Bock, *Acts* (BECNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007), 445. Similarly, Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), 400. Thomas E. Page concludes, 'It is clear that S. Luke notes the change of name as important and marking an epoch; it would seem that his non-Jewish name is thus introduced at the commencement of his missionary labours as the Apostle of the Gentiles, in order to indicate that the narrative is no longer concerned with a comparatively unknown Jew, but with one who, under the name of Paul, was to win a wider and universal fame.' *Acts of the Apostles* (London: Macmillan, 1886), 162.

¹⁰ Ramsay, *St. Paul: The Traveler and Roman Citizen*, 80; C. K. Barrett, *Acts: A Shorter Commentary* (NY/London: T&T Clark, 2002), 193.

¹¹ Richard G. Fellows, 'Renaming in Paul's Churches: The Case of Crispus-Sosthenes Revisited,' *TjynB* 56:2 (2005): 111.

¹² Fellows, 'Renaming in Paul's Churches,' 117.

¹³ Fellows, 'Renaming in Paul's Churches' 119.

¹⁴ Philo, 'On the change of names' (*De Mutatione Nominum*), 70 as cited by Fellows, 'Renaming in Paul's Churches,' 117.

¹⁵ Jaroslav Pelikan makes an interesting case for relating this episode to the

Christus Victor dimension of the atonement. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2005), 154. A For a study of Paul's curse against Bar-Jesus in Acts 13:10-11 see David H. Wenkel, 'Imprecatory Speech-Acts in Acts,' *The Asbury Journal* 63:2 (2009): 81-93.

¹⁶ For comments on the New Exodus theme in Acts 13:24 as a 'way' see David Strauss, *The Davidic Messiah in Luke-Acts: The Promise and its Fulfillment in Lukan Christology* (JSNTSup 413; Sheffield: Academic Press, 1995), 303-4.

¹⁷ Pao argues that the 'word of the Lord' takes on the qualities of a character in the narrative. David Pao, *Acts and the Isaianic New Exodus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), 160-7; 177-80. For notes on the 'word of the Lord' as an object of praise see Kindalee P. De Long, *Surprised by God: Praise Responses in the Narrative of Luke-Acts* (BZNW 166; Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2009), 258.

¹⁸ Rick Strelan, *Strange Acts: Studies in the Cultural World of the Acts of the Apostles* (BZNW 126; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), 219; Hans Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 100.

¹⁹ The textual variants of Βαρησοῦ do not appear significant. Bruce Metzger, et al, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (London/NY: UBS, 1994), 355-6; Max Wilcox, *The Semitisms of Acts* (Oxford: OUP, 1965), 89.

²⁰ For Talmudic literature on magicians see Shabbath 75a, also Didache 2.2, and Rev 22:15 (Kistemaker and Hendriksen, Acts, 461).

²¹ William Willimon, *A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Acts* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1988), 123; Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: Acts*, 162.

²² There is a significant textual variant here in v8. Codex Bezae reads Ἐτ[.]ιμας or Etoemas in Latin instead of Ἐλύμας. Metzger, et al, *A Textual Commentary*, 355-6.

²³ Bock summarizes two possibilities: 1) a variation of the Arabic word alim, which means 'sage,' 2) a name derived from the Aramaic haloma, which means 'interpreter of dreams' (Acts, 445). Both of these are based on etymology.

²⁴ Bruce, *Acts*, 249.

²⁵ Strelan, *Strange Acts*, 219; Rick Strelan, 'Who Was Bar-Jesus? Acts 13:6-12,' *Biblica* 85 (2004):65-81.

²⁶ Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: Acts*, 163.

²⁷ Stephen D. Moore, 'The Gospel of the Look,' *Semeia* 54 (1992): 160.

²⁸ Kathy Maxwell, *Hearing Between the Lines: The Audience as Fellow-Worker in Luke-Acts and its Literary Milieu* (LNTS 425; NY/London: T&T Clark, 2010), 151.

²⁹ For a discussion on the role of gazing into one's soul see De Long, *Surprised by God*, 194.

³⁰ It is also possible to view Paul's name as significant in light of the heavy intertextual allusions to Isaiah. According to Isa 65:12 the Isaianic suffering servant will undergo a name change. Motyer explains that this name change is linked with the identity of the person: 'the "name" signifies all that is essentially true of a person... As then so here, the different name 'means' becoming a different person with different potentialities and prospects.' J. A. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1993), 528. It is likely that Paul identified himself with the suffering servant and the change in Paul fits with this pattern. Thus, Paul's name change identifies him as taking upon or fulfilling the model of the Isaianic suffering servant. However, it is unlikely that this

intertextual framework should be considered the dominant way to understand the significance of the name 'Paul.' This would require a change in pattern that differs from the significance of Barnabas, Sosthenes, and Elymas.

³¹ Hemer, 'The Name of Paul,' 183.

³² Hemer, 'The Name of Paul,' 183.

³³ York identifies seven clear instances of bi-polar reversal in the Gospel of Luke see John O. York, *The Last Shall Be First: The Rhetoric of Reversal in Luke* (JSNTSup 46; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), *passim*.

³⁴ For the use of 'word-play' to describe what is going on with Bar-Jesus' name see Gangel, *Acts*, 213.