

The Magi of Persia & Babylonia: Historical Background; the Imposter in Acts 13:5-10; Paul Dressed Down Elimas, v. 10; the Tyranny of Political Correctness; Judging & Discernment Compared; Alinsky Tactic: To Hoist an Enemy by His Own Petard

VII. The Magi of Persia and Babylonia: Historical Background

Much debate swirls around the account of the Magi's visit to Jerusalem and Bethlehem in Matthew 2. Their identity is indicated only by their title and the direction from which they came, "Magi from the east" (Matthew 2:1).

Magi were originally a Median tribe according to Herodotus:

Deioces \dē'-ō-sēz\ [legendary first king of the Medes] collected the Medes into a nation, and ruled over them alone. Now these are the tribes of which they consist: the Busae, the Paretaceni, the Struchates, the Arizanti, the Budii, and the Magi.¹

The Medes were amalgamated into the Persian Empire when Cyrus the Great overthrew his grandfather, Astyages \as-tī'-a-jēz\, king of the Medes, in 550 B.C.²

Medes. An Indo-European people who dominated the highland area of northwestern Iran in the first half of the first millennium B.C. until the ascendancy of the Persians under Cyrus. They were closely related to the Persians and were not always distinguished from them by the Assyrians, Egyptians, or Greeks, who called both groups "Medes."³

The tribe of the Magi was invested into the Persian priesthood as early as Cyrus's reign and they achieved a high reputation for their religious knowledge:

The Magi of ancient Persia were a powerful priestly caste. Persian Magi were long respected for profound religious knowledge; but from the 1st century A.D. onward, the name in its Syriac form (*magusai*) was also applied to Magicians and soothsayers, chiefly from Babylonia, often considered imposters.⁴

The Magi of Babylonian origin were considered to be imposters and one is a target of Paul's righteous indignation in the Book of Acts:

Acts 13:5 - When they [Paul & Barnabas] reached Salamis [Cyprus], they began to proclaim the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews; and they also had John [John Mark] as their helper.

v. 6 - When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos \pa'-fas\ [capital of Cyprus], they found a magician [μάγος, **magos: a Magi of the Babylonian caste**], a Jewish false prophet whose name was Bar-Jesus,

v. 7 - who was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence. This man summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought [ἐπιζητέω, **epizēteō to desire earnestly**] to hear the word of God.

¹ Herodotus, *The History of Herodotus*, in *Great Books of the Western World*, ed. Mortimer J. Adler (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952), 6:24, bk. 1, par. 101.

² *Merriam-Webster's Biographical Dictionary*, s.v.: "Cyrus II."

³ Edwin Yamauchi, "Medes," in *The New International Dictionary of Biblical Archaeology*, eds. Edward M. Blaiklock and R. K. Harrison (Grand Rapids: Regency Reference Library, 1983), 305.

⁴ "Three Wise Men," in *Encyclopaedia Britannica: Micropaedia*, 15th ed. (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1979), 9:980.



v. 8 - But Elymas \el'-i-mas\ (for so his name is translated) [it is the Arabic word for Magi] was opposing them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith.

v. 9 - But Saul, who was also known as Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, fixed his gaze on him,

v. 10 - and said, "You who are full of all deceit and fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not stop making crooked the straight ways of the Lord?"

In a politically correct world, Paul's retort in verse ten is judgmental and exclusive. He asserts that Elymas is guilty of two mental attitude sins—deceit and fraud, that he is a son of Lucifer in that he is a liar, that he is in opposition to the standards of divine righteousness, and that as a result he is in opposition to the Lord's gospel.

Please note that Paul is an apostle that is filled with the Holy Spirit. Also, that Paul and his associates are in the process of evangelizing a proconsul, one of the most powerful men in the Roman Empire who has expressed positive volition: *epizēteō*. Elymas, one of Sergius Paulus's close advisors, is counseling the proconsul to reject the gospel message of the evangelists.

Paul accurately recognizes Elymas as an emissary of Lucifer and rebukes him in no uncertain terms. This is not being judgmental. Paul discerns the comments of the magician are an attack on truth and calls him to account.

Political correctness is a way of imposing a guilt complex on Christians. It is a case of hoisting them by their own petard. Most believers are familiar with the Lord's mandate in Matthew 7:1, "Do not judge so that you will not be judged!"

No one wants to be judged and to prevent this, believers are very cautious about judging others, a biblical principle to which all believers should subscribe.

However, the intent behind the current insistence on being nonjudgmental is to create an environment in which a person can think, decide, and then do with impunity whatever crosses his mind. If a certain behavior is criticized as being "immoral," "sinful," or "wrong," then the response is that the person holding such an opinion is being judgmental. Consequently, the person who identifies an inappropriate behavior is assigned the sin of judging by the person who is guilty of wrongdoing thus avoiding the responsibility of his actions.

The hypocrisy is that the one who is guilty of wrongdoing defends his actions by assigning the sin of judging to his critic which is being judgmental.

The environment in which this argument occurs is antinomianism: the rejection of socially established standards of morality. Antinomians impose no restraint on their decisions and assume no responsibility for their actions.

On the other hand, those who subscribe to the basic standards of establishment truth recognize the necessity to restrain certain behaviors for the maintenance of order in the commonwealth.

Among the latter are Christians whose subscription to the instructions of Scripture gives them a clear-eyed recognition of the difference between right and wrong.

The expression of one's opinion regarding biblical norms and standards is met by accusations of being judgmental. No believer wants to be guilty of this, therefore, he refrains from addressing obvious examples of wrongdoing for fear of being judged for doing so.

In effect, the moral Christian is hoist by his own petard:



Hoist by his own petard means “destroyed by his own trickery or inventiveness.” A *petard*, in medieval warfare, was an explosive charge which daring warriors would affix to the walls or gates of a castle under siege. This action in itself was a most hazardous one, but the greatest danger came after the *petard* was in place. The explosive was detonated by a slow match or slowly burning fuse. Occasionally, of course, the explosive went off prematurely, in which case the warrior was *hoist* (lifted or heaved) *by his own petard*. It is unlikely that this archaic phrase would have persisted in our language, even in the figurative sense, had not Shakespeare conferred immortality upon it with the line from *Hamlet*: “’Tis the sport to have the engineer *hoist with his own petard*.” Today it is chiefly used to describe a person ruined by plans or devices with which he had plotted to ensnare others.⁵

The way this concept is being applied today is described by the master strategist of the Progressive’s Long March, Saul Alinsky:

*Make the enemy live up to their own book of rules. You can kill them with this, for they can no more obey their own rules than the Christian church can live up to Christianity.*⁶

Paul’s dressing down of Elymas appears under current “rules” to be judgmental, but for such an advanced believer as Paul, who is under the filling of the Holy Spirit, it is doctrine that enables him to discern between good from evil, righteous from pernicious, moral from sinful.

⁵ William Morris and Mary Morris, *Morris Dictionary of Word and Phrase Origins* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1977), 285–86.

⁶ Saul D. Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971), 128.

