

4. Paul's Encounter with False Religion in Ephesus (19:13–20)

The example of Paul's genuine miracle-working is followed by two episodes that involve false attempts to accomplish the miraculous. The first relates the unsuccessful attempt of a group of Jewish exorcists to use the name of Jesus in their practice (vv. 13–16). The second shows the triumph of the gospel over magic and the occult (vv. 17–20).

(1) *Jewish Exorcists (19:13–16)*

¹³Some Jews who went around driving out evil spirits tried to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who were demon-possessed. They would say, "In the name of Jesus, whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out." ¹⁴Seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this. ¹⁵[One day] the evil spirit answered them, "Jesus I know, and I know about Paul, but who are you?" ¹⁶Then the man who had the evil spirit jumped on them and overpowered them all. He gave them such a beating that they ran out of the house naked and bleeding.

19:13 Paul's miracles had an impact on the wrong element as well as those genuinely seeking his help. Much as Simon Magus had been enamored with Philip's miracle-working, a group of itinerant Jewish exorcists had observed how Paul drove out evil spirits by invoking the name of Jesus and undertook to do the same themselves. In the Greco-Roman world, Jewish exorcists were held in high esteem for the venerability of their religion and the strangeness of their Hebrew incantations. Magicians and charlatans were omnipresent in the culture, offering various cures and blessings by their spells and incantations, all for a financial consideration. The more exotic the incantation, the more effective it was deemed to be.

A number of magical papyri from the ancient world have been discovered. These consist of various spells that often invoke the names of foreign gods and employ various kinds of gibberish. In the Paris collection of magical papyri, various Old Testament terms are found, such as Iao (for Yahweh), Abraham, and Sabaoth, terms which would have sounded exotic to Greeks and Romans. One spell reads, "I abjure thee by Jesus, the God of the Hebrews." Another from the same papyrus reads, "Hail, God of Abraham, hail, God of Isaac, hail, God of Jacob, Jesus Chrestus, Holy Spirit, Son of the Father."¹⁹ Ancient magicians were syncretists and would borrow terms from any religion that

sounded sufficiently strange to be deemed effective. These Jewish exorcists of Ephesus were only plying their trade. Paul's "spell" in Jesus' name seemed effective for him, so they gave it a try.

19:14 The attempt backfired. The group that made it were seven in number and are described as the sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva (v. 14). The reference to Sceva's high priesthood creates a problem. Josephus lists all the names of the Jewish high priests up to the fall of the temple, and none is named Sceva. Evidently the scribes of the Western text were the first to note this, for they altered the text to simply read "priest," not "high priest."²⁰ More recent scholars have taken other routes to solve the problem, such as arguing that Sceva was not a Jewish but a pagan high priest.²¹ Now it is true that the same term, "high priest" (*archiereus*), was often used in pagan cults, indeed in the imperial cult at Ephesus; but Luke plainly described *this* high priest as *Jewish*. Perhaps the key is that Sceva belonged to one of the priestly families from whom the high priests were drawn, i.e., he belonged to the high priestly "circle."²² Perhaps Sceva or those who claimed to be his sons made a false claim to a high priestly lineage in order to enhance their reputation. As high priest, the only one who could enter the holy of holies, he would have been deemed to have extraordinary powers among those who practiced the magical arts.

19:15–16 Whoever these would-be exorcists were, their attempt to invoke Jesus' name failed. It is interesting that the targeted demon, not Paul, was responsible for their undoing. Luke must have enjoyed writing this episode. It is filled with humor. Upon their abjuration, the demon responded: "Jesus I *know* [*ginōskō*], and Paul I *respect* [*epistamai*], but who are you?" (author's translation). As so often with the exorcisms

¹⁹ Both from the Paris papyrus 574, cited in K. Lake and H. J. Cadbury, eds., *The Beginnings of Christianity, Part 1: The Acts of the Apostles, vol. 4: English Translation and Commentary* (London: Macmillan, 1933), 241.

²⁰ See E. Delebecque, "La Méaventure des fils de Scévas selon ses deux Versions (Actes 19, 13–20)," *RSPT* 66 (1982): 225–32. W. A. Strange even argues for the Western text as having the original reading at this point ("The Sons of Sceva and the Text of Acts 19:14," *JTS* 38 [1987]: 97–106).

²¹ See B. E. Taylor, "Acts xix.14," *ExpTim* 57 (1945–46): 222.

²² See B. A. Mastin, "Scaeva the Chief Priest," *JTS* 27 (1976): 405–12.

performed by Jesus, the demon *confessed Jesus* and even acknowledged that the power of Jesus worked through Paul. He was, however, not about to yield any turf to these seven. They had no power over him whatever. He turned on them with a vengeance, overpowered them, and sent them running naked from the house.²³ With the extreme sense of modesty characteristic of Judaism, the nakedness of the Jewish exorcists was almost symbolic of their total humiliation in the incident.

Two lessons emerge from the story. For one, Christianity has nothing to do with magic. The name of Jesus is no magical incantation. The power of Jesus drives out the demonic, and his Spirit only works through those who, like Paul, confess him and are committed to him. Second, the demon did confess the power of Jesus over him, “Jesus I know.” Compare Jas 2:19, “Even the demons believe and shudder.”²⁴ The people of Ephesus recognized this and extolled the powerful name of Jesus as a result (v. 17). What was true for them is still true. In the name of Jesus is all the power needed to drive out the demonic forces in every age.

(2) Overcoming Magic (19:17–20)

¹⁷When this became known to the Jews and Greeks living in Ephesus, they were all seized with fear, and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honor. ¹⁸Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed their evil deeds. ¹⁹A number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to fifty thousand drachmas. ²⁰In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.

19:17–18 The demon’s acknowledgment of Jesus and the reversal of power on the unauthorized exorcists had its effect on the Ephesians. Obviously the name of Jesus was powerful and not to be toyed with. A reverent fear seized them, and they magnified the

²³ In v. 16 the Greek text literally has the demon overpowering them “both” (ἀμφοτέρων). This has led to various attempted solutions: that only two sons did the exorcism—G. M. Lee, “[The Seven Sons of Sceva \(Acts 19:13–16\)](#),” *Bib* 51 (1970): 237—or that “both” refers to the names of Jesus and Paul—C. Lattey, “[A Suggestion on Acts xix.16](#),” *ExpTim* 36 (1924–25): 381f. The simplest solution is the observation that in koine Greek, ἀμφοτέρων is often used with the meaning *all*—not just two (H. G. Meehan, “[Acts xix.16](#),” *ExpTim* 36 [1924–25]: 477f.).

name of the Lord Jesus. For some it taught an even more profound lesson. These were Christians who had delved in the magical arts before their conversion who now came and openly confessed their former deeds (v. 18).²⁴ On their part this was more than a confession of former ways. It was a commitment to forsake such practices altogether.

Ephesus was reputed as a center for magic. The famous statue of Artemis, the centerpiece of her temple, was noted for the mysterious terms engraved on the crown, girdle, and feet of the image. Referred to as the “Ephesian scripts,” this magical gibberish was considered to have great power.²⁵ It was not by accident that Paul’s encounter with magic took place in Ephesus, nor is it a surprise that his converts there had been involved in such practices. Magic was part of Ephesian culture. Nor should one question the integrity of these Ephesian Christians who only now openly forsook such ways. Salvation involves a process of growth, of increasing sanctification. And after all, the Ephesian spells were not that remote from the horoscopes and board games that supposedly communicate telepathic messages with which many Christians dabble in our own day.

19:19 The Ephesian abandonment of magic was not without some personal sacrifice. Their magical books must have been much like the papyrus collections that have been unearthed and are now on display in museums in Paris, Berlin, Rome, and London. All ancient books were expensive, but magical collections brought a considerable premium. Luke estimated the value of those burned in Ephesus at 50,000 pieces of silver. If the piece of silver concerned is the drachma, the most common Greek silver coin, that would come to about \$35,000 in current silver value.²⁶ Translated into terms of living standards, however, the sum was greater still, since the drachma was an average day’s wage.

²⁴ Those concerned in v. 18 were evidently already confessing Christians, as the perfect tense *πεπιστευκότων* would indicate. That the “evil deeds” (*πράξεις*) were magical arts is indicated both by the context (cf. v. 19) and by the fact that *πράξεις* was a technical term for magic spells. Likewise, in v. 19, *περίεργα* was a technical term for magic arts/sorcery. See A. Deissmann, *Bible Studies* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1901), 323, n. 5.

²⁵ See B. M. Metzger, “St. Paul and the Magicians,” *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 38 (1944): 27–30.

²⁶ The Attic drachma contained 67.5 grains of silver, or approximately 14 percent of a troy ounce. With silver at \$5 a troy ounce, the drachma would contain about 70 cents in silver value.

19:20 Verse 20 provides a summary of Paul's Ephesian ministry, much like the summaries at **6:7** and **12:24**, which also refer to the growth of the word.²⁷ The word bore fruit as more and more people responded in faith to the preaching of Paul and to the witness of the Ephesian Christians through such examples as their personal sacrifice in the public burning of their magical books. As a summary v. 20 provides a closure to Luke's treatment of Paul's Ephesian witness. Now, toward the end of his Ephesian period, two matters remain to be related: a major decision regarding Paul's future (vv. **21–22**) and a final tumultuous episode involving the temple of Artemis (vv. **23–41**).

²⁷ It might also be noted that the recurrence of the phrase "word of the Lord" in vv. **10**, **20** form a bracket, with vv. **10–20** exemplifying this two-year portion of his Ephesian ministry.