

# Barnabas, Second Century Exegete

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The author of the *Epistle of Barnabas* was a vigorous defender of the Christian faith against the claims of a militant messianic consciousness in early second century Judaism. He wrote to Christians in order to encourage their steadfastness. In the process he appealed extensively to Jewish writings and to the scriptures for authority and appropriated the exegetical tools perfected by several perspectives of Judaism. Thus, the *Epistle* is deserving of an investigation as regards scriptural authority and exegetical method. The understanding and use of the scriptures in the second century has only recently become a matter of serious concern. This period in which the Church searched for and found an identity and an apologetic in the Scriptures of Judaism is deserving of more extensive investigation than has been afforded it.

This investigation attempts to point out the conceptions of the scriptures reflected in the *Epistle of Barnabas* and to discover the methods of exegesis utilized to determine the meaning of the scriptures. It is hoped that this study will illumine one additional area in our understanding of the second century of which the *Epistle* is a product. The author's identity is uncertain although from earliest available records the *Epistle* has been attributed to one named Barnabas.<sup>2</sup> The *Epistle* probably is a product of the Alexandrian Christian community though affinities of thought and exegesis allow for possibilities of origination at several sites in the eastern Mediterranean Judaeo-Christian world about 132 A.D.<sup>3</sup>

The author of the *Epistle of Barnabas*, perhaps more than any of the other apostolic fathers, was dependent upon the scriptures for his authority. His attempt to speak to his community and to his age was channeled through the mold of Jewish literature, symbols and traditions and through methods appropriated from his age. He does not appear to have been very original in either conception of

scripture or in method of interpretation. Like most mortals, he was clearly the product of his heritage with all the benefits and limitations attendant thereto. Nevertheless, the *Epistle of Barnabas* is an important part of the evidence available for understanding the second century and the crystallizing processes already at work in the Christian tradition. Let us proceed to summarize Barnabas' constructs of scripture and methods of exegesis, and to make observations relative to the interrelationships of scripture and exegesis.

### BARNABAS' CONSTRUCT OF SCRIPTURE

The author of the *Epistle of Barnabas* saw the source of the scriptures as the Lord.<sup>4</sup> The writings were mediated through the prophets whose names, often cited by the author, emphasized the authority of the contents. It had for the author a high degree of authority despite his lack of concern for accuracy in citation. It would appear that authority was residual in the constructs "taught" in the scriptures rather than in the text itself. The errant citations are considered as authoritative as exact quotations and the appeals to that authority are held to be equally conclusive. The writer obviously did not consider the scriptures to be perfect in the Platonic sense, but rather authoritative because of their origin in the activity and speaking of God. The Lord was the ultimate authority to which he could point.

The concept of what writings constitute the scriptures is rather elastic for the author of the *Epistle of Barnabas*. The canonical Old Testament is cited extensively. With equal authority imputed, apocalyptic and haggadic materials of non-canonical status (at least non-canonical according to later standards) are used to defend theological affirmations and to rule in questions of faith and practice. No differentiation in validity or authority is indicated by citation formulae or by any other means between the Pentateuch, *Isaiah*, *Psalms*, *I Enoch*, *IV Ezra* and a multitude of other, often unidentifiable, Jewish writings.

The scriptures are the ultimate authority in concerns of life and doctrine among the community of believers. Especially intriguing is the fact that Jesus' lifestyle, Jesus' words and/or the activities of the apostles are not held up as the rule or even as examples of lifestyles viable for members of the Christian community endeavoring to walk in the way of righteousness. Nowhere does the author of the *Epistle of Barnabas* use elements of the synoptic tradition except the passion and resurrection to defend an assertion. This is surprising for at least

three reasons. First, the *Epistle* comes from a leading center of Christianity. Second, the issues with which the author deals would be easily and effectively supported by New Testament materials. Third, by the year 132 A.D., when the *Epistle of Barnabas* was presumably written, the writings later canonized by the Church were probably in existence. There is no conclusive evidence that the author of the *Epistle* knew any of the New Testament books. If the author did know any New Testament books, he did not apply to that writing the exegetical methods appropriated elsewhere to approach the scriptures. Thus, it appears that by the time of the writing of the *Epistle of Barnabas*, the New Testament had not been imputed canonical status or authority.

The scripture is not a guide to life in the community and in the world when it is approached alone and its commands understood literally. Instead, it is the combination of the word of the Lord and the Spirit of the Lord which together become actualized in the community *through the interpreter*. Only through the interpreter inspired by the Lord can the scriptures speak to the human situation, for not just anyone can comprehend the "Gnosis" or perceive the "type."

The Jews did not comprehend because of their being misled by the "evil angel." Only a Christian with certain prerequisites can rightfully interpret the scriptures. These prerequisites, given and required by the Lord, are wisdom, knowledge and a love for the Lord. Briefly, wisdom is the understanding of the rituals, ceremonies and laws; knowledge is the gift of understanding the past; the lover of the Lord is a Christian.

Thus interpretation, as well as the recording of the scriptures, is the gift of God. Both are given in the grace of God, who endows the Christian with special powers of perception.

As only members of the community of Christians may interpret the scriptures, the author of *Barnabas*, as did most early Christians, insisted the scriptures were only to be interpreted as pointing toward the Christ event and toward the Christian community. This was understood by the prophets, suggests the author of *Barnabas*, who, at the behest of the Lord, formulated the types of Christ and of kingdom life. This interpretation was misunderstood by the Jews who saw only the literal words of the scriptures, their eyes being blinded by the evil angel.

#### EXEGETICAL METHODS IN BARNABAS 1-16

The direct citations of scripture passages in the first sixteen chap-

ters of the *Epistle of Barnabas* were examined and categorized according to the methods of exegesis used by the author of the *Epistle* to arrive at his gnosis. The exegetical methods found include typology, allegory, midrash and pesher, analogy, and general and particular.

Typology was applied primarily in an effort to interpret the Pentateuch, although typological exegesis was applied as well to *I Enoch* and to *Psalm I*. The derived constructs focus primarily around the foci of the person and nature of Christ and the nature and function of the community of believers. It is the intent of the author of the *Epistle of Barnabas* to show how Christ and the community which calls Him Lord are in the main line of Jewish tradition and, more than that, show that the christocentric interpretation is the real intent of the prophets who went before. No allowance is made for what is now considered essential for understanding the scriptures; that is, the historical situation which brought forth the literature. The important thing for the author of the *Epistle* is to understand the intended underlying content of the passage under consideration.

Allegorical exegesis was used in an attempt to appropriate the liturgies and the more esoteric wisdom and prophetic materials as significant Christian literature. The rituals and ceremonies of Judaism, in their literal form, were rejected. From a spiritualized understanding of the liturgies was developed a word of the Lord which would speak to contemporary concerns, retain the Old Testament as authoritative for the Christian tradition and demonstrate the lack of wisdom in the alternative of reconversion to Judaism and the legalism of ritual and ceremony. This type of exegesis assumed no detail of the scripture text to be accidentally included. The scriptures became as oracles in which every aspect was pregnant with Christian content, awaiting only a Christian inspired by the Lord that it might be actualized.

Allegorical exegesis was commonly used in the first and second centuries of the Christian era. Perhaps the highest expression of the method is found in the writings of Philo of Alexandria. The extent of *Barnabas*' direct dependency on Philo is uncertain. It is certain that the *Epistle of Barnabas* was the heir of Philo's exegetical system into which was incorporated Christian symbols, constructs and attitudes.

Charismatic midrash and pesher were also used in an effort to adapt the scriptures to meet contemporary needs. The scriptures subjected to midrash and pesher are primarily from the prophetic books (both major and minor prophets) and from the *narrative* portions of the Pentateuch. The prophecy of *Isaiah* provides the majority of the

citations included in the various midrashim. The citations are carefully put together so that the point is made without recourse to interpretative comments.

The issue most often addressed is the lifestyle of the Christian community. The emphasis is on the lifestyle of the individual who must fulfill the intended content of scripture and scriptural injunctions. The individual believers are also responsible for each other as they live in community.

Midrash and peshet obtain results which are much more homiletic and practical in nature than theological and abstract. The citation of many words of the Lord spoken through the prophets adds authority to the constructs which the author of the *Epistle of Barnabas* wishes to communicate.

The author of the *Epistle of Barnabas* used analogy by inference from the linguistic form of the text, by inference from similar experiences, and by inference from similar ideas. The direction of this exegetical method is usually christocentric. It is used to understand passages from the Pentateuch, *Isaiah*, *Psalms* and apocryphal prophetic materials. The derived constructs assert conclusively for the author that Christ was the intended end of the prophetic traditions and of the scriptures. Analogy was a valuable method of exegesis for polemic purposes.

By general and particular exegesis, a general statement is more fully defined by individual or particular ideas, events or things. *Barnabas 2* is the best example of this method. Here Christians are encouraged to carefully inquire concerning their salvation in order that their lives and lifestyles might be acceptable sacrifices to be offered to God.

The author thus appropriates his methods of exegesis from methods already developed within the Judaeo-Christian community. The use of typology, allegory, midrash and peshet, analogy and general and particular differs only in the accrued content from the usage of the author's contemporaries.

The exegetical methods used in the *Epistle* have several features in common. First, all of the methods emphasize the spiritual gnosis in contradistinction to the literal understanding. Second, every method used tends to force a meaning on the passage. This meaning is discernible only to the elite, the Christian community. Third, exegesis in the *Epistle* is primarily pragmatic. It usually addresses itself to issues of life and practice. There is relatively little theological speculation.

## THEORY AND PRACTICE IN EXEGESIS

The view of the scriptures reflected in the *Epistle of Barnabas* has been summarized. The methods of exegesis used to ascertain the meaning of the scriptures have been reviewed. Now an effort is being made to observe how the two elements — one's view of the scriptures and the methods of exegesis which one appropriates in order to examine them — are related in the understanding of the author of the *Epistle of Barnabas*. Thus, the question of the implications of *Barnabas'* view of scriptural authority for exegesis, the inheritance from his contemporaries, and the controls applied to exegesis will be considered.

What is the effect of *Barnabas'* view of scriptural authority on exegesis? For the writer of the *Epistle of Barnabas*, the authority of the scriptures did not finally reside in the text. It is not the words of scripture that finally speak to man although each word was deliberately and purposely placed by the Lord and each detail is pregnant with meaning. Scripture is inspired but taken alone is valueless and will most certainly be misunderstood and misappropriated. The final authority of the scriptures is only in the *interpretation* which is inspired by the Lord. It is the man who loves the Lord, expounding the words of the Lord given through the prophets, who with insight available only from the Lord speaks an authoritative word to the community of believers. Each detail is waiting to be understood and appropriated. Only as the interpretation is offered is there a possibility of actualizing the authentic and true intent of the scriptures.

Thus, the hiddenness of the content of the scriptures and the high authority imputed to the results of exegesis serves as an implementing and motivating factor for searching the scriptures, not as a controlling factor. The essentially oracular nature of the writings *demand*s that exegesis take place. There are, however, no limitations implied as to method or as to the directions which exegesis may or may not take.

As has been observed, *Barnabas* is definitely a product of its age and an integral part thereof. The view of the scriptures reflected in the *Epistle* differs little from that of contemporary Judaism or Christianity. Furthermore, the author was not creative in his approach to understanding the scriptures. The author does, however, wax more creative in the informing of the content of the tradition in which he finds himself. It is herein that he departs from Judaism and, to a significant degree, is tendentious for the future as regards Christian exegesis and theology. He, more than any of the apostolic fathers or the New Testament writers, is indicative of what the third and fourth Christian centuries will produce.

Since the conception of the nature and authority of the scriptures does not provide controls for Biblical exegesis, it is appropriate to observe the controlling factors in the exegetical process reflected in the *Epistle of Barnabas*. First let us observe additional constructs which do not exert limitations upon the methods of exegesis which may be appropriated to understand the scriptures, context and history.

The concept of context was of little concern to the author of the *Epistle of Barnabas*. As did other early Christian writers, he offered his interpretations as valid and true with no appeal to, or consideration for the context of his sources. Literary form and linguistic detail were observed only if a particular idea might be derived from that observation. The modern literary critical approach was foreign to *Barnabas* and its time.

The historicity of the material, either as a corpus or as individual pericopes, is likewise of little concern for the author of the *Epistle of Barnabas*. History, used as it is today, as an organizing and classifying set was not a category of concern. The important factor for the author of *Barnabas* is not whether an event had taken place as recorded. The significant element is how the gnosis of the passage under consideration impinges upon his present concerns. The historical Jesus is secondary to the Lord who speaks to the Christian community and to the dilemmas which are *now* problematic for the community of believers who are striving to become a type of the world re-created.<sup>5</sup>

Now let us indicate the controlling factor in *Barnabas*'s exegesis of the scriptures. There is one controlling factor, namely, the Christian tradition of which the author is clearly a part. There is an effort on the part of the author to retain continuity with that tradition *and* to show how it is *the* true tradition. It is Christ and the community of believers about whom and to whom the writings of the prophets speak. In the *Epistle of Barnabas* is manifested a responsible effort to link the texts, historical details, ceremonies, rituals and acts of God reported in scripture to the ongoing Christian tradition, as it seeks, due to social, political and theological pressures, to stand and remain independent of the Judaism which had fostered it.

Scripture is secondary to the bounds set by the homogeneous tradition which has adapted it for its own use. In the *Epistle of Barnabas*, the tradition informs the content of the scriptures. The scriptures do not inform the constructs of theology, ethics or foci of interpretation maintained by the tradition.

The methods of exegesis are arbitrarily applied to *defend* positions held by the community of believers. New constructs are revealed

by the Lord, not discovered by the exegete. The scriptures are searched for material which will be supportive of the tradition by (1) indicating the idea to be part of the legacy of the prophets and hence assert its antiquity; and, (2) indicating the authoritativeness of the author's conceptions.

The arbitrariness in application of hermeneutical devices to the scriptures *and* the eagerness to retain responsible continuity with the orthodox Judaeo-Christian community are the redeeming factors in what could be a hopelessly subjective approach to appropriating the authority of the scriptures. All scriptures are not required to submit to the same methods of exegesis. The method is only a tool to buttress the author's perspective relative to the interpretative foci. No conception divergent from the tradition could be derived. It is the tradition which sets the limits of interpretive possibility.

The scriptures, as the oracles of the Lord, must be interpreted. Understood literally and ceremonially they function only as stumbling-blocks for the Christian community. The author of *Barnabas* seeks to allow them to speak to his age and to his concerns. It is the perspective from which the author works and to which he speaks that serves as the determinative factor in the choice of exegetical tools and in the constructs which may be derived.

### EVALUATION OF BARNABAS' EXEGESIS

The author of the *Epistle of Barnabas* was first of all a Christian who aligned himself with the tradition of the Church. As a Christian he sought to demonstrate the validity of his faith and to encourage those who might be tempted to return to the restrictions of Jewish ritual and ceremonial legalism. He saw a better way, the way of righteousness.

The main weapon used in his analysis of rituals and traditions was the interpretations he presented of the scriptures. The scriptures, written by men whom the Lord controlled, with every detail and word pregnant with meaning, awaited only the interpreter. The author of the *Epistle of Barnabas* was a student of the scriptures and respected that corpus of literature. Furthermore, he knew how to boldly relate that word to the problems faced by the community of believers, of which he was part.



## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>This is adapted from the author's unpublished Th. M. Thesis, "Scripture and Exegesis in the Epistle of Barnabas" (Asbury Theological Seminary, 1973).

<sup>2</sup>Professor F. F. Bruce has most recently assigned the epistle to the ranks of pseudonymous literature. This categorization is unwarranted and unfortunate in that it places a shadow over the integrity and value of the literature based on his own conjectures regarding authorship: "Eschatology in the Apostolic Fathers," *The Heritage of the Early Church* (Florovsky Festschrift), ed. David Neiman and Margaret Schatkin. *Orientalia Christiana Analecta*, 195. Rome: Pont. Institute Stud. Orient., 1973, pp. 77-89.

<sup>3</sup>Compare L. W. Barnard, *The Apostolic Fathers and their Background* (New York: Schocken Press, 1966) and also his "The Date of the Epistle of Barnabas — a document of early Egyptian Christianity," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 43 (1957), 101-107; and A. Lukyn Williams "The Date of the Epistle of Barnabas," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 34 (1933), 337-346.

<sup>4</sup>Here it is necessary to recognize the expansionist use of the term *κύριος* (Lord). He uses it in reference to God, in reference to Jesus and in reference to the Spirit. When he refers to *κύριος ὁ θεός, τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, πνεῦμα κυρίου*, there is no doubt as to the identity of *κύριος*. C. F. Andrey ("Introduction to the Epistle of Barnabas," Ph. D. Dissertation, Harvard (1949) summarizes the use of *κύριος*.

At times . . . the distinctions are clear, but often they are vague. He brings the Father and Son and Holy Spirit into an almost identical relationship in using *κύριος* as a common denominator for them all, and is not always clear in his distinctions between them. In any case *κύριος* spoke through the prophets revealing all things beforehand in the spirit.

In Rabbinic writings, in Hellenistic literature and Hellenistic Judaism, *κύριος* had a wide semantic range. Most unalloyed, *κύριος* denotes 'master' and connotes ownership and authority. However, Judaism and consequently early Christianity imputed to the construct "a

notion of ownership and authority more concrete, that which is usually associated with the Greek gods, and exactly in accordance with Oriental precedent.” (A. D. Nock, *Early Gentile Christianity and its Hellenistic Background*, New York, Evanston, London: Harper and Row, 1964). The primary factor in the expanded concept of Lordship was the use of *κύριος* by the translators of the Septuagint to translate Elohim, YHWH, Adonai and Baal. The understanding of the nature of God accrued to *κύριος*. The early Christians in defining their relation to God and to Christ and the relationship of Christ to God easily made the step to say Jesus is *κύριος*. The pagans called their gods *κύριος*, and Christians adopted the practice. As it is observed by W. Foerster (Werner Foerster, “Lord in Late Judaism,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, III, 1094):

In the absolute, *κύριος* could thus express the comprehensive lordship of Jesus. It could convey the truth that “the Father . . . hath committed all judgment to the Son” (John 5:22), that He has given Him “all *ἑξουσία* in heaven and in earth” (Matthew 28:18). If *κύριος* expressed all this, then LXX passages which spoke of the *κύριος* could be referred to Jesus. In Him God acts as is said of the *κύριος* in the OT.

This was the milieu in which the author of the *Epistle* understood and used the term *κύριος*.

<sup>5</sup>See especially *Barnabas* 6 and 15. Angelo P. O’Hogan, *Material Re-creation in the Apostolic Fathers*, TU 100, (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1968), offers the most cogent discussion of this aspect of the theology of the author of the *Epistle of Barnabas*.