

2 Letter of Barnabas

Rev Dr Jos M. Strenght, Alexandria School of Theology, Class 4, 2010-11

1.1 Introduction to Barnabas

1.1.1 Background of the letter

Why was this letter written? Actually more an essay than a letter.

> **Together read and discuss:** Barnabas 1:1-5.

1.1.2 History of documents of the letter

The text of Barnabas has been reconstructed on the basis of these witnesses:

- *Codex Sinaiticus* (4th century), found by Constantin von Tischendorf (1815-1874) (picture) in 1859 in the St Catharine Monastery, has Barnabas immediately after Revelation and before the Pastor of Hermas.
- *Codex Hierosolymitanus* has a complete copy of Barnabas.
- An incomplete version (starting at 5:7) is found in a group of nine Greek documents from 11th-13th century. These documents use a defective original.
- A papyrus fragment of 9:1-6.
- A Latin translation of chapters 1-17.
- A large number of quotes by Clement of Alexandria.



1.1.3 Importance of the letter in the early church

The fact that the *Codex Sinaiticus* has Barnabas immediately after the New Testament, and that Clement of Alexandria quoted from Barnabas as Holy Scripture, shows its importance in the early church. Origen and Didymus the Blind (both from Alexandria) also quote from Barnabas.

1.1.4 Who was Barnabas?

The name 'Barnabas' is not used in the letter itself, but it is attributed to him later. Maybe to give status to the book, by assuming it was St Paul's coworker? There is no supporting evidence for this connection. Barnabas was possibly a theologian in the city of Alexandria. This is not sure at all, but the following reasons have been given for this idea:

- The letter was used and quoted much in Alexandria
- Early Church history relates Alexandria to the Biblical person of Barnabas
- The allegorical style of Barnabas was also the hallmark of Jewish and Christian exegesis in Alexandria.

Barnabas as teacher: 6:5,9-10; 9:7; 13:1; 14:4; 16:1; 17:1.

Barnabas and his modesty: 1:8; 4:6,9; 21:1.

Barnabas and his self-confidence: 9:9



1.1.5 Date of the letter

> **Together read and discuss:** Barnabas 16:3-5.

It is clear that Barnabas was written after the destruction of the temple in 70 AD and at a time when there was talk of rebuilding it. The last possible date was therefore ca. 132-135, when a Jewish revolt was crushed and the Roman Emperor Hadrian rebuilt Jerusalem as a Roman and pagan city. Given that people like Clement of Alexandria considered Barnabas as Scripture, I assume an early date is likelier than a later one; the truth is: we do not know.

1.2 Content of Barnabas

1.2.1 List of the morality of Barnabas ('The Two Ways')

> **Each individually will read** a part from 'The Two Ways' (18-20). In class we will apportion a part to each student: 19:1-6, 19:7-12, and 20:1-2.

Take a sheet of paper and divide it in two columns. In the right column you write very precisely (use terminology of Barnabas) all things mentioned as bad, and in the left column all things that are mentioned as good.

After this, we will compare notes and see what moral behavior Barnabas liked most and what he rejected most.

1.2.2 Allegorical Bible usage by Barnabas to prove that Jesus fulfills the law and the prophets

The bulk of the sermon of Barnabas is to show how Israel was mistaken in its literal exegesis of the Old Testament, and that a spiritual reading confirms the views of the Church. This document was clearly created to build up the Church in its confrontation with the synagogue. Barnabas himself is so knowledgeable about the Old Testament that he was likely from Jewish background himself.

> **In small groups read and discuss** one subject from this list:

- a) Land of milk and honey 6:8-19;
- b) Rite of atonement 7:1-11;
- c) Red heifer 8:1-7;
- d) Circumcision 9:1-9
- e) Mosaic food laws 10:1-10
- f) Baptism foreshadowed 11:1-11
- g) The cross foretold: 12:1-11

- h) True heirs of the covenant 13:1-14:9 [will be treated in 1.2.3]
- i) Sabbath 15:1-9 [will be treated in 1.2.4]
- j) Temple 16:1-10 [will be treated in 1.2.3, 1.2.4 and 1.2.5]

> **Discuss together:** Do you find this sort of Biblical exegesis useful? Does the New Testament use allegory?

1.2.3 How Barnabas writes about Jews and their misunderstanding of the Old Testament

> **Together read and discuss:** 4:6-8; 5:8; 9:4-6; 10:1-3; 10:9; 13:1-14:9; 16:1-2

1.2.4 The eschatology of Barnabas

> **Read Together:** 1:7; 2:1; 4:3-5; 15:1-9; 16:4-7; 21:3

> **Note** how Barnabas shows that the early church celebrated Sunday, not Saturday, in 15:8-9

> **Note** also that Barnabas held a millennial eschatology.

1.2.5 The Gospel according to Barnabas

Barnabas says in 17:1 that his goal was to 'no omit anything of the matters pertaining to salvation'. How then does he describe this?

> **In small groups read and list** how Barnabas describes the Gospel:

- a) 1:3-4; 1:6; 4:1; 4:9b-14
- b) 5:1-14; 6:3; 7:2,11; 8:3,5-6
- c) 11:11; 14:6-9; 15:1,6-7
- d) 16:7-10; 21:1

> **Compare notes** and see how Barnabas describes salvation.

1.2.6 Father, Son and Holy Spirit in Barnabas

What do we learn from Barnabas about the Church's view of the Trinity toward the end of the 1st century? His references to Father, Son and Holy Spirit do not give us much insight in his theology about the Trinity, though nothing he says about this contradicts our information from the New Testament or from later creedal developments.

> **Together read and note** how Barnabas describes Father, Son and Holy Spirit: 1:3; 2:5-6; 5:9-11; 5:12; 7:2; 12:2,6-11

1.2.7 Holy Scripture in Barnabas

Barnabas makes extensive use of the Old Testament, often in direct quotes from the LXX. It is interesting that he only seems to use three quotes (are they?) from New Testament verses. These are:

> **Read** 4:14 and Mathew 22:14

> **Read** 5:9 and Mathew 9:13

> **Read** 5:7 and Acts 14:22

An interesting (maybe totally coincidental) fact is that Paul spoke that last verse, Acts 14:22, in the presence of his coworker Barnabas. Combine this with the absence of quotes from the New Testament and we might give some weight to the arguments that this Barnabas was indeed the author and that the letter should be dated rather early.

1.3 Lessons of Barnabas

1.3.1 How does Barnabas help shape our knowledge of Church history?

> **Discuss**

1.3.2 How does Barnabas shape our view of Bible and tradition?

> **Discuss**

1.3.3 How does Barnabas help us today in Egypt?

> **Discuss**