

# The Epistle of Barnabas

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Barnabas

The name 'Barnabas' is not used in the letter itself, but that name has been attributed to this epistle later. Maybe this was done to give status to the letter, 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 links Alexandria to the Biblical person of Barnabas
- The allegorical style of Barnabas was also the hallmark of Jewish and Christian exegesis in Alexandria.

### 1.2 History of documents of the letter

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

- Codex Sinaiticus (4th century), found by Constantin von Tischendorf (1815-1874) 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 - chapters 18-21 are missing. This translation is preserved in a single 9th-century manuscript (St Petersburg, Q.v.I.39) but probably dates back to the fourth century.
- A large number of quotes by Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–c. 215)

### 1.3 Date of the Epistle

Toward the end of the 2nd century Clement of Alexandria often cites the Epistle as Holy Scripture. Origen (c. 184–c. 253) and Didymus the Blind (c. 313–398) (both from Alexandria) also mention Barnabas as Holy Scripture.

Eusebius (c. 260–340), the first major church historian, however, recorded objection to it, and ultimately the epistle disappeared from the appendix to the New Testament, or rather the appendix disappeared with the epistle.

> **Read** Barnabas 16.3-5.

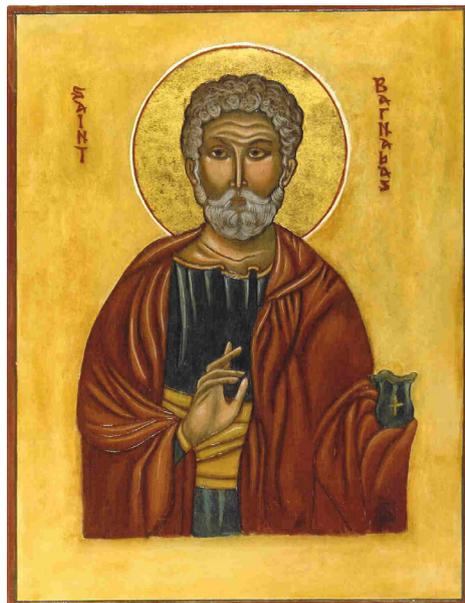
It seems clear that Barnabas was written after the destruction of the temple in 70 AD and at a time when there was talk of rebuilding it. The last possible date was therefore ca. 132-135, when a Jewish revolt was crushed and the Roman Emperor Hadrian

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.

### 1.4 Background to the letter

Why was this letter written? It is actually more an essay than a letter; the letter-format was possibly a literary devise.

> **Read and discuss:** Barnabas 1.1-5



## 2. Content of The Epistle of Barnabas

### 2.1 The morality of Barnabas ('The Two Ways')

> **Read** Barnabas 19.1-12 and discuss whether there is anything surprising in the 'way of light' as presented by Barnabas.

### 2.2 Allegorical exegesis

The main aim of this letter of Barnabas is to show how Israel was mistaken in its literal exegesis of the Old Testament, and that a spiritual reading of the Hebrew Scriptures confirms the view of the Church that Jesus Christ is the promised Messiah and the Son of God.

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.

The Old Testament topics discussed and allegorized by Barnabas are these:

- 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 under 2.3]
- i) Sabbath 15.1-9 [will be treated in 2.4]
- j) Temple 16.1-10 [will be treated in 2.3, 2.4 and 2.5]

> **Read and discuss:** Choose a subject from the above mentioned topics a) to g) How does Barnabas allegorize? What is the true message of the law or the story of the Exodus according to Barnabas?

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

### 2.3 Jews and their misunderstanding of the Old Testament

> **Read and discuss:** 4.6-8; 5.8; 9.4-6; 10.1-3; 10.9; 13.1-14.9; 16.1-2

### 2.4 The eschatology of Barnabas

> **Read and discuss:** 1.7; 2.1; 4.3-5; 15.1-9; 16.4-7; 21.3

> **Note:** Barnabas shows that the early church celebrated Sunday, not Saturday, in 15.8-9

> **Note:** Barnabas held a millennial eschatology.

### 2.5 The Gospel according to Barnabas

Barnabas says in 17.1 that his goal was to 'not omit anything of the matters pertaining to salvation'. How then does he describe this salvation?

> **Read and discuss:** 5.1-14; 6.3; 7.2; 8.3-6 ; 11.11; 14.6-9; 16.7-9; 21.1. How does Barnabas describe salvation?!

### 2.6 Holy Scriptures 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 really quotes?) from the New Testament.

> **Read** 4.14 and Mathew 22.14

> **Read** 5.9 and Mathew 9.13

> **Read** 7.11 and Acts 14.22

An interesting (and 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 more quotes from the New Testament and we might again consider the arguments that this coworker of Paul, Barnabas, was indeed the author and that the letter should be dated rather early.

