# The Shepherd of Hermas

Rev Dr Jos M. Strengholt      (October 2018)

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Background of Hermas

> **Read and discuss:** Hermas 1-4

- This is the first of 24 Visions (Hermas 1-25).
- Then the book contains 12 Commandments (Hermas 26-49)
- Finally a group of 10 Parables (Hermas 50-114)

In this book the author seems to wrestle with the question of post-baptismal sin. Can it still be forgiven? His answer tries to balance Gods justice and mercy; yes, repentance is possible, but it must happen quickly as the opportunity may pass. An important issue is also the treatment of poor people in Church. His solution (Hermas 31) stands in opposition to the Sermon on the Mount.

### 1.2 History of documents of the letter

The text is not well preserved. We have four incomplete Greek manuscripts. For 107:3-114:5 we have no original Greek, but Latin only. We have:

- *Codex Sinaiticus* – for Hermas 1:1-31:6
- *Michigan Papyrus* – late 2nd century (!) – has 51:8-82:1
- Old Latin or Vulgate translations – dating from the 2nd century?
- Palatine Latin translation – 4'h century
- *Codex Athous* -14th-15th century – contains 1:1-107:2
- *Bodmer Papyrus* – ca. 400 AD – contains 1:1-21:4
- Ethiopic and Coptic translations – 4th-6th century
- Many fragments in others papyri from the 2nd-6th century

It is not *well* preserved, but it is *widely* preserved, suggesting the importance in the early Church.



### 1.3 Importance of Hermas in the early Church

Hermas was widely popular in the 2-3rd century. Ireneaus, Clement of Alexandria, Didymus the Blind and Origen accepted the book as Holy Scripture. Tertullian did so as well, but he changed his mind when he joined the Montanist sect; he then rejected it as the 'shepherd of the adulterers' for its 'lax' approach to repentance. Athanasius used the Shepherd and quoted from it. In the *Codex Sinaiticus* it follows after the book of Revelation and Barnabas, also underlinging its importance in the early Church.

### 1.4 Who was the author?

Some have suggested it was Paul (see Acts 14:12) or the Hermas mentioned in Romans 16:14 (suggested by Origen). According to the *Muratorian Canon* (ca. 180-200), the oldest known list of books of the New Testament and early Christian writings, Hermas was the brother of Pius, bishop of Rome (140-154). In the book itself, the impression is given that he was a Roman Christian, possibly a freed slave. He was not a leader in the Church.

### 1.5 Date of Hermas

Ireneaeus mentions Hermas ca. 175, so it was published before that date. The *Muratorian Canon* suggests a date during Pope Pius (140-154). Others suggest a much earlier date.

If the document is a composite, then parts could be old and other somewhat newer. Information from Hermas 1-24 point to a date at the end of

first century, while Hermas 25-114 seems to be of a later date. Final editing may indeed have been done at ca. 150 AD.

## 2 Content of the Shepherd of Hermas

### 2.1 How does Hermas view the Church?

Hermas was not a formal church leader but he had a message for the Church. How did he view then Church?
> **Read and discuss:** 1;6; 3:4; 5;3; 6:6; 8:1-3; 13:1; 17:7-10.
> **Read and discuss:** Hermas 9-13. What does the vision teach us?

### 2.2 How to prepare for persecution?

> **Read and discuss:** Hermas 22-23.

### 2.3 How does Hermas view wealth?

> **Read and discuss:** Hermas 14:5-7; 17:1-6; 40:4-6; 45:1-3.

### 2.4 The 12 Commandments

The 12 'commandments' of Hermas give us good insight in the morality he preaches.

1. Have faith in God (Hermas 26)
2. Be sincere and innocent (27)
3. Truth (28)
4. Chastity, marriage, repentance (29-32)
5. Patience and anger (33)
6. Two ways and two angels (35-36)
7. Fear the Lord (37)
8. Self-control (38)
9. Double mindedness (39)
10. Cheerfulness and grief (40-42)
11. True and false prophets (43)
12. Evil and good desires (44-46)

A good summary can be found in Hermas 38.
> **Read and discuss** Hermas 38.

### 2.5 Baptism and Repentance

Is there a possibility for repentance if one sins after baptism?
> **Read and discuss:** Hermas 31.

### 2.6 Man has two angels

> Read and discuss: Hermas 36. Is Hermas here speaking of man's conscience that is drawn in two directions? It seems that he considers the 'inner voices' toward good and evil as the voices of angels.

### 2.7 How to recognize false prophets?

> **Read and discuss:** Hermas 43:7-14.

How can true prophets be recognized? How to recognize an evil prophet?

### 2.8 The ten parables

> **Read and discuss:** Parable 1 (Hermas 50)

- Parable 2: (chapter 51), the Elm and the Vine
- Parable 3: (52), Trees in Winter
- Parable 4: (53), Trees in Summer
- Parable 5: (54-60), On True Fasting
- Parable 6: (61-65), Danger of Luxury and Pleasure
- Parable 7: (66), Affliction and Repentance
- Parable 8: (67-77), Willow Tree
- Parable 9: (78-110), Twelve Mountains
- Parable 10: (111-114), Conclusion

> **Read and discuss:** Parable 10 (Hermas 111-114)