

# On "*The Epistle of Barnabas*"

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## 1. Summarization of the Book

The main purpose of the book is to pass on what knowledge the author has received to the addressees. He does not understand himself as a teacher, but wants to be understood as on the same level as the addressee, to bring comfort in a situation of some concern about we do not know anything more specific.

Drawing from the Old Testament (and the Book of Enoch and some other unknown sources) Christian Doctrine is developed. Old Testament passages are reinterpreted by allegory so that they reveal their "true" meaning which is not for the Jews but for the Christians who took their place because they were unfaithful. The author deals with a lot of topics in a seemingly random fashion interpreting the Old Testament.

The sacrifices are meant to show how to come into a right relationship with the Lord and as a purification from sins. The Scapegoat of the Jewish Day of Atonement is a foreshadowing of the death of Jesus for our sins. The incarnation is illustrated in the Old Testament. Circumcision necessary in the heart not on the outside. The Cross and Baptism in the Old Testament. The meaning of Vinegar and Gall of Jesus on the cross. The Christians are the real people of the covenant and the destruction of the Temple means that the Jews have forfeited their right. The End of times is expected to come therefore one needs to be prepared and live righteously before the Lord. This will result in the promised land - a land of milk and honey - with the Christians being the rulers of the Earth.

Some of the more astonishing conclusions from the Old Testament is that the true Sabbath is the Sunday and that the dietary laws were actually laws meant to describe with whom to socialize. The Book ends with the Two Ways which seem to be similar to the Didache. The way of Light and the way of Darkness. Specific guidelines are given on how to lead a life in the light and what characterizes life in the Darkness.

## 2. Critique of the Argument

### A. Intention of the Author

The main interest of the author is to instruct his hearers in the Christian faith. He assumes that the audience is familiar with Jewish worship (they possibly have judaistic tendencies) and makes his main points coming from this Jewish understanding. He himself is very familiar with Jewish customs and Jewish literature as his intensive drawing from their literature shows. His concerns about the audience is noteworthy especially to keep them away from the Jewish way of seeing things. This is an important early document about the Christian faith. Since it is mainly concerned with refuting a Jewish understanding of faith it must have been written quite early.

### B. Allegorical Interpretation of the Old Testament

One of the main concerns is the reinterpretation of the Old Testament for the hearers. The author is constantly affirming his allegorical understanding of OT passages over against the invalid literal understanding of the Old Testament. For example concerning the dietary laws:

... the Divine command is in no sense a literal ban on eating, and Moses was speaking spiritually. The meaning of the allusions to swine is this.... (p. 170)

His allegorical approach opens the doors for all sorts of meanings to be put into the Old Testament and is therefore very dangerous. But the vivid picturesque way in which he arguments for it is very easy to understand and is a good model on how to communicate ideas. This has certainly left a deep impression on his audience at that time and later. Otherwise it would certainly not have been preserved.

The allegorical approach is carried very far in some passages to even interpret the letters composing the number 180 (the number of the household of Abraham that were circumcised) as having a "spiritual" meaning.

Now, in writing eighteen, the ten is expressed by the letter I and the eight by E; and there, you see, you have I E (sus) (page 170)

This passage is especially troublesome since he tries to interpret the Septuagint this way and not the Hebrew text. There was good reason not to take this text into the New Testament Canon. These way of interpreting bible texts are still in use today. For example in his Book "The Genesis Record" Henry M. Morris also bases his argumentation on numerology. Many of his arguments do violence to the Old Testament passages and are very artificial. Certainly this cannot be accepted as a valid scriptural proof by anyone at anytime.

### **C. Use of Pseudoepigrapha**

Another critical element of this Book is its use of pseudoepigrapha like "The book of Enoch" and Esdras and some other unidentified scripture. Barnabas is using these as his basis for argumentation in the same way as the Old Testament. Since these writings seem to have been popular at that time in the Jewish world he might have just taken the occasion to argument from widely known texts.

### **D. Social Awareness and Ethical Views**

It is interesting that Barnabas arguments for social justice and caring for the poor instead of "spiritual" exercises like fasting (p.161). Immediately after talking about the right meaning of sacrifice, not as real sacrifice but as the believer being a sacrifice, he puts sacrificing on the same level as fasting and giving to the poor. Fasting is invalid and useless for him if there is no social justice and no caring for each other. God will only hear and bless if this primary issue has been dealt with. I found this very interesting and a very helpful thought.

His catalog of Christian behavior in "The Way of Light" at the end of the document would be very much acceptable today. It turns out that the killing of unborn babies and even already born babies for conveniences sake is nothing new in our modern society.

Never do away with an unborn child, or destroy it after its birth. (p, 180)

Christians had to deal with it from the early times onward. It is surprising how our society develops backward in many areas.

Many of his advice is urgently necessary today for our churches. For example the emphasis on moderateness, respect for authority, honesty in relationships, confessing of sins and so on.

Do not exaggerate your own importance, but be modest at all points, and never claim credit for yourself. Cherish no ill-natured designs on your neighbor.. If you have to rebuke anyone for a fault, do it without fear or favor. Keep calm and mild; reverence the word you have heard, and bear no resentment towards a brother. (p.180)

These sentences express the need for personal closeness achieved through openness and open correction. This is something we have to relearn especially here in California where the happy-face mentality prevails.

### **E. Gnostic Vocabulary and Tendencies. The two ways**

His vocabulary is somewhat the same as the Gnostics. The "Way of Light" and the "Way of Darkness". Jesus "makes an appearance in human flesh". Yet his theology is still orthodox in that Christ dies and rises again and does not imply a strict dichotomy between flesh and spirit.

### **F. Strange Things**

Some facts on which he bases his arguments are weird and plainly folk belief. For example mentioning the hyena changing his sex annually:

*And you are not to eat the hyena* signifies that you are to be no lecher or libertine, or copy their ways; for that creature changes its sex annually and is male at one time and female at another. (p. 171)

This is used to as a basis to argument to avoid association with certain people. It sound very far fetched and an artificial construction. This happens also at other times. The hare that "grows fresh orifice in its backside every year" (p.171) or the "fishes that are doomed to swim far down in the lowest depths of the ocean" (p.171). These are very vivid pictures, very much suited for memorization of the expected behavior by his audience. I question if he really believed these things or just used them to help his audience in memorizing, since it certainly cannot be taken as a logical proof.

### **G. Baptism**

Barnabas understands baptism to cleanse from sins like water cleans from mud.

...after we have stepped into the water burdened with sin and defilement, we come up out of it in full fruitage, with reverence in our hearts and the hope of Jesus in our souls; and whoever eats of them shall have life for evermore means that he who hears these sayings, and believes, will live forever. (p.173)

The baptismal understanding is different today. Baptism is largely seen as a symbolic act of witnessing a conversion to Christ and not as having supernatural effect like Barnabas supposes. Baptism is a very important turning point in life. It makes the baptized fruitful, cleanses him and brings him into fellowship with the living Jesus.

### **H. View of the Second Coming**

Barnabas is of the opinion that they are in the last days. The hearers must resist the evil of the day and Barnabas fears that the "Prince of Evil" will take control over them if they do keep on their efforts (p. 163). He interprets Mt 10:16 "Many are called, but few are chosen" in that way that only a part of the Christians (the called) will finally be with Christ.

... let us be careful not to be found among those of whom it is written that many are called, but few are chosen (p.163)

Certainly he does not subscribe to the popular American doctrine of "Once saved, forever saved". He hopes for a coming kingdom of Christ reigning the earth with the believers as the rulers of the earth. But this will only happen if the believers have been sufficiently made perfect to inherit the covenant.

However, He has told us when it will be so [the reign over creation]; namely, when we have been made sufficiently perfect to become the inheritors of the Lord's Covenant. (p. 167)

Barnabas looks back to the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and scorns the Jewish efforts to rebuilt it. This is a sign for the rejection of the Jews for him. Yet he expects another Temple to be built but now "in the name of the Lord", built by God himself. We are admitted into the temple of immortality by us being forgiven.