
Epistle of Barnabas

The *Epistle of Barnabas* was likely written in the first few decades of the second century CE. Its author is unknown. Many scholars have suggested Alexandria as its place of origin, but others have proposed Syria-Palestine or Asia Minor. Indeed, the *Epistle of Barnabas* reflects a variety of influences, from Alexandrian allegory to legal traditions known from rabbinic texts. Although it is presented in the form of a letter, the *Epistle of Barnabas* is really a treatise on the interpretation of the Old Testament (chs. 1–17) followed by moral exhortations (chs. 18–21). This treatise was ascribed to the apostle Barnabas by Clement of Alexandria (*Stromateis* 2.31.2; 2.35.5), was regarded as a “catholic epistle” by Origen (*Against Celsus* 1.63), and is included after Revelation in codex Sinaiticus (fourth century), but it was not ultimately recognized as part of the New Testament (see Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.25.4, although it is a “disputed” book in 6.14.1; Jerome, *On Illustrious Men* 6).

A central purpose of the *Epistle of Barnabas* is to argue that Jews have misunderstood the sacred Scriptures (= the Old Testament), and that these Scriptures point definitively to Jesus. The sustained and abrasive polemic against Jews found in *Barnabas* suggests a context where Judaism posed a viable ideological threat to the writer's Christian audience. The *Epistle of Barnabas* offers a unique window into early Christian figural interpretation and presents many christological typologies that would become commonplace among later Christian writers. Many of the biblical quotations in *Barnabas* are inexact, not even matching the Septuagint. Some of the Old Testament citations have clearly been modified to make them more suitable as proofs of Christian teaching. The writer of the *Epistle of Barnabas* may have known many of these prooftexts from Christian homilies or lists of *testimonia*.¹ The selection offered below deals with the Day of Atonement (ch. 7), the Red Heifer (ch. 8), circumcision (ch. 9), dietary laws (ch. 10), baptism (ch. 11), and the cross (ch. 12).

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7

1. Understand, therefore, children of joy, that the good Lord has revealed everything to us beforehand, so that we might know whom we ought to praise when giving thanks for all things. 2. If, therefore, the Son of God, who is Lord and is destined to judge the living and the dead,² suffered in order that his wounds might give us life, let us believe that the Son of God could not suffer except for our sake.

3. But he also was given vinegar and gall to drink when

1. On Christian *testimonia* ("testimonies") literature, see chapter five on Cyprian below.

2. See 2 Tim 4:1.

he was crucified.³ Hear how the priests of the temple have revealed something about this: when the command that “Whoever does not keep the fast shall surely die” was written,⁴ the Lord commanded it because he himself was planning to offer the vessel of his spirit as a sacrifice for our sins, in order that the type established by Isaac, who was offered upon the altar,⁵ might be fulfilled. 4. What, therefore, does he say in the prophet? “And let them eat from the goat that is offered at the fast for all their sins”—pay careful attention!—“and let all the priests (but only them) eat the unwashed intestines with vinegar.”⁶ 5. Why? “Since you are going to give me, when I am about to offer my flesh for the sins of my new people, gall with vinegar to drink, you alone must eat, while the people fast and lament in sackcloth and ashes”—this was to show that he must suffer at their hands. 6. Pay attention to what he commanded: “Take two goats, fine and well matched, and offer them, and let the priest take one for a whole burnt offering for sins.”⁷ 7. But what shall they do with the other one? “The other one,” he says, “is cursed.”⁸ Notice how the type of Jesus is revealed! 8. “And all of you shall spit upon it and jab it, and tie scarlet wool around its head, and then let it be driven out into the wilderness.”⁹ And when these things have been done,

3. Matt 27:34, 48; Mark 15:23, 36; Luke 23:36; John 19:29.

4. Cf. Lev 23:29. For the Day of Atonement as a fast, see Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 3.240; Philo, *On the Special Laws* 1.186–88; 2.193; Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 40.4–5; 46.2; m. Yoma 8:1.

5. Gen 22:1–18.

6. This appears to be a creative quotation from Leviticus 16 (see Lev 16:27; cf. Lev 9:8–22; Ezek 43:18–24) adapted to serve as a Christian prooftext. The word for “goat” is not the one used in the Septuagint of Leviticus 16 (*chimaros*), but rather the one used in Heb 9:12–13, 19; 10:4 (*tragos*). For the reference to vinegar, see Ps 69:21.

7. Cf. Lev 16:7, 9. For the idea that the goats should be well matched in appearance and value, see m. Yoma 6:1.

8. Cf. Lev 16:8, 10. The goat as “cursed” may reflect the influence of Deut 21:23 and Gal 3:13.

9. This creative quotation based on Lev 16:10, 21 was adapted to fit the narrative of Jesus’s crucifixion (spitting and jabbing; Matt 26:67; Mark 10:34; 14:65; Luke 18:32; 19:37). The scarlet thread attached to the scapegoat is mentioned in m. Yoma 4:2. Here, the scarlet

the man in charge of the goat leads it into the wilderness, and he removes the wool and places it upon the bush commonly called *rachia* (the buds of which we are accustomed to eat when we find them in the countryside; only the fruit of the *rachia* is sweet). 9 What is the meaning of this? Note well: “the one is for the altar, and the other is cursed,” and note that the one cursed is crowned.¹⁰ For they will see him on that day, wearing a long scarlet robe about his body, and they will say, “Is this not the one whom we once crucified, insulting and piercing and spitting on him? Surely this was the man who said then that he was the Son of God!” 10. Now how is he like that goat? The goats are well matched, fine, and almost identical, for this reason: so that when they see him coming then, they may be amazed at the similarity of the goat. Observe, therefore, the type of Jesus, who was destined to suffer. 11. And what does it mean when they place the wool in the midst of the thorns? It is a type of Jesus, set forth for the church, because whoever desires to take away the scarlet wool must suffer greatly, since the thorns are so terrible, and can only gain possession of it through affliction. Likewise, he says, “those who desire to see me and to gain my kingdom must receive me through affliction and suffering.”¹¹

8

1. Now what type do you think was intended when he commanded Israel that men who are utterly sinful should offer

thread calls to mind the christological interpretation of Rahab's scarlet thread (Josh 2:18, 21).

10. The practice of crowning the goat is not found in the biblical text and may reflect an earlier christological explanation of Leviticus 16 (see Matt 27:28–29; Mark 15:17; John 19:2, 5). For other Christian readings of the scapegoat ritual, see Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 40.3–5; and Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 3.7.8.

11. The source of this quotation is unknown. Cf. Acts 14:22.

a heifer, and slaughter and burn it, and that then the children should take the ashes and place them in containers, and tie the scarlet wool around a piece of wood (observe again the type of the cross and the scarlet wool) and the hyssop, and that then the children should sprinkle the people one by one, in order that they may be purified from their sins?¹² 2. Grasp how plainly he is speaking to you: the calf is Jesus; the sinful men who offer it are those who brought him to the slaughter. Then the men are no more; no more is the glory of sinners. 3. The children who sprinkle are those who preached to us the good news about the forgiveness of sins and the purification of the heart, those to whom he gave the authority to proclaim the gospel (there were twelve of them as a witness to the tribes, because there are twelve tribes of Israel). 4. And why are there three children who sprinkle? As a witness to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, because these men were great in God's sight. 5. And then there is the matter of the wool on the piece of wood: this signifies that the kingdom of Jesus is based on the wooden cross, and that those who hope in him will live forever. 6. But why the wool and the hyssop together? Because in his kingdom there will be dark and evil days, in which we will be saved, because the one who suffers in body is healed by means of the dark juice of the hyssop. 7. So, therefore, the things that happened in this way are clear to us but to them are quite obscure, because they did not listen to the voice of the Lord.

9

1. Furthermore, with respect to the ears he describes how he circumcised our heart. The Lord says in the prophet: "As soon

12. See Num 19:1–10, 17–21. Cf. Heb 9:13, 19. For the involvement of children, see m. Parah 3:2, 4. A different philosophical interpretation of the red heifer ritual is found in Philo, *On the Special Laws* 1.262–66.

as they heard, they obeyed me.”¹³ And again he says: “Those who are far off will hear with their ears, and they shall understand what I have done.”¹⁴ Also, “Circumcise your hearts,”¹⁵ says the Lord. 2. And again he says: “Hear, Israel, for this is what the Lord your God says.”¹⁶ And again the spirit of the Lord prophesies: “Who is the one who desires to live forever?”¹⁷ With the ear let him hear the voice of my servant.”¹⁸ 3. And again he says: “Hear, heaven, and give ear, earth, for the Lord has spoken these things as a testimony.”¹⁹ And again he says: “Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of this people.”²⁰ And again he says: “Hear, children, the voice of one crying in the wilderness.”²¹ 4. In short, he circumcised our ears in order that when we hear the word we might believe.

But the circumcision in which they have trusted has been abolished, for he declared that circumcision was not a matter of the flesh. But they disobeyed, because an evil angel “enlightened” them. 5. He says to them: “This is what the Lord your God says” (here I find a commandment): “Do not sow among thorns, be circumcised to your Lord.” And what does he say? “Circumcise your hardheartedness, and stop being stiff-necked.”²² Take this again: “Behold, says the Lord, all the nations have uncircumcised foreskins, but this people has an uncircumcised heart!”²³

13. Ps 18:44.

14. This is a paraphrase of Isa 33:13.

15. Cf. Lev 26:41; Deut 10:16; 30:6; Jer 4:4; 9:25–26.

16. Cf. Deut 6:4; Jer 7:2–3.

17. Cf. Ps 34:12. The quotation here adds “forever” (*eis ton aiōna*), which is not in the Septuagint.

18. Isa 50:10.

19. Cf. Isa 1:2. The quotation here adds “as a testimony,” which is not in the Septuagint. Cf. Mic 1:2.

20. Cf. Isa 1:10; 28:14.

21. Cf. Isa 40:3.

22. Deut 10:16; Jer 4:3–4.

23. Jer 9:25.

6. But you will say: “But surely the people were circumcised as a seal!” But every Syrian and Arab and all the idol-worshipping priests are also circumcised; does this mean that they too belong to their covenant? Why, even the Egyptians practice circumcision!

7. Learn abundantly, therefore, children of love, about everything: Abraham, who first instituted circumcision, looked forward in the spirit to Jesus when he circumcised, having received the teaching of the three letters. 8. For it says: “And Abraham circumcised ten and eight and three hundred men of his household.”²⁴ What, then, is the knowledge that was given to him? Observe that it mentions the “ten and eight” first, and then after an interval the “three hundred.” As for the “ten and eight,” the *I* is ten and the *H* is eight; thus you have “Jesus.” And because the cross, which is shaped like the *T*, was destined to convey grace, it mentions also the “three hundred.”²⁵ So he reveals Jesus in the two letters, and the cross in the other one. 9. The one who placed within us the implanted gift of his covenant understands. No one has ever learned from me a more reliable word, but I know that you are worthy of it.

10

1. Now when Moses said, “You shall not eat a pig, or an eagle or a hawk or a crow, or any fish that has no scales,”²⁶ he received, according to the correct understanding, three precepts.

24. The statement in Gen 14:14 regarding the 318 in Abram’s household is being combined with the circumcision account in Gen 17:23, 27.

25. In Greek, the number eighteen can be written with the letters *IH*, which *Barnabas* interprets as signifying *IHSOYS*, “Jesus.” The number three hundred is written with the letter *T*, which *Barnabas* likens to the shape of the cross. On *T* as the shape of the cross, see also Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 3.22.5.

26. See Lev 11:1–47; Deut 14:3–21. On the ethical interpretation of Old Testament dietary regulations, see Mark 7:14–23; *The Letter of Aristeas* 128–71; Philo, *On the Special Laws* 4.100–121; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.8.3–4; Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* 2.105.1–3.

2. Furthermore, he says to them in Deuteronomy, “I will set forth as a covenant to this people my righteous requirements.”²⁷ Therefore it is not God’s commandment that they should not eat; rather Moses spoke spiritually.²⁸

3. Accordingly he mentioned the pig for this reason: you must not associate, he means, with such people, who are like pigs. That is, when they are well off, they forget the Lord, but when they are in need, they acknowledge the Lord, just as the pig ignores its owner when it is feeding, but when it is hungry it starts to squeal and falls silent only after being fed again.

4. “Neither shall you eat the eagle or the hawk or the kite or the crow.” You must not, he means, associate with or even resemble such people, who do not know how to provide food for themselves by labor and sweat but lawlessly plunder other people’s property; indeed, though they walk about with the appearance of innocence, they are carefully watching and looking around for someone to rob in their greed, just as these birds alone do not provide food for themselves but sit idle and look for ways to eat the flesh of others—they are nothing more than pests in their wickedness.

5. “And you shall not eat,” he says, “sea eel or octopus or cuttlefish.” You must not, he means, even resemble such people, who are utterly wicked and are already condemned to death, just as these fish alone are cursed and swim in the depths, not swimming about like the rest but living in the mud beneath the depths.

6. Furthermore, “You shall not eat the hare.” Why? Do not become, he means, one who corrupts children, or even resemble such people, because the hare grows another opening every year, and thus

27. E.g., Deut 4:1, 5–6, 40. The fact that these are called “righteous requirements” (LXX: *dikaiōmata*) is taken to indicate that all of the rules apply directly to the moral sphere of human ethical behavior.

28. Barnabas is atypical of early Christian writers in asserting that Moses never intended these dietary rules to be followed literally, although it was common among early Christians to believe that these rules were meant to convey symbolic meaning.

has as many orifices as it is years old. 7. Again, “Neither shall you eat the hyena.” Do not become, he means, an adulterer or a seducer, or even resemble such people. Why? Because this animal changes its nature from year to year, and becomes male one time and female another. 8. But he also hated the weasel, and with good reason. Do not become, he means, like those men who, we hear, with immoral intent do things with the mouth that are forbidden, and do not associate with those immoral women who do things with the mouth that are forbidden. For this animal conceives through its mouth.

9. Concerning food, then, Moses received three precepts to this effect and spoke in a spiritual sense, but because of their fleshly desires the people accepted them as though they referred to actual food. 10. David received knowledge of the same three precepts and says similarly: “Blessed is the man who has not followed the counsel of ungodly men” (like the fish that swim about in darkness in the depths), “and has not taken the path of sinners” (like those who pretend to fear the Lord but sin like pigs), “and has not sat in the seat of pestilent men” (like the birds that sit waiting for plunder).²⁹ You now have the full story concerning food.

11. Again Moses says: “Eat anything that has a divided hoof and chews the cud.” Why does he say this? Because when it receives food it knows the one who is feeding it and, relying upon that person, appears to rejoice. He spoke well with regard to the commandment. What, then, does he mean? Associate with those who fear the Lord, with those who meditate in their heart on the special significance of the word that they have received, with those who proclaim and obey the Lord’s righteous requirements, with those who know that meditation is a labor of joy and who ruminate on the word of the Lord.

29. Ps 1:1.

But why does he mention “the divided hoof”? Because the righteous person not only lives in this world but also looks forward to the holy age to come. Observe what a wise lawgiver Moses was! 12. But how could those people grasp or understand these things? But we, however, having rightly understood the commandments, explain them as the Lord intended. He circumcised our ears and hearts for this very purpose, so that we might understand these things.

11

1. But let us inquire whether the Lord took care to foreshadow the water and the cross. Now concerning the water, it is written with reference to Israel that they would never accept the baptism that brings forgiveness of sins, but would create a substitute for themselves. 2. For the prophet says: “Be astonished, heaven, and let the earth shudder greatly at this, because this people has done two evil things: they have abandoned me, the fountain of life, and they have dug for themselves a pit of death.”³⁰ 3. “Is my holy mountain Sinai a desert rock? For you shall be as the fledglings of a bird that flutter about when they are taken away from the nest.”³¹ 4. And again the prophet says: “I will go before you and level mountains and shatter brass gates and break iron bars in pieces, and I will give you treasures that lie in darkness, hidden, unseen, in order that they may know that I am the Lord God.”³² 5. And: “You shall dwell in a lofty cave of solid rock.”³³ And: “His water will never fail; you will see the King in glory, and your soul will meditate on the fear of the Lord.”³⁴

30. Cf. Jer 2:12–13.

31. Cf. Isa 16:1–2.

32. Cf. Isa 45:2–3.

33. Cf. Isa 33:16.

34. Cf. Isa 33:17–18.

6. And again in another prophet he says: “And the one who does these things will be like the tree that is planted by the streams of water, which will yield its fruit in its season and whose leaf will not wither; and whatever that person does will prosper. 7. Not so are the ungodly, not so; instead they are like the dust that the wind blows from the face of the earth. Therefore the ungodly will not stand in judgment, or sinners in the council of the righteous, because the Lord knows the way of the righteous, and the way of the ungodly will perish.”³⁵

8. Notice how he pointed out the water and the cross together. For this is what he means: blessed are those who, having set their hope on the cross, descended into the water, because he speaks of the reward “in its season”; “at that time,” he means, “I will repay.” But for now what does he say? “The leaves will not wither.” By this he means that every word that comes forth from your mouth in faith and love will bring conversion and hope to many. 9. And again in a different prophet he says: “And the land of Jacob was praised more than any land.”³⁶ This means he is glorifying the vessel of his spirit. 10. Then what does he say? “And there was a river flowing on the right hand, and beautiful trees were rising from it, and whoever eats from them will live forever.”³⁷ 11. By this he means that while we descend into the water laden with sins and dirt, we rise up bearing fruit in our heart and with fear and hope in Jesus in our spirits. “And whoever eats from these will live forever” means this: whoever, he says, hears these things spoken and believes them will live forever.

35. Cf. Ps 1:3–6.

36. The source of this quotation is unknown (cf. Ezek 20:15; Zeph 3:19; 2 Baruch 61:7).

37. The source of this quotation is unknown (cf. Gen 2:10; 3:22; Ezek 47:1–12; John 6:51; Rev 22:1–2).

1. Similarly he once again gives an explanation about the cross in another prophet, who says: “And when shall these things be accomplished? The Lord says: ‘When a tree falls over and rises again, and when blood drips from a tree.’”³⁸ Once again you have a reference about the cross and about the one who was destined to be crucified. 2. And again he speaks to Moses, when war was being waged against Israel by foreigners, and in order that he might remind those being attacked that they had been handed over to death because of their sins, the Spirit says to the heart of Moses that he should make a symbol of the cross and of the one who was destined to suffer because, he is saying, unless they place their hope in him, war shall be waged against them forever. Therefore Moses piled one shield upon another in the midst of the battle, and standing high above them all he stretched out his hands, and so Israel was again victorious. But whenever he lowered them, the men began to be killed.³⁹ 3. Why so? So that they might learn that they cannot be saved unless they place their hope in him. 4. And again in another prophet he says: “All day long I have stretched out my hands to a disobedient people who oppose my righteous way.”⁴⁰ 5. Again Moses makes a symbol of Jesus—showing that he must suffer, and that the very one whom they will think they have

38. The source of this quotation is unknown. If it was taken from a Jewish source (cf. 4 Esdras 4:33; 5:5), it has presumably been rewritten to serve as a Christian prooftext. This quotation also occurs later in Pseudo-Gregory of Nyssa, *Testimonies against the Jews*, ch. 7 (perhaps fifth cent. CE).

39. See Exod 17:8–16. This was a standard typology among early Christian writers, e.g., *Sibylline Oracles* 8.251–54; Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 90.4–91.4; 97.1; 111.1; 131.4–5; Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 3.18; *Against the Jews* 10.10; Irenaeus, *Demonstration* 46; Origen, *Homily on Exodus* 11.4; Cyprian, *To Quirinus: Testimonies against the Jews* 2.21; *Exhortation to Martyrdom* 8; Ephrem the Syrian, *Explanation of Exodus* 17.2; Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* 2.148–49; and many other fourth- and fifth-century Christian writers.

40. Cf. Isa 65:2. The stretching out of the hands is taken to represent Jesus on the cross.

destroyed shall give life—in a sign given when Israel was falling. For the Lord caused all kinds of serpents to bite them, and they were perishing (since the fall happened through the serpent, with the help of Eve), in order that he might convince them that they were being handed over to death because of their transgression. 6. Indeed, even though the same Moses had commanded, “You shall not have a cast or a carved image for your God,” nevertheless Moses himself made one in order to show them a symbol of Jesus. So Moses made a bronze serpent and displayed it prominently, and called the people together by a proclamation. 7. When they had gathered together they begged Moses to offer a prayer for them, so that they might be healed. But Moses said to them: “Whenever,” he says, “one of you is bitten, let that person come to the serpent that is placed upon the wooden pole, and let that one hope and believe that though it is dead it can nonetheless give life, and that person shall be saved immediately.”⁴¹ And so they did. Once again you have in these things the glory of Jesus, because all things are in him and for him.

8. Again, what does Moses say to “Jesus” the son of Nun when he gave him this name, since he was a prophet, for the sole purpose that all the people might hear that the Father was revealing everything about his Son Jesus? 9. Moses said to “Jesus” the son of Nun, when he gave him this name as he sent him to spy out the land, “Take a book in your hands and write what the Lord says, that in the last days the Son of God will cut off by its roots all the house of Amalek.”⁴² 10. Observe again that it is Jesus, not a son of man but the Son of God, and revealed in the flesh by a symbol.

41. See Num 21:6–9; John 3:14–15.

42. *Barnabas* appears to be making use of a Christian homiletic retelling of Moses’s commissioning of Joshua (see Exod 17:14, 16; Num 13:17; 27:18–23).

Since, however, they were going to say that the Messiah is the son of David, David himself, fearing and understanding the error of sinners, prophesied: “The Lord said to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.’”⁴³ 11. And again, Isaiah says as follows: “The Lord said to the Messiah my Lord, whose right hand I held, that the nations would obey him, and I will shatter the strength of kings.”⁴⁴ Observe how David calls him “Lord,” and does not call him “son.”

43. Ps 110:1; Matt 22:41–46; Mark 12:35–37; Luke 20:41–44.

44. Cf. Isa 45:1.