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The Gospel of Barnabas

F. P. Cotterell

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The Gospel of Barnabas is one of three, or more precisely four, writings associated with the name of Paul's companion in the first part of his mission to the gentiles. The earliest of these writings is the *Epistle of Barnabas*, dating from the first half of the second century. The *Acts of Barnabas*, a more convenient appellation than the formal Greek title, *The journeys and the testimony of St. Barnabas the apostle*, dates from the fifth century. Then there is the *Gospel of Barnabas*, a title which is confusingly applied to two works. The first of these is known to us only by name. It is referred to in the Latin *Decretum Gelasianum*,¹ associated with pope Gelasius (492-496). Of the text of this *Gospel* we have no knowledge whatever. The second *Gospel of Barnabas* made its appearance in the sixteenth century and has re-surfaced at intervals ever since, most recently through a series of publications originating in Karachi, edited by Begum Aisha Bawany Wakf. This brief note is intended simply to draw attention to the character of the 'Gospel', to record what is known of its antecedents and the claims made for it by some Muslim apologists.

I. THE EPISTLE OF BARNABAS AND THE ACTS OF BARNABAS

The *Epistle* is found as an appendix to the New Testament in Codex Sinaiticus and in Vaticanus, amongst other early witnesses. Clement of Alexandria credited the work to Barnabas of Cyprus,² but there is general agreement that it is, in fact, the work of an unidentified Alexandrian Christian. Its twenty-one chapters deal with the relationship of the Old Testament to Jew and Christian. The Jew is represented as having culpably misunderstood the Old Testament which has true relevance only for the Christian. There are rather clear parallels with the thinking of Hebrews and that of Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons from 177 to 202.

The *Acts* is a brief pseudepigraphical work in Greek, in its early part dependent on canonical *Acts*, purporting to be written by John Mark, and taking the account of the life of Barnabas beyond the point at which he separated from Paul, at the end of *Acts* chapter 15. Again the author is unknown, but it is likely that the work originated in Cyprus, and is one witness to a specific attempt to elevate Barnabas to a position of parity with the apostles. This movement would reflect the period when claims to apostolic foundation and consequent special status were being made on behalf of a number of churches in the Mediterranean basin. The church in Cyprus needed an apostolic Barnabas to rid itself of the Antiochian oversight.

II. BARNABAS

The principal source of our information concerning Barnabas is the *Acts* narrative, beginning with the account in chapter thirteen of his call, with Paul, to an itinerant ministry, and closing with the separation of the two and the departure of Barnabas with his cousin John Mark for Cyprus, at the end of chapter fifteen. There are

¹ For the full text of the *Decretum Gelasianum* see E. von Dobschütz, *Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur*, 38, 4 (1912).

² Clement, *Stromata*, ii, 20.

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further references to him in I Corinthians, Galatians and Colossians. Already in Acts (14: 4) and implicitly in 1 Corinthians (9: 6) Barnabas is accorded apostolic status.

In Codex Bezae and other representatives of the 'Western' text of Acts 1: 23: Barnabas, one of the two candidates put forward to take the place of Judas Iscariot, becomes *Barnabas*. The Clementine *Recognitions* mention

'Barnabas, who also is called Matthias, who was substituted as an apostle in the place of Judas'³

while to make the picture even more complicated, according to Haenchen the Syriac version of the *Recognitions* has *Barabbas* in place of Barnabas(!).⁴

Clement of Alexandria (*Stromata* II 20) appeals to Barnabas as an authority:

'...adducing as a witness the apostolic Barnabas, and he was one of the Seventy, and a fellow-worker of Paul...'.

and to return to the *Recognitions*, Clement of Rome has Barnabas preaching the gospel in Rome during the lifetime of Jesus:

'...a certain man, standing in a most crowded place in the city (Rome), made proclamation to the people saying:

"Hear me, O ye citizens of Rome. The Son of God is now in the regions of Judaea, promising eternal life to everyone who will hear Him...".

Now the man who spake these things to, the people was from the regions of the East, by nation a Hebrew, by name Barnabas, who said that he himself was one of His disciples....'

(*Recognitions* 17)

The status of Barnabas is further enhanced by attributing miracles to him; the *Acts of Titus* represents him as raising Paul from the dead at the Pisidian Antioch.

III. THE GOSPEL OF BARNABAS

In the early years of the Christian church apocryphal gospels multiplied. Some fifty have been identified. The text of a few has come down to us almost complete, while of the majority we have only isolated passages. Of the original *Gospel of Barnabas* we have nothing beyond the name. It is mentioned in the *Decretum Gelasianum*, which treats of 'books which are received and books which are not received'. In the section dealing with the books which are to be received we have the full number of the 27 New Testament writings of our present canon. In the section of apocryphal works there is mention of the *Gospel of Barnabas*. According to Hennecke the Decree is of South Gallic origin and is dated in the sixth century.⁵

³ *Recognitions*, i, 60.

⁴ Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles*, English translation by B. Noble and G. Shinn, Blackwell, London, 1971, p. 162.

⁵ E. Hennecke, *The New Testament Apocrypha*, Lutterworth, London, 1963, Vol. 1, p. 46.

John Toland appears to be our earliest witness to the existence of an Italian version of the *Gospel of Barnabas*, in his *Nazarenus*, published in London in 1718. He apparently dates the manuscript he saw in the early fifteenth century, on the basis of orthography and ‘character’. George Sale, the Arabicist, was acquainted with a Spanish version of the *Gospel of Barnabas*, apparently made by ‘Mostafa de Aranda, a Moslem of Aragon’,⁶ from an Italian copy stolen from the library of Pope Sixtus V (1585-90); we may note that amongst the remarkable accomplishments of Sixtus was the building of the Vatican Library.

Sale has a number of comments on *Barnabas* in his translation of the Qur'an

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(London 1734, and re-printed in 1825 together with the extremely valuable Preliminary discourse).

In Section IV of his preliminary discourse, Sale refers to both Italian and Spanish copies of the *Gospel of Barnabas*, and to the supposed substitution of *periclyte* for *paraclete* so as to present Jesus as the forerunner of Muhammad:

‘The Mohammedans have also a Gospel in Arabic, attributed to St. Barnabas, wherein the history of Jesus Christ is related in a manner very different from what we find in the true Gospels, and correspondent to those traditions which Mohammed has followed in his Koran. Of this Gospel the Moriscoes in Africa have a translation in Spanish and there is in the library of Prince Eugene of Savoy a manuscript of some antiquity containing an Italian translation of the same Gospel, made, it is to be supposed, for the use of renegades. This book appears to be no original forgery of the Mohammedans, though they have no doubt interpolated and altered it since, the better to serve their purpose; and in particular, instead of the Paraclete or Comforter, they have, in this apocryphal gospel, inserted the word Periclyte, that is, the *famous* or *illustrious*, by which they pretend their prophet was foretold by name, that being the signification of Mohammed in Arabic; and this they say to justify that passage in the Koran where Jesus Christ is formally asserted to have foretold his coming under his other name Ahmed, which is derived from the same root as Mohammed and of the same import.’⁷

VI. THE CONTENTS OF THE GOSPEL OF BARNABAS

The Gospel presents us with a conflated account of the life of Christ, largely drawn from the four Gospels, but with an idiosyncratic and arbitrary sequencing of events, the interpolation of some additional apocryphal material and the addition of specific Muslim apologetic sections. As opposed to the Qur'an, which allows Jesus the title of Messiah, Jesus is represented as specifically denying that He is Messiah: this title is reserved for Muhammad. This accounts for the double truncation of the canonical gospel Life of Christ: at the beginning John the Baptist, as herald of Jesus, disappears from the story so that Jesus can prophecy the coming of Muhammad, and at the end Judas takes the place of Jesus on the cross.

⁶ George Sale, *The Koran*, first published in 1734, reprinted by Warne with the invaluable *Preliminary discourse* (n.d.) makes several references to the Gospel of Barnabas. Some of these references are taken up by W. E. A. Axon, ‘On the Mohammedan Gospel of Barnabas’, *JTS* 3 (1901-2).

⁷ Sale, *op. cit.*, preliminary discourse section iv.

In his account of the *Gospel of Barnabas* we have noted Sale's comment on the Periclyte-Paraclete substitution which he had apparently found, or been informed of, in the Spanish version. According to Lonsdale Ragg the Italian version does not contain any parallel to the Johannine Paraclete passages, but he traces Sale's comment to an Arabic marginal gloss connecting *Ahmed*, the Latin Consolator and the Greek *Paracletus*.⁸

The Qur'an's denial of the crucifixion of Jesus is well known. Since this position is a scarcely tenable one there have been other interpretations of the passage in question in recent years. Rodwell's translation of the relevant lines in Sura 4 is as follows:

‘...and for their saying, “Verily we have slain the Messiah, Jesus the son of Mary, an Apostle of God.” Yet they slew him not, and they crucified

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him not, but they had only his likeness... and they did not really slay him, but God took him up to himself.’

This enigmatic saying is expanded in the *Gospel of Barnabas*, so as to make clear both how Jesus was ‘taken up to God’ and in what sense they ‘had only his likeness’

‘Judas came near to the people with whom Jesus was; and when he heard the noise, he entered into the house where the disciples slept. And God, seeing the fear and danger of his servant, ordered Gabriel and Michael and Rafael and Azrael to carry him out of the world. And they came in all haste, and bare him out of the window which looks towards the south. And they placed him in the third heaven, where he will remain, blessing God, in the company of angels, till near the end of the world.’ (chapter 216)

The story proceeds at once with an account of the changing of Judas into the likeness of Jesus, his arrest and crucifixion:

‘And Judas the traitor entered before the rest into the place from which Jesus had just been taken up. And the disciples were sleeping. And the wonderful God acted wonderfully, changing Judas into the same figure and speech with Jesus. We, believing that it was he, said to him, “Master, whom seekest thou?” And he said to them, smiling, “Ye have forgotten yourselves, since ye do not know Judas Iscariot.” At this time the soldiery entered; and seeing Judas so like in every respect to Jesus, laid hands upon him....’

(Chapter 217)

‘...They carried him to Mount Calvary, where they executed criminals, and crucified him, stripping him naked for the greater ignominy. Then he did nothing but cry out: “O my God, why hast thou forsaken me that I should die unjustly, when the real malefactor hath escaped?”’

(chapter 219)

Commenting on the related passage in Sura 3, Sale says:

‘It is supposed by several that this story was an original invention of Mohammed's; but they are certainly mistaken, for several sectaries held the same opinion long before his

⁸ L. Ragg, ‘The Mohammedan “Gospel of Barnabas”’, *JTS* 6 (1904-5), note on p. 425.

time. The Basilidians, in the very beginning of Christianity, denied that Christ himself suffered but that Simon the Cyrenean was crucified in his place. The Cerinthians before them, and the Carpocratians next (to name no more of those who affirmed Jesus to have been a mere man), did believe the same thing; that it was not himself, but one of his followers very like him that was crucified.⁹

It is generally accepted that Muhammad's knowledge of Christianity came at second hand and from heretical sects such as the Collyridians. The idea of a substitute crucifixion could certainly have stemmed from some such heretical sect.

V. THE GOSPEL OF BARNABAS IN MUSLIM APOLOGETIC

In 1976, Ashram Publications of Karachi published a first edition of ten thousand copies of a booklet, *The gospel vs the gospels*¹⁰ and some of these have found their way to Britain. The tract once more presents the *Gospel of Barnabas* as the gospel, concealed by the Christian church in favour of the (fraudulent) canonical gospels.

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It opens with an extract from Barnabas representing the commissioning of Barnabas by Jesus to write the gospel:

'And Jesus turned himself to him who writeth and said, "See Barnabas that by all means then (thou?) write my gospel concerning all that hath happened through my dwelling in the world. And in like manner that which hath befallen Judas, in order that the faithful may be undeceived and everyone may believe the truth."'

The leaflet itself is a curious compilation, depending, in its first part, on selected extracts from St. Augustine, H. G. Wood and F. C. Burkitt (who becomes Burlsett at one point) and others and using such sources as the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Thompson's *Chain-Reference Bible* and Black's *Bible Dictionary*. Polycarp of Smyrna is Poly Corp. A quite extraordinary attempt is made to have Solomon speak of Muhammad: Solomon is made to say:

'His mouth is most sweet; yea he is Mohammad (*mahmaddīm*), altogether lovely. This is my beloved and this is my friend, O daughter of Jerusalem.'

(Song of Solomon 5: 16)

Muhammad makes an odd third in Solomon's love song.

.....

The purpose of the booklet is to press the claims of Barnabas; Geoffrey Parrinder comments that it was

'...unknown even to Muslim apologetics till the sixteenth century.'¹¹

⁹ Sale, *op. cit.*, p. 38 of the translation.

¹⁰ Begum Aisha Bawany Wakf, *The Gospel vs the Gospel*, Ashram Publications, Karachi, 1976.

¹¹ G. Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur'an*, Sheldon Press, London, 1976², p. 111.

And, Sale's comment that 'The Mohammedans have also a Gospel in Arabic attributed to St. Barnabas',¹² notwithstanding, we do not possess an Arabic text, still less the Greek text from which such a text would, presumably, stem.

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¹² Sale, preliminary discourse section iv. See also L. and L. Ragg, *The Gospel of Barnabas*, OUP 1907 and J. Cannon, 'The Gospel of Barnabas' in *The Moslem World*, 32 (1942).