The destruction of the Jerusalem Temple

Date: 70 CE to 135 CE
Place: Alexandria
Language: Greek

Category: Christian

Literary genre: Letter and Rhetorical treatise

Title of work: The Epistle of Barnabas

Reference: 16.1-5

Commentary:
Despite having the form of a letter (1.1-8, 21.1-9), the Epistle of Barnabas is essentially a didactic, polemical essay. The text is anonymous, and should not be associated with the Barnabas of the New Testament. The favourite view for the document’s compositional location is Alexandria, owing to the facts that Clement of Alexandria is its earliest witness, and the hermeneutical style is comparable to that of Alexandrian Judaism and Christianity (for a detailed discussion of the text's provenance, see James Carleton Paget, The Epistle of Barnabas, p. 30-41). All that can be said with reasonable certainty regarding the dating of the document is that it was written at some point after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE, which is referenced in the text, and before Hadrian rebuilt the city after the revolt of 132-135 CE. The text witnesses one of the earliest examples outside of the New Testament of Christians attempting to understand their relationship with Judaism, and the implications of this for Christian practice. As S. Lowry argued, the text was written while church-synagogue tensions were high (“The Confutation of Judaism”), and the author aims to show through interpretation of scripture that it is the Christians, not the Jews, who are the rightful heirs to God’s covenant. The author sets his teachings against the background of the fight between good and evil, which will soon reach its climax with God’s final judgement (2.1; 4.1, 9, 12; 5.7; 15.5; 21.3, 6). Christians, therefore, must prepare themselves for this eschatological event, and should avoid becoming complacent like Israel (4.13-14). While some scholars believe that the text was not inspired by any real-life conflict with Jews, and instead simply uses them as a literary device to help the Christian movement self-identify as superior (e.g. Miriam Taylor, Anti-Judaism and Early-Christian Identity), others have argued for specific historical settings.

This passage discusses the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple by the Romans, which occurred in 70 CE, and equaled a tragic blow for the Jewish community. In a similar vein to the author of the Gospel of Luke (see the discussion of Luke 7:1-28), the present author understands the decimation of the Temple as punishment for Israel’s sins. The text continues after this passage to elaborate on how the Christians are the spiritual temple of God (16.6-10), contrasting them with the “wretched people” (i.e. the Jews) who placed all their hopes in a material building (the Temple), and lost sight of God. Martin Shukster and Peter Richardson have argued that the reference to the rebuilding of the Temple in verses 3-4 suggests a date for the text towards the end of Nerva’s reign (96-98 CE), when they suggest there were high hopes of this among the Jewish community. They refer to coins minted in Nerva’s time which suggest that the fiscus Iudaicus was abolished and the Jews would return to “ante-bellum” status, and take the “servants of the enemy” in verse 4 to be the Yavnean authorities who could have been seen as key in supporting a Roman effort to rebuild the Temple (“Temple and Bet Ha-midrash,” p. 21-23). However, this suggestion seems far-fetched. Others favour a dating in Hadrian’s reign, either seeing a hope that a “pacific emperor” would enable the Temple’s rebuilding, or that his plans to replace it with a temple to Jupiter are in view (for the former, see E. Mary Smallwood, The Jews under Roman Rule, p. 434-445 and for the latter, Klaus Wengst, Didache (Apostellehre), Barnabasbrief, p. 114-118). James Rhodes also supports this interpretation, suggesting that while the Jewish community suffered a particularly low point in its history, the Christian author of the Epistle of Barnabas took the opportunity to instruct his audience on their essential superiority, and remind them not to fall into the same traps that Israel had done (The Epistle of Barnabas, p. 86-87). Another interpretation is that the author here refers to a spiritual, metaphorical temple (i.e. the Gentile church) (see John Gunther, “The Epistle of Barnabas”). It remains uncertain, but the rhetoric of the author is quite explicit – God cannot be enshrined in a
man-made structure, and the errant belief by Israel that he could be was met with harsh retribution.

Verse 2 explains through the use of Isaiah 40:12 and 66:1 that it was the Lord who abolished the Temple – he reminded the Jews of a valuable lesson, that he cannot be contained in a building. While it was the Romans who physically destroyed the Temple, then, the author’s viewpoint is that this was completely sanctioned by God. Rome in this sense acted as a divine tool for God to castigate his wayward people. This is a common motif in early-Christian literature bearing anti-Jewish rhetoric. When the author assures his Christian audience in verse 2 that “you now know that their hope was in vain,” he both demeans the Jews and warns them against similar behaviour (see also Epistle of Barnabas chapter 4). Israel’s punishment was long foretold by scripture (verse 5), but as the new inheritors of God’s covenant, an issue which the author deals with at length in chapters 5-6, the Christian community must strive towards the impending eschaton with both confidence and caution not to repeat the mistakes which led to the Temple’s destruction.

Keywords in the original language:

- ??????
- ???????
- ?????
- ?????
- ?????
- ???????
- ??????
- ?????
- ?????
- ?????
- ?????
- ?????
- ?????
- ?????
- ?????
- ?????
- ?????
- ?????
- ?????
- ?????
- ?????
- ?????

Thematic keywords in English:

- Aelia Capitolina
- consecration
- destruction of the Temple
- divine punishment
- enemy
- eschatology
- Great Revolt
- heaven
- Jerusalem Temple
- Jewish war
- prophecy
- punishment
- Second Temple
- servant
Carleton Paget, James, *The Epistle of Barnabas: Outlook and Background* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1994)
Wengst, Klaus, *Didache (Apostellehre), Barnabasbrief, Zweiter Klemensbrief, Schrift an Diognet. Eingeleitet, herausgegeben, übertragen und erläutert* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1984)

Other sources connected with this document: Text


The trampling of Jerusalem by the Gentiles

- Read more about Luke 21:7-28

Text

Matthew 24:3-31

Eschatological woes and Jesus's parousia

- Read more about Matthew 24:3-31

Realized by:

Kimberley Fowler

Source URL: http://www.judaism-and-rome.org/epistle-barnabas-161-5