Epistle of Barnabas 4.3-5

The end of the Flavian dynasty?

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

**Category:** Christian  
**Literary genre:** Letter and Teaching

**Title of work:** The Epistle of Barnabas  
**Reference:**  
4.3-5

**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. For instance, James Rhodes suggests that the text came at a low point for the Jewish community, when Hadrian planned to build a temple to Jupiter on the ruins of the Jerusalem temple. The Christian author therefore 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).

The present verses occur within a passage where the author is exhorting his audience to good behaviour, which he frames eschatologically, supposedly quoting from Enoch that the “final stumbling block” is imminent. This quotation does not find an exact parallel in Enoch, and may simply be the author’s memory of something like 1 Enoch 90:17 (see James Carleton Paget, *The Epistle of Barnabas*, p. 10, n. 38 for a detailed discussion of this issue). The author expands upon the character of this “stumbling block” by quoting two passages from Daniel 7:24 and 7:7-8 (albeit not adhering to the precise order or wording of the text of Daniel either from the LXX or other papyri, and only the second is actually attributed to Daniel by the author). It seems that the author has somewhat freely utilised material from Daniel, which is significantly abbreviated, or perhaps is drawing on another apocalyptic source. It is generally agreed that the fourth beast here is used to refer to the Roman empire, with the horns perhaps representing different rulers. However, a great number of questions arise at this point. Firstly, if this is the case, then at which point in Roman history should one start counting “horns” (emperors)? Is the “little horn” an eleventh ruler who comes after the “ten” (4.4: “after them”) or one of them (4.5: “out of them”)? Might this problem be rectified through the application of a *Nero redivivus* myth, where Nero returned from dead is counted as the eleventh horn, who was still once part of the ten? The popular *Nero redivivus* myth, which hoped or feared Nero would return from the dead, believed that he would appear with armies of Medes and Persians (Parthians) to destroy Rome and other places (see, for example, *Sibyline Oracles* 5:488-490; 8:92 and Dio Chrysostom, *Discourse XXI On Beauty* 10). This myth is also a popular explanation for the cryptic language of...
Revelation 13:11-12 and 17:11, which also draws heavily on the book of Daniel and uses various “beasts” to describe the evils of the Roman empire. What does it mean that the little horn is called an “offshoot,” and how does this “offshoot” subdue three of the others “with a single blow”?

Scholars have taken pains over the years to make the “ten horn” fit with Roman emperors, some beginning with Augustus, others beginning with Julius Caesar, some excluding Vitellius and/or Otho (for details of each argument, see Rhodes, The Epistle of Barnabas, p. 48). As Rhodes highlights, however, manipulating the text in this way has enabled interpreters to identify the “little” horn with almost anyone from Vespasian to Hadrian. Reidar Hvalvic (Struggle for Scripture, p. 30) has suggested that Vespasian is a good candidate for the “offshoot” on the grounds that Suetonius notes the slight obscurity of the Flavian house at the time of Vespasian’s reign (Suetonius, Vespasian 1). Peter Richardson and Martin Shukster understood verses 4-5 of this passage in reference to the end of the Flavian dynasty of Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian, with the assassination of Domitian as the “single blow” which humiliated the once powerful dynasty. As such they have suggested a more specific dating for the text during or soon after the reign of Nerva (96-98 CE) (“Barnabas, Nerva, and the Yavnean Rabbis”). This is not a particularly satisfactory explanation either, however.

The problem is that such apocalyptic texts are frequently difficult to interpret in the precise and contrived ways that scholars often attempt to, and it is not always necessary for understanding the wider point that is being made. For instance, it is perhaps unnecessary to read specific Roman emperors onto each different “beast” mentioned in Revelation. The book of Revelation as a whole seeks to do something broader than condemn, for instance, Nero or Domitian – the author sets the entirety of Roman authority against that of God/Jesus. In this sense, the beasts can be interpreted as any or all Roman emperors. Might something similar be going on here in the Epistle of Barnabas? Rhodes points out that one should keep in mind the fact that even when interpreting Daniel itself, while the “little horn” is taken to be Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the identities of the preceding “ten horns” and the “uprooted horns” are debated. The association of the “little horn” with Antiochus IV Epiphanes is based on other evidence from Daniel, and the context of the Maccabean conflict (Rhodes, The Epistle of Barnabas, p. 49; he cites John J. Collins, Daniel, p. 320-321 on this issue).

The Epistle of Barnabas has at its centre a concern with proving that Israel has fallen out of favour with God, and the Christians are thus the inheritors of God’s covenant – they are the “beloved” of verse 3. As chapter 16 goes on to elaborate through its account of the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, the Romans are key in bringing about God’s eschatological plan. They have played a significant role in punishing the Jews for their errant ways, and yet the anticipation of their own downfall can perhaps be understood in the present passage to signal that God’s ultimate plan for his new people is coming into fruition. The author of the text therefore shares the polemic of writings such as Revelation, whereby the Roman empire is viewed as a wicked beast, bound for destruction. However, the author of the Epistle of Barnabas also understands Rome to have played an important part in establishing the Christians as God’s people.
beast

cycle of empires

Daniel

Flavian dynasty

king

kingdom

prophecy

Roman emperor

Carleton Paget, James, *The Epistle of Barnabas: Outlook and Background* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1994)

Other sources connected with this document: Text

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The destruction of the Jerusalem Temple

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