

SABBATH AND COVENANT IN THE EPISTLE OF BARNABAS

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The Epistle of Barnabas is usually dated to 130 A.D., though some have placed it earlier.¹ Chapter 15 is often considered to contain the earliest definite reference to Sunday observance by Christians,² with the purpose of discouraging the observance of the seventh-day Sabbath.³ If this is true, it may be claimed as a witness to the early observance of Sunday in place of the seventh-day Sabbath.

Several considerations indicate a need to reopen questions regarding the interpretation of this epistle. First, it has been maintained that the author's choice of terms implies an observance of Saturday and Sunday conjointly.⁴ Such practice on the part of the author of Barnabas would not be consistent with his supposed attack on the seventh-day Sabbath. Is there, then, sufficient evidence in the Epistle of Barnabas to affirm that its author defended the observance of Sunday, or that he discouraged the observance of the seventh-day Sabbath?

It is true that the author had an obvious anti-Jewish bias and that he interpreted some aspects of the Torah allegorically, but one cannot necessarily infer from these facts that he also allegorized the Decalogue. He does maintain in chapter 15 that the purest form of Sabbath-keeping will only occur during the eschatological rest following the Second Coming, and that one cannot gain covenant status through Sabbath observance, but this article will argue that it does not necessarily follow from these statements that the Sabbath is not binding on Christians.⁵

¹Edgar J. Goodspeed dates it to 130-131 A.D. (*A History of Early Christian Literature* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966], 20); other scholars have proposed a date within the first century; see Kirsopp Lake, *The Apostolic Fathers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), I:335-336.

²Samuele Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday* (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University Press, 1977), 218.

³Cf. Robert L. Odom, *Sabbath and Sunday in Early Christianity* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1977), 86-92; William H. Shea, "The Sabbath in the Epistle of Barnabas," *AUSS* 4 (1966): 168.

⁴Bacchiocchi, 284-285.

⁵Besides chap. 15, there is little in Barnabas that can be brought to bear on Sabbath-

Indeed, there are no clear references to Sunday in *Barn.* 15 and nothing in it that disallows Sabbath observance. A careful study of the argumentative function of the OT quotations in the epistle shows that the author is attempting to invalidate Sabbath-keeping as a means of obtaining the covenantal favor of God for literal Israel; but he is not attempting to discourage Sabbath-keeping in general. It is possible, then, that this epistle cannot be claimed as a witness to the substitution of Sunday for Sabbath observance in primitive Christendom.

The text of chapter 15, as given in the translation of Kirsopp Lake,⁶ is as follows:

1. Furthermore, it was written concerning the Sabbath in the ten words which God spake on Mount Sinai face to face to Moses: "Sanctify also the Sabbath of the Lord with pure hands and a pure heart." 2. And in another place he says, "If my sons keep the Sabbath, then will I bestow my mercy upon them." 3. He speaks of the Sabbath at the beginning of the Creation, "And God made in six days the works of his hands and on the seventh day he made an end, and rested in it and sanctified it." 4. Notice, children, what is the meaning of "He made an end in six days"? He means this: that the Lord will make an end of everything in six thousand years, for a day with him means a thousand years. And he himself is my witness when he says, "Lo, the day of the Lord shall be as a thousand years." So then, children, in six days, that is in six thousand years, everything will be completed. 5. "And he rested on the seventh day." This means, when his Son comes he will destroy the time of the wicked one, and will judge the godless, and will change the sun and the moon and the stars, and then he will truly rest on the seventh day. 6. Furthermore he says, "Thou shalt sanctify it with clean hands and a pure heart." If, then, anyone has at present the power to keep holy the day which God made holy, by being pure in heart, we are altogether deceived. 7. See that we shall indeed keep it holy at that time, when we enjoy true rest, when we shall be able to do so because we have been made righteous ourselves and have received the promise, when there is no more sin, but all things have been made new by the Lord: then we shall be able to keep it holy because we ourselves have first been made holy. 8. Furthermore he says to them, "Your new moons and the Sabbaths, I cannot away with."⁷ Do you see what he means? The present Sabbaths are not acceptable to me, but that which I have made, in which I will give rest to all things and make the beginning of an eighth day, that is the beginning of another world. 9. Wherefore we also celebrate with gladness the eighth day in which Jesus also rose from the dead, and was made manifest, and ascended into Heaven.

keeping. In 2:6, following the quotation from Isa 1:13, the author comments, "These things then he abolished." The subject, however, is "sacrifice" rather than "days of rest."

⁶Lake, I:392-397.

⁷A more modern translation of "I cannot away with" would be "I cannot endure."

As may be readily seen, this chapter of the epistle is composed of OT passages and the author's commentary. To assess the meaning, it is important to notice the placement of the chapter in the epistle. Previous chapters (especially 13 and 14) attempt to demonstrate that even though God did grant a covenant and its attendant blessings at Sinai to the literal Israelites, it was lost almost immediately through idolatry and was never granted again (4:6-8; 14:1); instead, the Christian church has received it (13:5-7). Chapter 15 is intimately related to this idea, as evidenced by the opening conjunction *eti oun* ("furthermore"). It appears that Barnabas is amassing evidence for his position on the exclusion of literal Israel from the covenant. This calls into question whether Christian Sabbath-keeping is being discouraged in this chapter. There is nothing in the context of the previous chapters to suggest that he may be dealing with Christian practices. The question of whether *Barn.* 15:9 refers to Christian Sabbath or Sunday observance will be dealt with below.

First, however, what is the precise connection between the exclusion of Israel from the covenant and the OT quotations in 15:1, 2? The answer to this question is complicated by the idiosyncratic way in which the author quotes the OT. Research has established that some of the quotations in Barnabas are exact, while others are not.⁸ This variance may be partially explained by supposing that the author was using *testimonia* (collections of passages for apologetics), rather than the LXX text.

Lake translates the quotation in *Barn.* 15:1 thus: "Sanctify also the Sabbath of the Lord with pure hands and a pure heart." This quotation cannot originate from the Decalogue since the fourth commandment does not mention hands or heart. We may assume that this usage of "pure hands and a pure heart" is not to be explained in terms of a grossly loose quotation practice or faulty memory, but is purposeful. Barnabas returns to the subject "purity of heart and hands" in 15:6, with the remaining verses of the chapter hinging on the idea of purity (cf. 15:7). It is not likely that Barnabas would entrust the biblical authority of his argument to a concept absent from Scripture without ever bothering to check it or being corrected by others. It seems preferable, therefore, to understand the meaning of 15:1 in the following manner: "Furthermore, concerning the Sabbath [which is] in the ten words God spoke on Mount Sinai face to face, it is written, 'Sanctify also the Sabbath of the Lord with pure hands and a pure heart.'" When interpreted in this way, one can see that the

⁸L. W. Barnard, *Studies in the Apostolic Fathers and Their Background* (New York: Schocken Books, 1966), 109-136.

⁹In this elucidation of the meaning, the phrase "in the ten words God spoke" (*en tois deka logios en hois elálaxen*) is connected not with the verb "it is written" (*gégraphtai*), but with

quotation is not referring directly to the Decalogue, but to another OT passage *concerning* the Sabbath in the Decalogue (and not concerning other sabbaths, such as the annual ones).¹⁰

A reasonable candidate for this quotation is Isa 56:2, where the injunction “keep the Sabbaths from profaning them” may be considered loosely equivalent to “sanctify the Sabbath,” and “keep his hands from doing unrighteousness” is comparable to “with pure hands and a pure heart.” While Isa 56:2 is not a perfect match for the quotation in *Barn.* 15:1, it does appear to be a much more reasonable one than the fourth commandment of the Decalogue. More importantly, Isa 56 is more appropriate in the context of *Barn.* 15 than the Decalogue, since it deals repeatedly with both Sabbath and covenant (56:2, 4, 6), which is the subject of *Barn.* 15 (cf. chaps. 13 and 14). It is clear from the remainder of chapter 15 that the concept “purity of hands” is considered to be integral to the biblical authority to which *Barn.* 15:1 appeals.

Accordingly, the argumentative function of the OT quotations in 15:1, 2 seems to be the solution for the problem of literal Israel and the covenant. In Isa 56:2, 4, 6, as well as other similar OT passages, the observance of the seventh day is linked with God’s covenant: “Blessed is the man who does this . . . , who keeps the Sabbath without desecrating it and who holds fast to my covenant.” There is no question that literal Israel observes the seventh-day Sabbath, and thus Jews might claim to be in the covenant—a conclusion Barnabas wishes to argue against. Additionally, other OT passages, such as Jer 17:24-26 and Exod 31:13-17, definitely promise the favor of God for Israel if the Sabbath is kept, a fact duly noted in *Barn.* 15:2.

To resolve the conflict between OT promises of blessing to literal Israel and his personal desire to exclude them from these blessings, Barnabas introduces a doctrine of an eschatological holy state in the future world. The condition established in the OT for receiving covenantal grace is not, according to *Barn.* 13:1, 2, mere Sabbath-keeping: purity of hands and heart is conjointly necessary (as may be inferred from Isa 56:2). Therefore, Sabbath observance will become a source of covenantal grace only in the future world, when true purity and righteousness will be obtained for the first time by God’s people and the promised divine favor and grace will be manifest in the new earth (*Barn.* 15:3-7). In the meantime, Sabbath observance does not obtain the grace of God for literal

the noun “Sabbath” (*sabbátou*). The translation supplied the phrase “which is,” according to a familiar Greek pattern as in *pater hem̄n ho en tois ouranois*, “our Father which art in heaven” (KJV).

¹⁰Cf. Lev 23:4-39.

Israel. This is precisely the point of chapters 13-15.

Another OT quotation occurs in 15:8. It has generally been identified as Barnabas's interpretation of Isa 1:13, in which he takes the position "that God has abolished Sabbath observance."¹¹ However, when the author states that "the *present* Sabbaths are not acceptable," he does not mean in this context that God now rejects Sabbath-keeping. Rather, he means that the present forms of Sabbath-keeping performed by literal Israel have not earned them God's covenantal favor. This is shown by the fact that the time has not yet come in which God will give "rest to all things and make the beginning of an eighth day, that is, the beginning of a new world," thus realizing his grace and favor in a concrete way.

The theory of an eschatological holy rest, then, does not purport to invalidate Sabbath observance generally, but rather only the Jewish claim to a present covenantal status because of such observance. To buttress this theory, Barnabas appeals to the Christian practice of celebrating "also" the eighth day with gladness, as if anticipating the future age (15:9).¹² A Christian observance of the seventh-day Sabbath would not be affected by Barnabas's considerations, since the status of Christians as the people of the new covenant depends on the sacrifice of Christ, which has already been accomplished (*Barn.* 14:5); and, therefore, there is no appeal to Law-righteousness, as in the case of the Jews.

Barnabas's theory of eschatological rest should, therefore, be read in its proper context of OT quotations and not as a general commentary on Sabbath observance. The OT quotations may seem initially to imply that, in his view, the Jewish community has a legitimate claim to God's covenant, but through the use of eschatology he tries to forestall such a conclusion. At present, literal Israel does not have access to covenantal blessings through Sabbath observance, since the condition of absolute purity of heart and hands cannot now be met. In contrast, Christians have immediate access to those promises through the sacrifice of Christ.

The Epistle of Barnabas allegorizes several commandments of the Pentateuch, such as the prohibition of eating unclean animals. However, in so doing Barnabas recommends a series of ethical norms clearly inspired by the Decalogue. For instance, abstaining from the meat of the "hawk, kite, and crow" means that Christians should abstain from stealing, and the prohibition against the use of hyena meat indicates that Christians

¹¹Odom, 91.

¹²This "also," as intimated before, might conceivably imply a double observance of both Saturday and Sunday, which was common for centuries in the East. But it could also refer to an additional reason for joy, besides the resurrection of Christ, namely, the anticipation of the joys of eternity, rather than the observance of Sunday in addition to that of Saturday.

should abstain from adultery (*Barn.* 10:4, 7). In view of this influence of the Decalogue upon Barnabas, and since the only reference he makes to the Sabbath is to disprove the Jewish claim to covenantal status, it seems unlikely that Barnabas intended that the "Sabbath which is in the ten words God spake on Mount Sinai" is no longer binding on Christians. Additionally, his apparent distinction between the Sabbath of the Decalogue and other (annual) Sabbaths suggests he did not consider it so. In any case, if his purpose was to discourage the observance of the seventh-day Sabbath, he certainly could not have accomplished such an objective through the arguments advanced in chapter 15.

Another interpretation of *Barn.* 15, namely that it could have helped to give Sunday prominence among early Christians, is equally far from certain. Later writers such as Clement of Alexandria and Origen often quoted the Epistle of Barnabas as Scripture, but they never used it in their argumentation for Sunday-keeping,¹³ suggesting that they did not understand it to support Sunday observance.

Though the "eighth day" of 15:9 is usually understood today to indicate Sunday (as, for example, in the recent papal episcopal letter *Deus Domini*) on the grounds that Sunday comes after the seventh day, no known author before Barnabas used the phrase in that sense;¹⁴ rather, he uses it in two ways: In an eschatological sense, it denotes a new age of the world when God will "make the beginning of an eighth day, that is, the beginning of another world" (15:8); in a present sense, however, it refers to Christian praxis (15:9).

Many have assumed that this "eighth day" praxis is a reference to a weekly day of rest different from the seventh-day Sabbath. However, in the immediate context Barnabas is not making such a contrast; instead he draws a parallel between the eighth age of the world and the Christian observance of the "eighth day." Scholars suggest that the Epistle of Barnabas is a paschal homily, basing their arguments on the strength of 15:9, among other passages.¹⁵ Thus the "eighth day" probably refers to the high day of the paschal festival, the "eighth day" counting from Palm Sunday at the beginning of Holy Week to Easter day proper, or the feast of the Resurrection. Evidence for this view may be found in the mention

¹³Odom, 91f.

¹⁴Later authors did use "eighth day" for Sunday, but such use seems to depend on Barnabas or on a misunderstanding of the same. Slavic Enoch (2 *Enoch*) has been cited as an early witness of the "eighth day" concept, but this appears only in the extremely late J recension of this pseudepigraphical work, from the twelfth century or later (Kenneth A. Strand, ed., *The Sabbath in Scripture and History* [Washington DC: Review and Herald, 1982], 68).

¹⁵Barnard, 78.

of the "gladness" of the eighth day, a feeling which contrasts with the sadness of Good Friday and, indeed, of most of the season. It was common in the early centuries of the Christian era to expect the Second Coming at Easter.¹⁶ Because of this hope, the "gladness" of the feast of the Resurrection included an element of expectation—of an immediate realization of the "new world"—the eschatological "eighth day" (15:8). Hence, the eighth day of the *Easter festival* "in which Jesus also rose from the dead," may be connected with the eschatological theory of Barnabas in a much more natural way than to the first day of each week.

It is, therefore, not clear whether *Barn.* 15 refers to Sunday observance at all. Even if it does, such reference is not meant to propose Sunday as an alternative rest day, but only as a day celebrating the biblical hope in an age to come—an age when the conditions for the Sabbath observance will be met from the standpoint of the arguments presented in the Epistle of Barnabas. This possibility challenges the use of Barnabas as an early witness for Sunday observance; and, further, it does not provide adequate argumentation for the abandonment of the seventh-day Sabbath at the time the Epistle was written.

¹⁶Ibid.