

**‘Barnabas, His Gospel, and its Credibility (II)**

*Abdus Sattar Ghauri*

**V. BARNABAS AS AN AUTHOR.**

The following works have been attributed to Barnabas:

- i) Epistle to Hebrews
- ii) Epistle of Barnabas
- iii) Gospel of Barnabas

There is another short work ,‘The Acts of Barnabas’, but it was not written by Barnabas. The work itself claims of having been written by John Mark , the cousin of St. Barnabas , which is evident from the following:

(...) and since I have zealously served Him, I have deemed it necessary to give an account of the mysteries which I have heard and seen.

I, John, accompanying the holy apostles Barnabas and Paul, (...), for assuredly thy name shall be changed to Mark, and thy glory shall be proclaimed in all the world<sup>52</sup>.

But the claim is controversial and ‘The Acts of Barnabas’ is said to be doubtlessly ‘originated at the end of the 5th or in the beginning of the 6th century.’<sup>53</sup>

**i) The Epistle to the Hebrews**

This is a canonical book and is the 19th title of the New Testament of the Bible. Its authorship is a disputed question, as is elaborated in W. Barclay’s ‘The Daily Study Bible’:

Perhaps the most insoluble problem of all is the problem of its authorship. (...). The title in the earliest days was simply, 'To the Hebrews.' No author's name was given, no one connected it directly with the name of Paul. Clement of Alexandria used to think that Paul might have written it in Hebrew and that Luke translated it, for the style is quite different from that of Paul. Origen made a famous remark, 'Who wrote the Letter to the Hebrews only God knows for certain.' (...). Jerome said the Latin Church did not receive it as Paul's and speaking of the author said, 'the writer to the Hebrews whoever he was.' Augustine felt the same way about it. Luther declared that Paul could never have written it because the thought was not his. Calvin said that he could not bring himself to think that this letter was a letter of Paul.

At no time in the history of the Church did men ever really think that Paul wrote Hebrews. (...).

Can we guess who the author was? Many candidates have been put forward. We can only glance at three of the many suggestions.

(i) Tertullian thought that Barnabas wrote it. Barnabas was a native of Cyprus; the people of Cyprus were famous for the excellence of the Greek they spoke; and Hebrews is written in the best Greek in the New Testament. He was a Levite (Acts 4:36) and of all men in the New Testament he would have had the closest knowledge of the priestly and sacrificial system on which the whole thought of the letter is based. (...). He was one of the few men acceptable to both Jews and Greeks and at home in both worlds of thought. It might be that Barnabas wrote this letter, (...).

(ii) Luther was sure that Apollos was the author. (...).

(iii) The most romantic of all conjectures is that of

Harnack, the great German scholar. He thought that maybe Aquila and Priscilla wrote it between them.<sup>54</sup>

‘A New Commentary on Holy Scripture’ has also dealt with the subject in a bit detail. Some excerpts are given below:

(...) His[author’s] great interest in the details of the Law, and especially the details of sacrifice, make it almost certain that he was a Jew, and probable that he was of a priestly family or connexion. If a Jew, he was a Hellenistic Jew and highly educated. The arrangement of his argument is in the best rhetorical style of the day; his Greek in language, grammar, and syntax is the best in the New Testament, (...). The nearest approach to a ‘tradition’ is one quoted by Tertullian as current in North Africa at the close of the 2nd century ascribing the epistle to Barnabas. In the first three centuries the Eastern Church generally --- probably in order to justify its inclusion in the canon --- attributed it to St Paul, while the westerns denied the Pauline authorship, (...). It was only after the 4th century that the Latin Western Church accepted the Pauline authorship. (...) At the Reformation the Pauline authorship was at first again disputed. (...) it came back into general acceptance, and so remained until the 19th century. Today, however, it is almost universally regarded on the grounds of style and subject matter as very improbable. (...).

These indications all agree in placing the date of the epistle not later than 70 (earlier than 64, if written to Rome), but not earlier than about 55-60. In any case it is certainly earlier than the letter of Clement of Rome (A.D. 95).<sup>55</sup>

J. L. McKenzie’s Dictionary of the Bible asserts as follows:

Very few modern scholars still maintain that Heb is the work of Paul. (...), and both ancients and moderns have made various suggestions: Clement of Rome, Barnabas, Jude, Apollos, and even Priscilla, the wife of Aquila.

These are no more than guesses. (...)

The divergences from Paul in vocabulary, style, sentence structure, and patterns of thought are more numerous and more notable than the resemblances. The style of Heb is the most polished of all the NT writings. The author knows and uses the rhetorical figures and periods of style.<sup>56</sup>

Encyclopaedia Biblica has also dilated upon the subject. Some relevant excerpts would further elaborate the point:

With this it agrees that the early Roman church ---where the epistle was known about the end of the first century, and where indeed the first traces of the use of it occur (Clement, and *Sheferd of Hermas*) --- had nothing to contribute to the question of authorship and origin except the negative opinion that the book is not by Paul. (...); Hippolytus (like his master Irenaeus of Lyons) knew our book and declared that it was not Pauline.

The earliest positive traditions of authorship to which we can point belong to Africa and Egypt,(...). I. The African tradition preserved by Tertullian (*De Pudicitia*, 20), but certainly not invented by him, ascribes the epistle to Barnabas.<sup>57</sup>

W. Tong observed as follows:

(...) some have assigned it to Clement of Rome; others to Luke; and many to Barnabas, thinking that the style and manner of expression is very agreeable to zealous, authoritative, affectionate temper that Barnabas appears to be of, in the account we have of him in the Acts of the Apostles; and one ancient father quotes an expression out of this epistle, as the words of Barnabas.<sup>58</sup>

About similar views are held by most of the authorities. It shows that Barnabas admittedly held the talent of an author. Some of the authorities are given below:

- i) A.M. Stibbs, V. Principal, Oak Hill Theological College, London, the New Bible Commentary, p. 1088
- ii) Dr. Allan J. McNicol, Prof. of N.T., Inst. for Christian Studies, Austin, Texas, Harper's Bible Dictionary, Bangalore, 1994, p. 94.
- iii) Myles M. Bourke, The New Jerome Biblical Commentary, Bangalore, 1994, p.920.
- iv) Dr. Robert W. Ross, Dptt. of History, N. W. College, Minnneapolis, Minn., The Wycliffe's Bible Commentary, 1987, p. 1403 f.
- v) William Smith, A Dictionary of the Bible, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1988, p.238.
- vi) Dr. F. F. Bruce, Ryland's Prof. of Biblical Criticism & Exegesis, Manchester University, in Peake's Commentary on the Bible, Thomas Nelson Ltd, London, 1967, p. 1008.

From the above data it is clear that:

1. The attribution of the authorship of 'The Letter to the Hebrews' towards Paul is categorically ruled out by all the authorities. He could not have been the writer of it.
2. If the authorship of 'The Letter to the Hebrews' can be attributed to anyone, he can only be Barnabas; and, that's why, it has actually been attributed to him by so many celebrities.
3. The attribution of 'The Letter to the Hebrews' to anyone else is not acceptable.

It can thus be concluded that Barnabas was recognized as a scholar and as a writer from the early centuries of Christianity, otherwise one of the best documents of the New Testament could not have been attributed to him by a number of celebrities.

## **ii) The Epistle of Barnabas**

This is not a canonical book; it is an Apocryphal book. 'Its Greek text was first discovered entire in the Codex Sinaiticus.'<sup>59</sup> Its authorship is also a matter of dispute. Although, in view of the modern scholarship, it is difficult to assert that Barnabas is

the author of it, but previously it was ascribed only to Barnabas, which is evident from the following:

The ancient writers who refer to this Epistle unanimously attribute it to Barnabas the Levite, of Cyprus, who held such an honourable place in the infant Church. Clement of Alexandria does so again and again (Strom.,ii. 6,ii. 7, etc.). Origen describes it as 'a Catholic Epistle' (Cont. Cels., I.63 ), and seems to rank it among the Sacred Scriptures(Comm. in Rom., I.24). Other statements have been quoted from the fathers, to show that they held this to be an authentic production of the apostolic Barnabas; and certainly no other name is ever hinted at in Christian antiquity as that of the writer.<sup>60</sup>

The Epistle was first cited by Clement of Alexandria, and Origen, as a work of the apostolic Barnabas, who plays so prominent a part in the early history of the Church. Origen seems to rank it almost with the inspired Scriptures. In the Sinaitic Bible, of the fourth century, it follows as the 'Epistle of Barnabas,' immediately after the Apocalypse (even on the same page 135, second column), as if it were a regular part of the New Testament. (...). Eusebius and Jerome likewise ascribe it to Barnabas, but number it among the 'spurious,' or 'apocryphal' writings. They seem to have doubted the authority, but not the authenticity of the epistle. The historical testimony therefore is strong and unanimous in favor of Barnabas, and is accepted by all the older editors and several of the later critics.<sup>61</sup>

From the Above references it is abundantly clear that almost all the renowned Christian scholars acknowledge and greet Barnabas as a competent writer. M. J. Shroyer, Professor Emeritus of New Testament, Wesley Theological Seminary, Washington, D.C. puts it as follows:

The testimony of the later Church gives Barnabas a role as writer. Tertullian assigned to him the authorship of the letter to the Hebrews. Both Clement of Alexandria

and Origen gave him credit for the epistle which bears his name, and they gave it canonical standing because they rated its author as an apostle. However, the nature of both Hebrews and the Epistle of Barnabas is hard to reconcile with the conservative tendencies of Barnabas as indicated in Galatians, and the identification of Barnabas with Jerusalem in the book of Acts. Moreover, the Epistle of Barnabas seems to be dated ca. A.D. 130 on internal evidence, and too late for our Barnabas.<sup>62</sup>

It can thus be concluded from the above dissertations that although the attribution of the above two books to Barnabas is not safe yet his potential, capability and talent as a competent writer and author was universally admitted.

### **iii) The Gospel of Barnabas**

Setting aside the question of the Gospel printed at the Clarendon Press, Oxford, in 1907; only the question whether a gospel had ever been written by Barnabas, would be discussed in this section.

There are two documents providing the lists of accepted (canonical) and rejected (apocryphal) books of the Bible in which 'The Gospel of Barnabas' has categorically been recorded and described as APOCRYPHAL (rejected). A brief account is given below:

#### **(a) DECRETUM GELASIANUM**

It was 'An early Latin document, handed down most frequently under the name of Pope Gelasius (492-96), but in some MSS. as the work of Damasus (366-84) or Hormisdas (514-23), containing *inter alia* a Latin list of the Books, of the Bible. Acc. to E. von. Dobschutz, it is not a Papal work at all, but a private compilation which was composed in Italy (but not at Rome) in the early 6th century.'<sup>63</sup> W. Schneemelcher has provided some details of this Decree. Some of its excerpts are given below:

In the so called *Decretum Gelasianum de libris recipiendis et non recipiendis*, which upon the whole is probably of South Gallic origin (6th century) but which

in several parts can be traced back to Pope Damasus [366-84 A.D.] and reflects Roman Tradition, we have in the second part a canon catalogue, (...), and in the fifth part a catalogue of the 'apocrypha' and other writings which are to be rejected. The canon catalogue gives all 27 books of the NT, the canon therefore being settled definitely in this form. The list, already outwardly and sharply separated from it, of the 'apocrypha', i.e. of the writings to be rejected, is given here in translation (acc. to the edition of v. Dobschutz, see below). (...).

*Further Enumeration of Apocryphal Books:*

(...). Itinerary (books of travels) under the name of the apostle Peter, (...) apocryphal

Acts under the name of the apostle Andrew, Thomas, etc. apocryphal

Gospel under the name of Matthias apocryphal

Gospel under the name of Barnabas apocryphal

(...)

These and the like, what Simon Magus, (...), have taught or compiled, we acknowledge is to be not merely rejected but excluded from the whole Roman Catholic and apostolic Church and with its authors and the adherents of its authors to be damned in the inextricable shackles of anathema forever.<sup>64</sup>

**(b) CATALOGUE OF THE 60 CANONICAL BOOKS**

The heading of this catalogue is quite misleading. True, it provides the names of 60 canonical books of the Bible, but its author has recorded in it 25 names of apocryphal books as well. Relevant excerpts are reproduced from W. Schneemelcher:

This list transmitted in several manuscripts (for information about these see Zahn, *Gesch. d. ntl. Kanons* II I, pp. 289 f.) reflects the view, widely held in the Greek Church, at a later time, of the canon of sixty books (34 OT and 26 NT, therefore without the revelation of John). After the enumeration of the canonical books, in which the complete silence observed regarding the Apocalypse of John is the most serious



matter, there follows that of the writings 'outside the sixty' and the 'apocrypha'.

And the following (writings) outside the 60:

1. The Wisdom of Solomon
2. The Wisdom of Sirach -----9. Tobit

And the following apocryphal (writings):

1. Adam --- 23. The Teaching of Polycarp
24. The Gospel according to Barnabas
25. The Gospel according to Matthias <sup>65</sup>

It is thus clear that 'The Gelasian Decree' --- whosoever its writer and whatsoever its status --- (a) had been written and physically existed before the advent of Islam in the 7th century A.D.

(b) There would have been something in it unacceptable for the Church which was by that time under complete hold of the Pauline Creed and, therefore, the Church denounced it as apocrypha (literally meaning a hidden or secret thing ). Had it not ever existed in written form, it could not have been declared as rejected.

---

- 
52. The Ante Nicene Fathers Vol.8, p.493
  53. New Testament Apocrypha, Vol.2, p.578
  54. W.Barclay, The Daily Study Bible, Vol.13, p.8f
  55. S.C.Gayford, A New Commentary on Holy Scripture (Ed. Charles Gore), Part III, London, p.596f.
  56. John L. McKenzie, Dictionary of the Bible, Bangalore, 1984, p.348f.
  57. Encyclopaedia Biblica, WATTS AND CO. London, E.C., 1899, Vol. II, p.(column) 1991f.
  58. Matthew Henry, A Commentary on the Holy Bible, Ward, Lock & Co., London, E.C., Vol. VI, p.1240.
  59. The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, p.134.
  60. The Ante Nicene Fathers Vol. I, p.134.
  61. Philip Schaff, History of the Christian Church, N.Y., Charles Scribner's Sons, 1888, Vol. II, p.675 f
  62. The Interpreter's Dictionary, Vol. I, p. 357.
  63. The Oxford Dy. of Christisn Church, p. 385.
  64. New Testament Apocrypha, Vol. I, pp.46-49.
  65. op. cit. p. 51f.