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Barnabas

The book of Acts refers frequently to an important leader in the church named Barnabas (pronounced bahr´nuh-buhs). His name was actually Joseph but the apostles in Jerusalem decided to call him “Barnabas,” which in Hebrew means “son of encouragement” (Acts 4:36).

This renaming was in sync with the practice of Jesus who decided to call one of his disciples “Peter” (“rock” in Greek), even though his birth name was Simon. Neither “Peter” nor “Barnabas” is known to have been used as names prior to these applications by Jesus and the apostles.

In any case, Barnabas was a Levite from Cyprus, and so, a Jew from the Diaspora who had perhaps moved to Jerusalem, or perhaps was simply visiting when he encountered the Christian community there. He became a member of that early church quite early, though there is no reason to believe he was among the 120 on the day of Pentecost. More likely, he could have been among the 3,000 added to the church on that day (Acts 2:41), though that is also just speculation.

Barnabas was a cousin of John Mark (Col. 4:10) and soon became a leader in the church. He is first mentioned as the prime example of believers who took seriously the community’s commitment to hold all

things in common. He sold a field and laid the money at the apostles' feet to be used by the community as a whole (Acts 4:36–37). In this way, he is presented as the antithesis of Ananias and Sapphira, two greedy Christians who sought to take advantage of the “all things in common” policy by living out of the common purse while also holding on to their own private resources (Acts 5:1–10).

According to Acts, Barnabas was the person who introduced Saul (Paul) to the apostles in Jerusalem (9:27). Naturally, the apostles were initially suspicious of Saul, a new convert who had viciously persecuted them, but when Barnabas vouched for him they were more accepting.

Later Barnabas appears in Antioch, where he was sent as a representative of the Jerusalem church (11:19–26). He affirms the mission to the gentiles there and works with Saul as senior partner or supervisor of a Christian mission in Syria-Cilicia. Acts further reports that Barnabas and Saul took the famine offering from Antioch to Jerusalem (11:27–30; 12:25).

Paul and Barnabas traveled together on a mission tour to Cyprus and to the Iconium region of Asia Minor (13:1–14:28). They also appeared together at the Jerusalem council (15:1–35) but later disagreed over the question of allowing John Mark to accompany them on a second mission trip (15:36–41).

The problem was that John Mark had cut short his participation in an earlier mission (13:13). Paul took this to mean he was unreliable, but

Barnabas stood by his cousin. The dispute was so acrimonious that Barnabas and Paul had to part company and go their separate ways. The narrative in Acts follows Paul, who replaces Barnabas with Silas, and heads for Asia Minor and what is now Greece (Macedonia and Achaia). We are told almost in passing that Barnabas and Mark took off on a similar journey to Cyprus, where they both had worked with Paul previously (Acts 15:39; cf. 13:4). Nothing more is reported of this trip or its outcome.

Elsewhere, Barnabas is mentioned with reference to a dispute in Antioch over whether circumcised and uncircumcised believers should eat together (Gal. 2:11–14). According to Acts 15:1–35, Barnabas was a strong defender of not binding circumcision on gentile converts, as was Peter, but he and Peter apparently sided against Paul with regard to the related question of mixed table fellowship.

A mid-second-century document called the Epistle of Barnabas was accepted as an authentic work by Paul's associate by some leaders in the early church (Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria) but is universally regarded as pseudepigraphical today.

The book of Acts speaks of Barnabas as “a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith” (11:24). Paul, despite their problems, seems to regard Barnabas as an apostle in 1 Corinthians 9:1–6. The latter reference is especially noteworthy, since Paul and Barnabas are the only two people called “apostles” in the book of Acts who had not

been members of “the twelve” or among those who had known the earthly Jesus (Acts 14:4, 14; cf. 1:15–26).

According to a survey by Wayne O. McCready, Barnabas is primarily remembered in later tradition and literature in two distinct ways:¹

- First, Barnabas becomes something of a metaphor for a mentor who is surpassed by a pupil, especially when this pleases the mentor. One might say, “I played Barnabas to his Paul,” meaning, “I was honored to help him get started, but he has accomplished more than I ever did.” So Ghirlandaio could be regarded as Barnabas to Michelangelo’s Paul, and Anne Sullivan could be regarded as Barnabas to Helen Keller’s Paul (though the expression is not typically used for women).
- Second, Barnabas becomes a symbol for missionary work in which congregations are able to support ministry in other locales. John Milton in his *De Doctrina Christiana* laid out a plan to create a class of “extraordinary ministers” within the church patterned on the work of Barnabas, who was sent from the established church in Jerusalem to aid the developing community in Antioch.² Elsewhere, Milton makes a similar case with specific reference to financial resources: the sending of Barnabas from Jerusalem to Antioch provides the model for wealthier congregations to support ministry in surrounding villages.³

1. Wayne O. McCready, "Barnabas," in *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition and English Literature*, ed. David Lyle Jeffrey (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 76.
2. John Milton, "Of the Visible Church," in *De Doctrina Christiana* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1825), 1.29.
3. John Milton, *Considerations Touching the Likeliest Means to Remove Hirelings out of the Church* (London: T.N. for L. Chapman, 1659), n.p.