

THE EXILE OF JESUS TO DAMASCUS  
IN THE MEDIEVAL GOSPEL OF BARNABAS

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In chapter 138 of the medieval Gospel of Barnabas<sup>1</sup> we reach the point in the narrative at which Judas Iscariot betrays his Master, Jesus. As is typical of this strange medieval production, the narrative, in part, follows the canonical models closely although intermingling synoptic and Johannine episodes. In this section of the work the author(s) is following synoptic patterns, but deviates from all canonical models by the inclusion of several episodes that seem to have no precedent in the Jesus tradition, canonical or apocryphal. There is, firstly, a “Miracle of the Harvest” at Nain, the place at which, according to Luke’s Gospel (Lk 7:11), and elsewhere in the Barnabas gospel (Ch. 42), Jesus raises the widow’s son. And secondly, immediately following this, there is an episode in which Jesus and his disciples retire to Damascus. This whole section of the work seems to me to be of intrinsic interest to scholars investigating the formation and later permutations of the Jesus story, especially when seen in the light of recent discoveries and new developments in scholarship. The Damascus episode, in particular, is of considerable interest because it provides a curious parallel — albeit in a very late and very disreputable source — to the now famous sojourn in “Damascus” described in the sectarian Dead Sea Scrolls. In this paper I will sketch that parallel and add some further contextual considerations. As far as I know, no one has pointed to this parallel before.

In the Miracle of the Harvest “all the men of” Nain “with the women and children” come to the house where Jesus and his disciples are staying and urge him to help them: “the worms have eaten the corn, and we shall not receive any bread this year in our land.” At length Jesus persuades them to fast for nineteen

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<sup>1</sup> L. Ragg (trans), *The Gospel of Barnabas*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1909.

days, and on the twentieth “they gathered so much corn that they did not know where to store it; and this thing was cause of plenty in Israel.” The good people of Nain, however, determine to make Jesus their king, and apparently divining this Jesus flees and his disciples cannot find him for another fifteen days. When he is found he explains that:

I fled because a host of devils is preparing for me that which in a short time you shall see. For, the chief priests with the elders of the people shall rise against me and [they] shall wrest authority to kill me from the Roman governor, because they shall fear that I wish to usurp kingship over Israel.<sup>2</sup>

And he predicts, in the canonical manner, his betrayal by one of his disciples. Then, the following day, “there came, two by two, thirty-six of Jesus’ disciples; and he abode in Damascus awaiting the others.” Here he gives a brief discourse on death.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, Judas Iscariot, we are told, has gone to visit the “chief priests” and “having made his resolution, he gave notice to the scribes and Pharisees how the matter had passed in Nain.”<sup>4</sup> It is explained that “he hoped that Jesus would become king of Israel, and so he himself would be a powerful man,” but had decided to betray Jesus when his hopes were dashed. Judas, however, joins Jesus in Damascus in chapter 143 where the remaining (thirty-six?) disciples “came to Damascus, by the will of God. And on that day Judas the traitor, more than any other, made show of having suffered grief at Jesus’ absence.”<sup>5</sup> Nothing more happens. Jesus says, “Let us return into Galilee, for the angel of God has said to me that I must go there.” They return to Galilee and the narrative rejoins the canonical models at Luke 19:1.<sup>6</sup>

This is the sequence of events that turns the tide in Barnabas’ story. Up until this point, as in the canonical accounts, the priests and Pharisees had conspired against Jesus but have not moved against him; these were the events, according to the

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<sup>2</sup> Ch. 139.

<sup>3</sup> Ch. 140-141.

<sup>4</sup> Ch. 142.

<sup>5</sup> Ch. 143.

<sup>6</sup> In fact there is no continuity in the text. The beginning of the next sections appears as a new beginning: “So one sabbath morning, Jesus came to Nazareth...” and we have the story of Zacchaeus in the sycamore tree. (In Luke, of course, this occurs in Jericho, not Nazareth.) There is a seam in the text separating the Damascus section and the next.

medieval Barnabas, that brought the traitor Judas to them and gave them what they needed against Jesus. In short the story goes: Jesus performs a miraculous harvest at Nain, the people seek to make him king, he flees, his disciples find him, he predicts his betrayal, he and some of the disciples flee to Damascus, Judas (remaining behind) consults the authorities, the remaining disciples arrive in Damascus and then they all return to Galilee. The issue of kingship is central.

The Miracle of the Harvest is one of the episodes that Canon Ragg, who translated the Italian manuscript of the Barnabas Gospel into English in the early 1900s, described as being among the more intriguing and worthy passages in the work. The story may be based in Malachi 3:11ff. or, more significantly, 1 Samuel 12:16ff. where Samuel says to the Israelites, when conceding to anoint Saul king:

It is now wheat harvest is it not? I will call on Yahweh and he shall send thunder and rain. Consider then and see what a very wicked thing you have done in the sight of Yahweh by asking to have a king.

The direct canonical basis for the episode, however, seems to be John 4:35: "Have you not got a saying: Four months and then the harvest?"<sup>7</sup> In Barnabas Jesus asks the people of Nain: "How long is it until harvest?"<sup>8</sup> directly echoing John. That "they gathered so much corn that they did not know where to store it" appears to be a motif taken from or related to Luke's story of the rich man who had so much corn he did not know where to store it (Luke 12:16ff.).

The article of the story in which Jesus goes missing appears, in turn, to be based in John 6:15. In John's Gospel Jesus retreats "to the hills by himself" because a crowd of followers want to make him king.

Jesus...could see they were about to come and take him by force and make him king, [so he] escaped back to the hills by himself.

The parallel to this in the synoptics, Mark 1:35-39 and Luke 4:42-44, is where Jesus quietly leaves Capernaum, making his way to "a lonely place" where, according to Luke, "the crowds

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<sup>7</sup> That is, the miracle of the loaves in John.

<sup>8</sup> Ch. 138.

went to look for him” but where, according to Mark, “Simon and his companions set out in search of him.” According to Luke, Jesus explained that he had to move on to continue teaching in “Judea”; according to Mark, “Galilee.”

As usual in the Gospel of Barnabas we are at a loss to chart the exact permutations of canonical and non-canonical elements that have gone into constructing the extant text. One of the difficulties is that the permutations of narrative in canonical sources alone defy a precise delineation. Reference to external sources and external events presents some suggestive parallels but not conclusive models. There is a very odd parallel to these configurations of narrative in Josephus’ *Jewish War* that deserves attention. He relates the story of one of his many Messianic pretenders, Simon — noting the appearance of that name in Mark — who has “a village called Nain” as one of his strongholds. He was obeyed, even by “respectable citizens,” Josephus says, “like a king” (JW 4.506). Outside of the Gospel of Luke, this is the only ancient reference to a “Nain,” although the Biblical Nain is in Galilee while Josephus places it far to the south.

The really curious section of the narrative, however, is the sojourn in Damascus. This seems to have no basis in the canonical Gospels at all. Mark has Jesus propose, “Let us go elsewhere, to the neighbouring country towns, so that I can preach there too,” (Mk 1:38) and Luke has him saying, “I must proclaim the Good News of the kingdom of God to the other towns too” (Lk 4:43). But Jesus does not go to Damascus. In John the episode that follows Jesus’ escape into the hills from those who would make him king is the walking on the water at the Sea of Galilee (Jn 6:16-21) followed by a discourse in the synagogue in Capernaum (Jn 6:22ff.). Jesus goes as far north as Tyre and Sidon in the canonical stories (Mt 15:21ff.; Mk 7:24ff.), but not to Damascus. In Mark he also visits “the region of the Decapolis” (Mk 7:13) but not specifically Damascus. In fact, Damascus is never mentioned in the canonical Gospels at all, and in none of the apocryphal Gospels with the exception of the Gospel of Barnabas. It does feature as a significant place, of course, in Acts of the Apostles, and the immediate source of Barnabas’ idea that Jesus went there may come from reports of a community of Christians in that city in Acts — thus was Saul on the road to there to persecute the “followers of the Way” (Acts 9:2).

It is possible that the author of Barnabas has made good an apparent omission in the canonical accounts by placing Jesus

and his followers in Damascus, a place known from Acts to have been a Christian centre. This may even be connected with the strongly anti-Pauline character of the Gospel of Barnabas; there are other points where the work seems to be countering Acts and its portrayal of Saul/Paul and the official version of Christian origins. The whole premise of the medieval Gospel of Barnabas is that it is written by Paul's erstwhile companion, Barnabas, to correct the (Hellenistic, pro-Roman) errors into which Paul had fallen.<sup>9</sup> In such an anti-Pauline work, given the importance of "the road to Damascus" in orthodox portraits of Paul, it is conceivable that the author is hoping to make a point against Paul by presenting his very Judaic, Ebionitic Jesus in Damascus. If so, the author's point is unclear. As already indicated, nothing actually happens in Damascus. Jesus and a portion of his followers go there. Jesus says a few words about death. Then, no sooner have the other disciples arrived and they return again to Galilee (and the text returns to canonical models). The interlude in Damascus seems to have no particular point, except perhaps that Jesus' absence from the land gives Judas an opportunity to confer with Jesus' enemies.<sup>10</sup>

In the small amount of scholarship applied to the many mysteries of the medieval Barnabas little is said about this Damascus episode. Typically, commentators will simply point to it as another instance of the work's errant geography. The vast bulk of secondary literature on the work has a polemical intent coloured by Christian-Islamic disputes and most of it is written from a Christian apologetic perspective. In such commentary the fact that Jesus goes to Damascus is simply proof that the

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<sup>9</sup> This anti-Pauline stance is signalled in the Prologue to the Italian version and in the final chapter of both Spanish and Italian versions. "Others preached, and yet preach, that Jesus is the Son of God, among whom is Paul deceived." In general the work is at odds with Paul on questions of sacrifice, food regulations and circumcision.

<sup>10</sup> There is a second reference to Damascus in the Gospel of Barnabas. Three days after the crucifixion — which in Barnabas is of the substitute Judas, not Jesus — we are told that all but twenty-five of the seventy-two disciples went to the Mount of Olives: the twenty-five have "for fear fled to Damascus." In this article I am only concerned with the first journey to Damascus — the sojourn of Jesus himself. Concerning the second reference the numbers surely refer to the constitution of the Sanhedrin and the "small Sanhedrin" of twenty-three. (According to the Babylonian Talmud). The passage then reads: "So they all went there except *the small Sanhedrin* who fled in fear to Damascus." Compare Ezk 8:11-16 where there are seventy "elders of the House of Israel" and twenty-five "men with their backs to the sanctuary of Yahweh and their faces turned to the east." Ezekiel, however, is referring to the perpetrators of "filthy practises..."

medieval author did not know his stuff, because *we know* (from the canonical accounts) that Jesus did *not* go to Damascus. It is only recently that some scholarship of substance has been applied to these issues. In particular, a number of scholars conducting their research in Spain, seeking out the earliest attestations of the medieval Barnabas, have drawn attention to the works of the Morisco writer Juan Alonso. Alonso reproduces many of the doctrines of the Gospel of Barnabas in a manuscript (BNM MS 9655) now in Madrid, and dated about 1612. He does not refer to the Gospel by name, but there are undoubted similarities between his work and the point of view propounded in the Gospel, and, as Weigers has observed, he relates a peculiar story about a certain "King Jesus of Damascus."<sup>11</sup> It is supposed by some scholars that Juan Alonso or some member of the Morisco community composed the Gospel of Barnabas (as a fraud, the purpose of which is unclear, however)<sup>12</sup> and that Alonso's story of King Jesus of Damascus is the immediate source of the work's story of Jesus' visit to that city.<sup>13</sup> There can indeed be little doubt of some connection — noting, for instance, the continuation of the king motif — but the exact relationship between one story and the other is far from obvious. Other than the connection by name — King Jesus of Damascus — Alonso's story bears little resemblance to the Barnabas story. Alonso's story, in fact, as Weigers documents, is a crude reworking of the tragedy of Oedipus Rex (!) and is finally a very different type of story that has little *literary* relationship to the Barnabas tale.<sup>14</sup> Alonso says that the Jesus who was crucified (as opposed to the true Jesus) was a "King Jesus of Damascus" who was in Judea doing penance for inadvertently marrying his mother. Can this be

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<sup>11</sup> G.A. Weigers, "Muhammad as Messiah: A Comparison of the Polemical Works of Juan Alonso with the Gospel of Barnabas," *Bibliotheca Orientalis*, LII, no3/4, April-June 1995, Leiden, pp. 253-54

<sup>12</sup> While there is mounting evidence connecting the Gospel of Barnabas to the Moriscos there are no convincing accounts of *why* it was written — to fool whom, to what end? Some have tried to connect it with the discovery of supposed early Arabic "gospels and letters" in Granada between 1588-1607, the so-called Lead Books (*Libros Plumbeos*) of Sacro Monte.

<sup>13</sup> See especially the work of Luis F. Bernabe Pons who advances a Morisco theory of origins for the Gospel of Barnabas. For a guide to recent theories see J. Slomp, "The Gospel of Barnabas in Recent Research," *Islamochristiana* 23, Pontificio Instituto Di Studi Arabi E D'Islamistica, Rome, 1997.

<sup>14</sup> G.A. Weigers (supra, n. 11), p. 255. Weigers reports that there appear to be no precedents for Alonso's story in any known sources so "the story seems to have been invented by Juan Alonso himself..."

the source of the Barnabas story? The evidence gathered by Weigers and others may demonstrate no more than that Alonso was *influenced by* the Gospel of Barnabas — indirectly, since he does not mention the work by name and also, as well as points of view in common, has many points of view radically at odds with it<sup>15</sup> — or at most, that the Gospel of Barnabas shares a certain world of ideas with some Morisco writers in the early 1600s, although no clear and certain relationship has been established. Alonso's strange Oedipal story of a King Jesus of Damacus deepens rather than illuminates the mystery. Can it be *unrelated* to the Gospel of Barnabas story? If it is related, how, other than by a coincidence of title (king), name (Jesus) and place (Damascus)?

So from where did the Barnabas author get this episode? What precedents for it are there in earlier sources? Where are its roots? A parallel, or at least a family resemblance, does present itself, it seems to me, in the so-called 'Damascus (or Zadokite) Document' found among the Dead Sea Scrolls and in the two incomplete medieval copies of the same document belonging to the Kararite sect of Judaism discovered in Cairo late last century. There, and in what we now know to be related texts, we have the story of the Righteous Teacher who leads his followers into the "Land of Damascus" as well as the story of the Teacher's betrayal by the "Liar" or "Wicked Priest," evidently one of his own followers or, at one point, at least, an ally.<sup>16</sup> As soon as the Damascus Document was found among the Qumran texts and the Karaite manuscripts were shown to be ancient works from the dawn of the Christian era and related to other ancient sectarian tracts, commentators began to suggest some relationship between its story and the story of Jesus and Judas in Christian sources.<sup>17</sup>

Needless to say, no certain connection has been demonstrated, but there is a clear typological similarity: central to the history of the Qumran sect, and the Christian sect, is a drama of

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<sup>15</sup> See Idem, p. 286. Most notably Juan Alonso regarded Paul as a sacred character, a view diametrically at odds with that of the Gospel of Barnabas.

<sup>16</sup> The precise details of this story are, in nearly every point, open to very diverse interpretations. I am only concerned here with the general shape of the story, not its details. It is, however it is looked at, a story of betrayal and subsequent persecution.

<sup>17</sup> M. Dupont-Sommer, in particular, advanced the similarities between Jesus and the Righteous Teacher, most famously in a paper delivered to the French Academie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres in 1950.

betrayal.<sup>18</sup> The similarity is reinforced, moreover, by descriptions of both sects as followers of “the Way” and by the advent of a “New Covenant” in both cases. Most appraisals of the Dead Sea literature place it some time before the arrival of Christianity and the whole thrust of mainstream scholarship has been to deny any identity between the Qumran sectarians and the Christians, but this still leaves open the possibility that the Christian story owes a debt to the Qumran story. Scholars are less inclined today than they were in the past to dismiss the Qumran sect as an obscure, unimportant group on the fringes of ancient Judaic religion with no connection to anyone or anything; rather it seems they were at least representative of certain trends in Judaism and it is now widely admitted that themes, ideas and vocabulary found in Qumran literature have found their way into Christian works if only because they were “in the air.”<sup>19</sup> If there is no direct connection between the nascent Christian sect and the followers of “the Way” at Qumran, the Qumran sect is at least recognized as foreshadowing many aspects of what became Christianity. It is possible, therefore, that the story of the betrayal of Jesus by Judas is one of the elements “in the air” at the time, that when the time came to write the life of the great Christian “Righteous Teacher,” founder of the New Covenant of the Christians, the pre-existing story of the Qumran Righteous Teacher helped shape the Christian narrative. Again, this is not to propose any identity between the two; it is merely to suggest that the later story was influenced by the earlier, and to say that there is, consequently, a resemblance between them.

If we admit this, then we are in the position to see the version of the story in the medieval Gospel of Barnabas as bearing an even closer family resemblance because, unlike the canonical Gospels, it includes not only the general shape of a betrayal story but the important detail of *the sojourn in Damascus*. The important thing to note here is not merely that

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<sup>18</sup> Some might dispute that the Scrolls tell a story of betrayal. But it seems clear that the Wicked Priest was at one time a trusted ally of the Sectarians, that he made the Teacher (or the Sectarians, or both) “stumble,” and the Scrolls speak of entrapment and “snares.” This, and the intense bitterness of the Sectarians towards their enemy, warrants regarding the schism of which the Scrolls speak as a story of “betrayal.”

<sup>19</sup> It should be stressed that I am not here making any claims about possible connections between the Qumran “sect” and Christianity; I am only making the general point that they share certain features, as would be expected given their common milieu, late Second Temple Judaism.



Barnabas has Jesus go to Damascus, but that this journey to Damascus Barnabas makes the pivot of *the betrayal story*. If the journey to Damascus had occurred at some other point in Barnabas' narrative we would have much less of a case, but as it is Jesus' journey to Damascus occasions the betrayal. A natural and uncontroversial reading of the Damascus Document, along with other sectarian documents from Qumran, is that the "Righteous Teacher" leads his followers to the "Land of Damascus" which is a safe haven from persecution by a "Wicked Priest" and betrayal within by a "Liar," a "Man of Lies" or a "Scoffer" (possibly all designations for the same villain). In the Gospel of Barnabas it at first seems that Jesus flees to Damascus to escape the citizens of Nain and their desire to make him king; in fact, as he explains to his disciples when they find him, he flees to Damascus because he has received foreknowledge of Judas' betrayal of him and of the persecution that will soon descend upon him. If the story in the canonical accounts has similarities to the story in the Qumran literature, the story in the medieval Barnabas has an even stronger similarity.

One point of textual evidence adds weight to this. It becomes clear in the short discourse on death presented by Barnabas' Jesus that Damascus is, for Jesus and his followers, a *place of exile*. "Tell me, brethren," Jesus says to his followers:

is this world our native country? Surely not, seeing that the first man was cast out into the world into exile and there he suffers the punishment of his error. Is there an exile who does not aspire to return to his own rich country when he finds himself in poverty?

"Is this world our native country?" The cause of this question, and its underlying metaphor, is that Jesus and his disciples are in Damascus, *not* their native country. "Is there an exile who does not aspire to return to his own rich country?" It is clear that Jesus and his followers are exiles in Damascus; Jesus is using their status as exiles as an opportunity to teach his followers that life itself is a period of exile and, consequently, death is not to be feared because it is a returning home. For the people who wrote the Damascus Document (and related Qumran texts) their sojourn in the "Land of Damascus" was a period of exile too. If the author of Barnabas has drawn the general idea that the followers of Jesus resided in Damascus from Acts, the notion that Damascus is a land of *exile* cannot easily be drawn from

canonical sources. Acts would have us believe there was a settled Christian community in Damascus; only in the Dead Sea Scrolls and the medieval Gospel of Barnabas is Damascus explicitly a place of exile. This idea is not explicit in Juan Alonso's fanciful tale of King Jesus of Damascus either; the idea of exile is, perhaps, an implicit feature of the original Oedipus story but, if anything, in Alonso's story, King Jesus leaves Damascus to go into exile *in Judea*. Clearly, in the Gospel of Barnabas, Jesus leads his followers into a period of exile in Damascus, and this within the context of the betrayal. This is surely in the same family of stories as those told of the Righteous Teacher and his followers.

To these observations a number of others could be added. There is, for instance, the medieval Barnabas' implicit characterisation of Judas as a *liar*. In the canonical Gospels Judas Iscariot does not actually misrepresent his Master; he merely agrees to betray his whereabouts for a price. In the Gospel of Barnabas Judas reports to the authorities that Jesus has plans to usurp the kingship, though he knows very well this is untrue.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, his knowledge that Jesus does not want to be king is the very reason he decides to tell the authorities precisely the opposite; he leads them to believe that Jesus aspires to the kingship because he is disappointed that Jesus has no such aspiration.

More interesting are textual connections between the Damascus Document and other sections of the Gospel of Barnabas. The exile of the Righteous Teacher and his followers to the "Land of Damascus" has its scriptural warrant, according to the Damascus Document, in the prophecies of Isaiah and Amos, and especially in Amos: *I will exile the tabernacle of your king* [noting the reference to kingship again] *and the bases of your statues from my tent to Damascus* (Amos 5:26-27). This is an instance where, typically, the Qumran sect take extraordinary liberties with canonical texts, bending them to their own purposes, even to the point of reversing their meaning. In fact, in the prophet Amos in our Bible "exile to Damascus" is used as a threat against religious corruption among the Israelites. The Damascus Document transforms this into a divine promise of salvation. The Gospel of Barnabas has a specific quarrel with the orthodox interpretations of the prophet Amos; indeed the text

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<sup>20</sup> Ch. 142.

dwells on themes from the passage from which the Qumran text is quoting. Here is the passage from Amos as we have it in the canonical text:

I hate and despise your feasts  
I take no pleasure in your solemn festivals,  
When you offer me holocausts,  
I reject your oblations  
and refuse to look at your sacrifices of fattened cattle...  
Did you bring me sacrifice and oblation in the wilderness  
for all those forty years, House of Israel?  
Now you must shoulder Sakkuth your king  
and Kaiwan your god,  
those idols you have made for yourselves;  
for I mean to take you far beyond Damascus into exile,  
says Yahweh - God of Sabaoth is his name.

The full context helps to explain the Qumran sect's twist on the Damascus prophecy: they invoke it when cut off from Temple sacrifice and other cultic aspects of Judaism, the key idea being that the Israelites in the wilderness of Sinai did not need elaborate cult practices, that a return to the wilderness is a purifying return to true forms of worship. God, that is, has exiled them to "the land of Damascus" as a return to a more pure and primitive arena of faith, rejecting the lavish sacrifices of the Temple cultus (the practices of the enemies of the sect).<sup>21</sup> There is a very strong parallel theme in Barnabas. Jesus is portrayed as not only critical of Pharisaic hypocrisy, as in the canonical texts, but is scathing, throughout, regarding the sacrifices of the "High Priest, scribes and Pharisees." A constant refrain in Jesus' preaching in Barnabas is that "God does not eat" and therefore has no need of the sacrifices offered to Him. The "holocausts and oblations" are an abomination, a sacrilege, and Jesus makes it clear that God rejects them.<sup>22</sup> Sometimes Barnabas turns to Isaiah, Ezekiel or Jeremiah for his proof texts in this matter, but he has a much deeper interest in Amos. This passage in Amos is clearly the ultimate source of his critique of the Temple sacrifices, although the nominated source for the idea is, we are told at one point, a mysterious "old Book of Moses" — a pristine text

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<sup>21</sup> Again, I trust that this is an uncontroversial reading of the Qumran texts. No doubt there are other readings, but I do not think I am misrepresenting the broad thrust of the literature.

<sup>22</sup> See especially ch. 67.

uncorrupted by “the Pharisees and their traditions” — that proclaims “God does not eat” as one of its central tenets.<sup>23</sup> Barnabas’ interest in Amos extends to the whole question of how it (and other articles of scripture) ought to be interpreted. He devotes a discussion to this matter, warning the disciple Philip “how great is the danger of resting in the letter, as do the Pharisees” and recommending a specialized reading of this prophet in particular.<sup>24</sup> His interpretation of all scripture is wildly unconventional, but it is Amos that he selects as the example of his method. Amos is singled out for a metaphorical reading. As if to confirm this by a ‘sign,’ Jesus at this point causes an earthquake at which “everyone fell down as dead, and Jesus raised them up.”<sup>25</sup> There are a number of places in the text where Jesus ‘seals’ a highly unorthodox interpretation of a proof text with such ‘signs’. They have the effect of insisting that Jesus’ is the proper reading.

**W**hen we look deeply into the Gospel of Barnabas, and see it in the light of new texts, new discoveries and new understandings, suggestive, tantalizing parallels such as these emerge. A statement concerning exegetical method found in the Preface to the Spanish manuscript of Barnabas is also intriguing. It tells of how certain “glosses on the Prophets” were surrendered to an employee of the Inquisition in the late sixteenth century, a “Friar Marino.”<sup>26</sup> These glosses, we are told, are “unlike any known in our time.” In what way? All our author offers at this juncture is the cryptic statement “suffice it to say they were written by prophets.” Glosses on the Prophets *written by prophets*? This is the usual explanation offered for the exegetical liberties exercised by the Qumran sect: that they could alter and twist the words and meanings of the prophets, as they have surely done in the case of Amos, because they saw themselves as writing in the spirit of prophecy and being engaged

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<sup>23</sup> Ch. 191. Bowman thinks that this “old Book of Moses” may be a reference to the Samaritan Pentateuch: “The Gospel of Barnabas and the Samaritans,” *Abr-Nbraim* 30 (1992), 20-33: p. 27.

<sup>24</sup> See chs. 161-162.

<sup>25</sup> Ch. 162. This allusion is presumably to the earthquake mentioned at the beginning of Amos, but then the earthquake of 31BC seems, according to some authorities, to have been a significant event in the life of the Qumran sect.

<sup>26</sup> There are no clues as to the identity of this “Friar Marino”; many possibilities have been suggested. According to the Preface these “glosses” were handed over to him by a member of the Ursini (Orsini?) family who “found them in his library, among books of his fore-fathers.”

in the *prophetic* exegesis of the prophets of old. There are no less than seven mysterious, otherwise unknown books mentioned in the Gospel of Barnabas (or its Preface), many of them of an obviously 'Jewish-Christian' orientation and "repugnant to Christian law." At least some of them, including these "glosses," seem to have been the product of just this sort of unconventional 'prophetic' tradition with which the text of the Gospel of Barnabas is replete. In the intellectual biography of "Fra Marino" he was first and foremost interested in unconventional Jewish Biblical commentaries. This ultimately led him to unconventional Christian works and especially the Gospel of Barnabas, but his first windfall of strange texts was this collection of glosses on the Prophets "unlike any known in our time..." Are these the empty assertions of a forger or does the Preface alert us to the circulation of a body of strange "prophetic" works in the late Middle Ages, flushed out, as the story implies, by the Inquisition?

The Gospel of Barnabas and the Damascus Document (and related Qumran texts) are assuredly very different works, yet these connections — if they can withstand closer scrutiny — constitute evidence that Barnabas reflects, if not the Damascus Document itself, then traditions not unrelated to it. Whether these connections extend further into Barnabas' portrayal of Jesus and other aspects of the work is another question, although there are good initial indications that they do. There is, for example, an unquestionable connection between Barnabas' portrait of Jesus and what we know of the Samaritan Messiah Dositheus. Jesus speaks of a time when "my gospel shall be annulled, insomuch that there shall be scarcely thirty faithful."<sup>27</sup> This exact idea is found in the Church Fathers describing the reduction of the followers of the Samaritan Messiah to "scarcely thirty faithful."<sup>28</sup> Many scholars now regard this Dositheus as a rewriting of the earlier 'Righteous Teacher' character.<sup>29</sup> In the light of much scholarly speculation about the identity of the Righteous Teacher it is also remarkable that Barnabas presents his Jesus in the role of the character the canonical gospels call

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<sup>27</sup> Ch. 72.

<sup>28</sup> See Origen *Against Celsus*, 6.11.

<sup>29</sup> The idea was first advanced, I think, by John Allegro. See J. Allegro, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Christian Myth*, Abacus, London, 1979: "Convergent testimonies from the fourth-century and medieval witnesses describe the followers of Dositheus as adherents of a strict Jewish sect which arose in Maccabean times...", p. 181.

John the Baptist. There is no John the Baptist in Barnabas, or rather, Barnabas' Jesus *is* John the Baptist.<sup>30</sup> There is, throughout the work, a fascinating conflation of the two figures. If it is objected, therefore, that the Righteous Teacher of the Scrolls is much more likely to have been the prototype of John than of Jesus, in the Gospel of Barnabas the two characters are, remarkably, one and the same.<sup>31</sup> There has long been abroad among more adventurous scholars the theory that the Righteous Teacher was the model of John and the "Wicked Priest" — the traitor — of Jesus, and that the Scrolls record the viewpoint of a "Baptist" sect that at some point was "hijacked" by the Christian sect.<sup>32</sup> The strange contortions of the canonical accounts presented by the medieval Barnabas, and especially the conflating of John and Jesus, become all the more intriguing in the light of such speculation. The exile of Barnabas' Jesus/John to Damascus would then be a pregnant parallel with the ancient Qumran texts.

We do not know who wrote the Gospel of Barnabas, when, where or why. It is a late medieval production surviving in Italian and Spanish versions and, as noted earlier, it is connected to the Morisco communities of southern Spain and Morocco in the early seventeenth century. There are, however, strong indications in the text of the Gospel itself that at least parts of it were composed in the early 1300s.<sup>33</sup> Bowman has made a strong case for seeing it as a work under Samaritan inspiration and in fact has suggested that it was written by an Italian-speaking community, with Samaritan contacts, residing in Damascus in the early

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<sup>30</sup> This is one of the many striking ways in which the work is unIslamic. The Baptist is a revered figure in Islam, including among the Morisco Muslims. Yet he is nowhere to be found in this ostensibly "Muslim gospel." There are many ways in which the Gospel of Barnabas seems to have been adapted to Muslim purposes rather than having been Islamic in inspiration; a work of direct Islamic or Morisco design could hardly omit John the Baptist.

<sup>31</sup> A similar point could be made where it is argued that the Righteous Teacher of the Scrolls is more likely to have been the prototype of James (the Righteous) than of Jesus. Barnabas' Jesus is also, in places, very James-like. (See especially the Sermon from the Pinnacle of the Temple, chpt. 12.) Stories about the downfall of James may also bear a family resemblance to the Qumran stories.

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, B. Thiering, *Jesus the Man*, Doubleday, Sydney, 1992. More generally Wilson reports on scholars trying to identify John as the Teacher. E. Wilson, *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, Collins, Glasgow, 1971 (first published W. H. Allen, 1995), p. 92.

<sup>33</sup> Among other indications, there is a reference in ch. 82 to the "one hundred year Jubilee" which prevailed in Latin Christendom between 1300 and the late 1340s.

1300s.<sup>34</sup> He also noted the strong, unmistakable imprint of primitive Carmelite ideas in the work.<sup>35</sup> Most commentators argue for a Spanish or at least European provenance but largely because, as Bowman points out, the extant texts are written in European languages.<sup>36</sup> Bowman proposes a Middle Eastern provenance and sees the work as the result of European contact with (to Europeans) long-lost strains of Judeo-Christian ideas still alive in medieval Palestine, perhaps having their roots in ancient times. The Carmelite connections seem the most promising. In the 1330s Sibert of Bakka recorded that the primitive Carmelites — followers of John the Baptist (and therefore not actually within the ambit of the Christian Covenant, as the Carmelite's enemies were wont to point out) — were heirs to the traditions of the "Essenes and Rechabites." At the end of the Crusades the Carmelites were relocated en mass to Latin Christendom, notably to Spain where they later had an illustrious history. Once in Europe, however, they were completely re-formed into a mendicant order, but for several centuries they suffered accusations of heresy and, within their own ranks, a bitter battle was fought between the reformers and those who hoped to preserve the primitive traditions of the monks from the Middle East. Perhaps the appearance of the Gospel of Barnabas is connected in some way with the vicissitudes within the Order? Perhaps the Gospel of Barnabas records some very unorthodox traditions — coming through the "Essenes and Rechabites"? — preserved among the primitive Carmelites in Palestine?

**I**n any case, it is not my purpose here to speculate about avenues through which ancient material might have passed into the late Middle Ages, resurfacing in the Gospel of Barnabas. My purpose is simply to point out Barnabas' version of the betrayal and the work's depiction of Jesus' exile to Damascus, noting the similarities to the story told of the Righteous Teacher. We know, of course, from the discoveries in the Cairo *genizah*, that the Damascus Document was current in the Middle Ages. If we propose some dependence of the Barnabas story on the Damascus Document story the simplest way to explain it would be to say that the Damascus Document story was known to Jews in Spain or wherever else the Gospel of Barnabas was written; if

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<sup>34</sup> Bowman J. (*supra*, n. 23), pp. 24-25.

<sup>35</sup> *Idem*, p. 22.

<sup>36</sup> *Idem*, p. 25.

the Damascus Document was about there would be any number of conceivable opportunities for the story to find its way into a syncretic work like the Gospel of Barnabas. If we accept a Morisco authorship, the Moriscos were, by definition, *outsiders* and we can suppose they had an interest in and affinity for other groups and bodies of literature on the wrong side of orthodoxy, as were the Karaite Jews.<sup>37</sup> Juan Alonso was both familiar and in sympathy with the Karaites, citing them as having exposed Rabbinical corruption of Scripture.<sup>38</sup> Chejne in his study of the Moriscos actually describes the store of literature in which the writings of Alonso are found as resembling “the Genizah documents written by the Jewish community living in various parts of the Mediterranean basin.” It preserves, he says, “vestiges of a great Arab legacy...”<sup>39</sup>

It is not surprising that no one has made anything of these passages in the Gospel of Barnabas before;<sup>40</sup> it is the last place one would look for echoes of ancient texts or new insights into either the origins of the Christian myth or the continuation of stories from the Qumran literature. But, as stated at the outset, some sections of the work — and especially Jesus’ exile to Damascus — deserve the attention of scholars interested in permutations of the Jesus story. The work is no doubt a “forgery” — a problematical word when discussing any Gospel literature — but this does not exclude the possibility that it preserves a stratum of early material. Several scholars, going back to Toland in the 18th century, have been struck by how faithfully this medieval work recreates a species of early “Ebionism.” Others have pointed to other ancient connections, or at least the appearance of ancient connections. The Damascus episode as a parallel to the story of the Righteous Teacher is an even more notable example of such appearances. If we were to put aside the normal framework of scholarly caution — which errs on the side of conservative conclusions — we could see in the Gospel of Barnabas a remarkable confirmation that there are elements of

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<sup>37</sup> For a comprehensive account of the Moriscos and their distinctive religious literature see A.G. Chejne, *Islam and the West: The Moriscos*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1983.

<sup>38</sup> See G.A. Weigers (supra, n. 11), p. 261.

<sup>39</sup> A.G. Chejne (supra, n. 37), p. 49.

<sup>40</sup> Bowman (supra, n. 23, p. 23) notes the association of Damascus with the “Qumran Essenes” and the story told in the Damascus Document in the context of his discussion of the place of Damascus in the Gospel of Barnabas, but he does not pursue the connection.



the Righteous Teacher story in the Jesus tradition. If we discount ancient connections, and suppose that the Barnabas author is reflecting (say) Karaite traditions, we still have a remarkable instance where Jesus has been matched with the Righteous Teacher.

To recap: the configuration of Jesus (or John's) exile to Damascus coincident with the betrayal bears a family resemblance — I would say a strong family resemblance — to the story of the Righteous Teacher, *his* betrayal and *his* exile to [the land of] Damascus. I think it unlikely that the medieval author has just inferred the episode from canonical notices (Acts) and unlikely that it is just a garbling of Juan Alonso's tale (where the reverse, that Alonso's story is a garbling of a story more intact in the Gospel of Barnabas, seems more likely to be the case). Perhaps this odd medieval book, arguably the most peculiar of all works of Christian apocrypha, can — especially if we could establish its author and more importantly his sources — provide some missing pieces to the greater puzzle of Christian origins? Certainly, the possibility that the medieval Barnabas preserves a characterization of Jesus with elements from the story of the Righteous Teacher deserves a fuller investigation.