

Do as I Say Not as They Do: Social Construction in the *Epistle of Barnabas* Through Canonical Interpretation and Ritual

Jason N. Yuh

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Introduction

Scholarship to date has neglected the importance of “the somewhat strangely” phrased metaphor found in the *Epistle of Barnabas*: the circumcision of hearing (*Barn.* 9:1-3).¹ Part of this neglect

¹ James N. Rhodes, *The Epistle of Barnabas and the Deuteronomic Tradition: Polemics, Paraenesis, and the Legacy of the Golden-Calf Incident* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004) 59. Though very little, if any, has been written on the circumcision of hearing, the exceptional strangeness of the overall text itself has been well documented, e.g., Philipp Vielhauer, *Geschichte der urchristlichen Literatur: Einleitung in das Neue Testament, die Apokryphen und die Apostolischen Väter* (New York: de Gruyter, 1975) 612; James N. B. Carleton Paget, *The Epistle of Barnabas: Outlook and Background* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1994) 1; Jörg Frey, “Temple and Identity in Early Christianity and in the Johannine Community: Reflections on the ‘Parting of the Ways,’ ” in *Was 70 CE a Watershed in Jewish History? On Jews and Judaism Before and After the Destruction of the Second Temple* (ed. Daniel R. Schwartz and Zeev Weiss; Boston: Brill, 2012) 463; Ruth A. Clements, “Epilogue: 70 CE After 135 CE—The Making of a Watershed?” in *Was 70 CE a Watershed in Jewish History? On Jews and Judaism Before and After the Destruction of the Second Temple* (ed. Daniel R. Schwartz and Zeev Weiss; Boston: Brill, 2012) 522; and Stephen G. Wilson, “Gentile Judaizers,” *NTS* 38 [1992] 610). This strangeness has led to a negative view on the text (e.g., John Lawson, *A Theological and Historical Introduction to the Apostolic Fathers* [New York: Macmillan, 1961] 198), which has created the perception that the epistle “is not really worthy of the range of critical approaches applied to texts such as the NT” (Ken Derry, “One Stone on Another: Towards an Understanding of Symbolism in *The Epistle of Barnabas*,”

is because the significance of this metaphor does not directly contribute to the theological outlook or background of Barnabas, which are topics that have largely preoccupied Barnabas scholarship. I contend, however, that not only is this metaphor significant, but its significance lies in its social and communal implications.²

To explore the social and communal implications of the overall letter as well as the specific metaphor, I draw upon interdisciplinary research on canon and ritual. Here, canon is a set of fundamental principles that simultaneously shapes and is shaped by the identity of a community, while rituals are the embodiment of these principles that, *inter alia*, differentiates the group from

JECS 4 [1996] 516). English translations and verse references of the *Epistle of Barnabas* are from Bart D. Ehrman's critical edition ("Epistle of Barnabas," in *The Apostolic Fathers: Volume II* [Cambridge: Harvard University, 2003] 1-84).

2 There is a recent trend in exploring the social dimensions of this epistle (e.g., Michael Kok, "The True Covenant People: Ethnic Reasoning in the Epistle of Barnabas," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 40 [2011] 81-97; Julien C. H. Smith, "The *Epistle of Barnabas* and the Two Ways of Teaching Authority," *VC* 68 [2014] 465-97; Derry, "One Stone on Another," 528). The emergence of these studies is indebted to the works of Carleton Paget and Hvalvik as they remedied the previous consensus in scholarship that Barnabas is merely a mindless motley of sources (Carleton Paget, *Epistle of Barnabas*; Reidar Hvalvik, *The Struggle for Scripture and Covenant: The Purpose of the Epistle of Barnabas and Jewish-Christian Competition in the Second Century* [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996]). Lastly, the social-scientific approach taken in this study functions as a response to Burton L. Mack's challenge for a "redescription of Christian origins" that is "firmly anchored in a social and cultural anthropology, capable of sustaining a conversation with the humanities" ("On Redescribing Christian Origins," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 8 [1996] 254). More generally, Stanley Stowers problematizes the notion of community and argues that scholars have assumed that this entails a group that is "highly cohesive with commonality in belief and practice" ("The Concept of 'Community' and the History of Early Christianity," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 23 [2011] 245); I have not fully absorbed the work of Stowers in this area, so I am eager to see how my current study can be further nuanced.

outsiders while also structuring internal, hierarchical distinctions. Research in these areas have independently demonstrated that canon and ritual are fundamental elements of any group, and I employ these concepts to explain how Barnabas attempts to fulfill these fundamental elements through the circumcision of hearing.³ More specifically, I argue that an examination of the metaphor illuminates how Barnabas was seeking to persuade his fledgling community to adhere uncompromisingly to his teachings by offering a new canon (or canonical interpretation) and ritual.

The first part of this paper articulates how the notion of canon is critical for Barnabas's community. It is because canon is indispensable for communities in general that Barnabas finds himself in a precarious argumentative stance: he seeks to refute "Jewish" traditions by using the "Jewish" canon.⁴ Barnabas is unable to offer a new canon, so he consequently offers a new canonical interpretation or γνῶσις (knowledge) that can only be perceived when one's hearing is circumcised. I then in the second part of the paper describe how Barnabas's repudiation against all physical rituals once again leaves him in a tenuous situation when reflecting upon the fundamental role that rituals play for social groups. Upon closer analysis, however, various elements of the epistle are best explained when considering select concepts from ritual theories: Barnabas regards his hearers as fragile neophytes in the ambiguous phase of liminality. It is through the circumcision

³ Recent utilization of canon and ritual as conceptual tools to analyze the communal aspects of early Christianity can be seen in Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra, "Weighing the Parts: A Papyrological Perspective on the Parting of the Ways," *NovT* 51 (2009) 168–86 and Risto Uro, *Ritual and Christian Beginnings* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2016).

⁴ I use terms such as "Jew" and "Jewish" rather than "Judaean" (Anders Runesson, "Inventing Christian Identity: Paul, Ignatius, and Theodosius I," in *Exploring Early Christian Identity* [ed. Bengt Holmberg; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008] 64–70).

of hearing that Barnabas addresses both of these fundamental aspects of group formation, thereby quickening his hearers to become “τον λαόν τον καινόν” (the new people) of God (7:5; also 5:7).⁵

Due to the theoretical richness of canon and ritual, my study can also serve as a methodological template to examine the dynamics of other communal groups beyond the one that Barnabas sought to establish and maintain. The most pertinent areas of research are the formation of early Christian identit(ies) and the contentious topic of early Jewish-Christian relations. Although the methodology and conclusion of this study are primarily concerned with the social dimensions of Barnabas, I do not intend to undermine the importance of the theology of Barnabas. Rather, my study seeks to supplement, or perhaps even clarify, the theological outlook of Barnabas and potentially of other early Christian writers.

Canonical Interpretation

Barnabas’s Need for Canonical Interpretation

Reidar Hvalvik observes that one of the key themes for Barnabas is his struggle for scripture.⁶ From an historical standpoint, the struggle is intense for the obvious reason that both Christ-devotees and Jews based their norms on the same sacred texts. For Barnabas, this struggle was acutely difficult as he (unlike Marcion) maintained a high regard for the Hebrew scriptures, and (unlike Justin Martyr, Origen, or Tertullian) contended that there was always only one people and

⁵ So Smith, “*Epistle of Barnabas*,” 468. Note the textual variant for 5:7 from the defective manuscripts of G (11th cent. and later).

⁶ Hvalvik, *Struggle for Scripture*.

covenant of God (e.g., *Barn.* 4:6).⁷ Thus, Barnabas distinguishes his authoritative $\gamma\nu\tilde{\omega}\sigma\iota\varsigma$ by denouncing the way that various strands of Judaism have understood these scriptural texts.⁸ Whether it is animal sacrifices (ch. 2; chs. 7-8), fasting (ch. 3), circumcision (ch. 9), dietary laws (ch. 10), the Sabbath (ch. 15), or the Temple (ch. 16), the root of the problem is not what these sacred texts say about these things (e.g., 9:4; 10:1). Rather, the problem is that the sacred texts have been understood literally, a problem that is so egregious that it is of demonic influence (9:4).⁹

Canon as a Prerequisite for Group Identity

In order to more fully appreciate Barnabas's predicament in this regard, it is helpful to note that there is an inextricable—and inevitable—connection between canon and group formation as recently established by numerous scholars from varying areas of study.¹⁰ For the purpose of this

⁷ E.g., Rhodes, *Epistle of Barnabas*, 178–82; Hvalvik, *Struggle for Scripture*, 91–2.

⁸ In older scholarship, a distinction was made between two kinds of $\gamma\nu\tilde{\omega}\sigma\iota\varsigma$ in the epistle (e.g., Hans Windisch, *Der Barnabasbrief* [Tübingen: Mohr, 1920] 307–9; Robert A. Kraft, *The Apostolic Fathers: A New Translation and Commentary* [ed. Robert M. Grant; 6 vols.; New York: Nelson, 1964] 3:22–7). For a detailed summary on this view, see Carleton Paget, *Epistle of Barnabas*, 46–9. I am following more recent studies by interpreting $\gamma\nu\tilde{\omega}\sigma\iota\varsigma$ as conveying the same meaning throughout the epistle (e.g., Jonathan A. Draper, “Barnabas and the Riddle of the Didache Revisited,” *JSNT* 17 [1995] 95; Hvalvik, *Struggle for Scripture*, 84–6).

⁹ Although, there are portions of the text where these sacred texts are to be understood literally, e.g., Daniel C. Ullucci, *The Christian Rejection of Animal Sacrifice* (New York: Oxford University, 2012) 97.

¹⁰ Pertaining to early Christianity in particular, see Guy G. Stroumsa, “Early Christianity—A Religion of the Book?” in *Homer, the Bible, and Beyond: Literary and Religious Canons in the Ancient World* (ed. Margalit Finkelberg and Guy G. Stroumsa; Leiden: Brill, 2003) 153; Christoph Marksches, “The Canon of the New Testament in Antiquity,” in *Homer, the Bible, and Beyond: Literary and Religious Canons in the Ancient World* (ed. Margalit Finkelberg and Guy G. Stroumsa; Leiden: Brill, 2003) 192; David Brakke, “A New Fragment of Athanasius’s Thirty-

study, canon operates simply as a finite set of basic principles (or convictions, axioms, core narratives, etc.) that plays an authoritative role for, and is shaped by, a group.¹¹ The very existence of a canon—its inception, maintenance, relevance, and interpretation—is thus predicated upon its group. However, the inverse is equally true: the very existence of a group is predicated upon its canon. A group cannot be considered as such unless its individual members share at least some common principles that they perceive as normative or canonical.

Closely related to the critical role that canon plays within a community is the need for interpreters.¹² These interpreters are individuals within a community whose interpretations on what

Ninth Festal Letter: Heresy, Apocrypha, and the Canon,” *HTR* 103 (2010) 47–66; David Brakke's article, published more than twenty years ago, receives special mention as it is perhaps the earliest study to explore the "social and political implications" of the concept of canon (“Canon Formation and Social Conflict in Fourth-Century Egypt: Athanasius of Alexandria’s Thirty-Ninth ‘Festal Letter,’” *HTR* 87 [1994] 396), and also for his own application of Jonathan Z. Smith's cross cultural findings (*ibid.*, 416). At a more general level, see Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1982) 36–52; Miriam Levering, “Introduction,” in *Rethinking Scripture: Essays from a Comparative Perspective* (ed. Miriam Levering; Albany: SUNY, 1989) 5; Margalit Finkelberg and Guy G. Stroumsa, “Introduction: Before the Western Canon,” in *Homer, the Bible, and Beyond: Literary and Religious Canons in the Ancient World* (ed. Margalit Finkelberg and Guy G. Stroumsa; Leiden: Brill, 2003) 5; Marksches, “Canon of the New Testament,” 178; Guy G. Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom: Esoteric Traditions and the Roots of Christian Mysticism* (Boston: Brill, rev. ed. 2005) 88; Aleida Assmann, “Canon and Archive,” in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook* (ed. Ansgar Nünning, Astrid Erll, and Sara B. Young; New York: de Gruyter, 2008) 100.

11 Similar to Finkelberg and Stroumsa’s notion of “foundational texts” (“Introduction,” 5).

12 This touches upon the inseparable relationship between canon and hermeneutics as seen across different cultures, such as the Neoplatonists, Rabbinic Jewish communities (Finkelberg and Stroumsa, “Introduction,” 6-7), and religious groups of ancient Rome (Mary Beard, “Ancient Literacy and the Function of the Written Word in Roman

various principles mean and how they can be applied are considered to be authoritative or canonical. As Jan Assmann remarks:

In this way interpretation becomes the central principle of cultural coherence and identity. The normative and formative impulses of cultural memory can only be gleaned through the incessant, constantly renewed textual interpretation of the tradition through which identity is established. Interpretation becomes the gesture of remembering, the interpreter becomes a person who remembers and reminds us of a forgotten truth.¹³

If the identity of a group is established through “renewed” interpretations of sacred traditions and/or texts, then this explains the social reasons behind why Barnabas, and many other early “Christian” writers, would have been so preoccupied with scriptural texts. The stories of Jesus compelled individuals to create these contemporary interpretations. Those who agreed with these interpretations eventually formed their own subgroups. As differences of interpretations became

Religion,” in *Literacy in the Roman World* [ed. Mary Beard et al.; Ann Arbor: Journal of Roman Archaeology, 1991] 53-8; though Beard’s emphasis is on written texts and not canon per se). See also Stroumsa’s observation concerning the parallel between the Mishnah and the New Testament (*Hidden Wisdom, 79-91; The Making of the Abrahamic Religions in Late Antiquity* [New York: Oxford University, 2015] 31-2).

¹³ Jan Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory: Ten Studies* (Stanford: Stanford University, 2006) 43. Assmann grounds these assertions primarily on evidence from ancient Egyptian culture and, interacting with Leo Oppenheim, ancient Mesopotamian culture. Assmann’s statements are even more relevant for the “textual communities” of early Christianity (Judith Lieu, *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World* [Oxford: Oxford University, 2004] 28–9). See also Smith, *Imagining Religion*, 49 and Harald Welzer, “Communicative Memory,” in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook* (ed. Ansgar Nünning, Astrid Erll, and Sara B. Young; New York: de Gruyter, 2008) 285–98.

intolerable, the need for a subgroup to become its own group necessitated a change in canon—or, in Barnabas’s situation, the interpretation of canon.¹⁴

Thus, the solution for Barnabas to create a new community was to offer new interpretations on what was at this time a relatively fixed Jewish canon.¹⁵ This delicate balance meant that Barnabas had to retain the canon while offering new interpretations and applications of that canon. In other words, Barnabas needed “to develop exegetical procedures that will allow the canon to be applied without alteration or, at least, without admitting to alteration.”¹⁶ For instance, Barnabas construes covenantal faithfulness as being grounded not upon physical practices, but upon true γνῶσις that enables one to “know the commandments in an upright way” (10:12). In other words, the problem with “them” is that they have misunderstood the scriptural texts; hence, the solution is the right

14 E.g., George W. E. Nickelsburg, “Revealed Wisdom as a Criterion for Inclusion and Exclusion: From Jewish Sectarianism to Early Christianity,” in *“To See Ourselves as Others See Us”: Christians, Jews, “Others” in Late Antiquity* (ed. Jacob Neusner and Ernest S. Frerichs; Chico: Scholars, 1985) 73–92; however, Shaye J. D. Cohen places the emphasis on the Temple and who is true Israel (Shaye J. D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006] 119–66); but even topics concerning the Temple and true Israel would have been based on competing interpretations of scripture (ibid., 129).

15 I am referring to the “foundational texts” of most Jewish communities during this time (Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* [New York: Oxford University, rev. ed. 1997] 2; Timothy H. Lim, *The Formation of the Jewish Canon* [New Haven: Yale University, 2013] 180). In fact, Barnabas relies heavily on Jewish sources and very little on Christian ones (Metzger, *Canon of the New Testament*, 58-9; James N. B. Carleton Paget, “Paul and the Epistle of Barnabas,” *NovT* 38 [1996]). For a detailed study on Barnabas’s source, see Carleton Paget, *Epistle of Barnabas*. The simple point is that Barnabas does not introduce new texts that are explicitly about Jesus, but rather interprets Jesus into his existing sources.

16 Smith, *Imagining Religion*, 50.

interpretation of these texts through the disclosure of Barnabas's γνώσις.¹⁷ Consequently, this interpretation becomes the new “canon” around which Barnabas's group can form. Borrowing the terminology of J. Z. Smith, Barnabas is assuming the role of the group's “hermeneute.”¹⁸

Barnabas as the “Hermeneute” with Γνώσις

By virtue of having perfect γνώσις and his desire to disseminate it, Barnabas establishes himself as the group's “hermeneute” from the outset (1:5), a point which he strongly and proportionally develops throughout the letter. Barnabas assumes his pedagogical role and his possession of γνώσις in virtually every chapter (e.g., 1:5, 8; 4:6; 6:9; 7:1; 8:2; 9:7, 9; 10:11; 12:3, 8; 14:4; 15:5; 16:7, 8; ch. 17; 18:1), and he implicitly reinforces this role with the concentrated integration of Jewish traditions into his arguments.¹⁹

17 So Draper, “Barnabas and the Riddle,” 95; Hvalvik, *Struggle for Scripture*, 85.

18 Smith, *Imagining Religion*, 48. While canon and group formation can be understood within the conversation concerning the relationship between “social formation and mythmaking,” this paper will not attempt to explore the “social logic” of this epistle. For a short summary on this conversation, see Ron Cameron and Merrill P. Miller, “Conclusion: Redescribing Christian Origins,” in *Redescribing Christian Origins* (ed. Ron Cameron and Merrill P. Miller; Atlanta: SBL, 2004) 513-5.

19 On the inextricable connection between Barnabas and Jewish traditions, see Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra who notes that Barnabas represents “the text best informed about the Temple rite [of Yom Kippur]” and is therefore a “goldmine of Jewish traditions” (Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra, “Fasting with Jews, Thinking with Scapegoats: Some Remarks on Yom Kippur in Early Judaism and Christianity, in Particular 4Q541, *Barnabas* 7, Matthew 27 and Acts 27,” in *The Day of Atonement: Its Interpretations in Early Jewish and Christian Traditions* [ed. Thomas Hieke and Tobias Nicklas; Boston: Brill, 2012] 173–4); also James D. G. Dunn suggests that other than *1 Clement*, the *Epistle of Barnabas* uses the Hebrew scripture more heavily than any other early Christian writing at this time (James D. G. Dunn, *Neither Jew nor Greek: A Contested Identity* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015] 550–69); see also Pierluigi Lanfranchi, “Attitudes

There is also evidence that Barnabas is writing in response to contemporaneous events, prompting him to write with urgency (e.g., 1:5, 8; 2:1, 10; 4:1-2, 6, 9-10; 16:4, 5). Γνωσις in this way works as the cipher that allows Barnabas and his hearers to make proper sense of what is currently transpiring (1:7; 5:3). Barnabas is therefore assuming “the indigenous theologian’s task,” the task to interpret and apply the Jewish sacred traditions to the specific circumstances and concerns of his community.²⁰ Once again, a canon is not a canon unless it is being animated within the triangular relationship between itself, interpreter, and listener.²¹

Even the Two Ways tradition (*Barn.* 18-21), which concludes the epistle, is portrayed as another form of teaching (from διδαχή; 18:1); moreover, the Way of the righteous is described as a way of γνωσις (19:1; 21:5-6).²² Therefore, more than any other role, Barnabas presents himself as the “hermeneute” who has divine γνωσις, which not only legitimizes his truth claims, but also his efforts to simultaneously create a new community and a new canon.²³ However, Barnabas’s γνωσις is controversial, and there are indications that his hearers might not accept parts of it.²⁴ It

to the Sabbath in Three Apostolic Fathers: *Didache*, Ignatius, and Barnabas,” in *Jesus, Paul, and Early Christianity: Studies in Honour of Henk Jan De Jonge* (ed. Rieuwerd Buitenwerf, Harm W. Hollander, and Johannes Tromp; Leiden: Brill, 2008) 243–60; Tim Hegedus, “Midrash and the Letter of Barnabas,” *BTB* 37 (2007) 20–6; L. W. Barnard, “The ‘Epistle of Barnabas’ and Its Contemporary Setting,” *ANRW* II.27.1 (1993) 159–207.

²⁰ Smith, *Imagining Religion*, 46, 51.

²¹ So Assmann, “Canon and Archive,” 100.

²² So Hvalvik, *Struggle for Scripture*, 86.

²³ So Smith, “*Epistle of Barnabas*,” 486–9. For more on the role of the teacher, see n. 48 below.

²⁴ Smith, “*Epistle of Barnabas*,” 488; Hvalvik, *Struggle for Scripture*, 53. It will be shown below that, against Smith and Hvalvik, the uncertainty lies not in the content of Barnabas’s teaching, but in the condition of his hearers.

is thus the circumcision of hearing that provides his hearers the requisite ability to properly understand and believe his teachings.

The Need for the Circumcision of Hearing

Our analysis of Barnabas's circumcision of hearing (8:7; 9:3; 10:12; 16:10; also 11:11)²⁵ begins with the simple fact that the combination of circumcision and the faculties of hearing does not occur in any other prior writings. The only possible exception would be Stephen's speech (Acts 7:51, "ἀπερίτμητοι καρδίας καὶ τοῖς ὠσίν" [uncircumcised in heart and ears]) and Jeremiah's prophecy in the LXX (Jer 6:10, "ἀπερίτμητα τὰ ὦτα αὐτῶν" [their ears are uncircumcised]), but both instances describe uncircumcision (from ἀπερίτμητος, not circumcision) with a form of οὖς (ear, and not from ἀκοή [hearing]).²⁶ Thus, there is probably no literary relationship between Barnabas (*Barn.* 9:3; "περιέτεμεν ἡμῶν τὰς ἀκοάς" [circumcised our hearing]) and Acts or Jeremiah. This observation is important for three reasons. First, this strengthens Robert Kraft's hypothesis that this metaphor was influenced by Hellenistic Judaism: "This type of approach

25 Though the idea of hearing is also found in 12:8, these four verses will be primarily examined because they all convey the notion of differentiation that is also seen in the literal circumcision. For instance, verses not only include the idea of hearing, but they (or their respective contexts) also imply the covenantal implications of circumcision (e.g., 9:6) by making a contrast between those who hear and those who do not hear; on the other hand, 12:8 only references the notion of hearing without making a distinction between those who are in and out of the covenant. A lexical search would also return references such as 7:3 and 13:2, but the sense of ἀκούω (I hear) in these are idiomatic and should not be taken in a technical way (e.g., "consider this").

26 The LXX translation is from the author, but all scriptural translations are from the NRSV. There are, however, instances in Herodotus, but these are not related to circumcision in the Jewish cultic sense (e.g., *Historiae* 2.162.5; περιταμεῖν προστάξαι αὐτοῦ τὰ τε ὦτα καὶ τὴν ῥῖνα).

[linking disobedience with hearing] was extended especially to the thought of life . . . in the Judaism represented by Philo—circumcision of the understanding (ear, heart) thus became prime for him [Philo].”²⁷ Kraft is right to group “ear, heart” together because nowhere does Philo actually combine (un)circumcision with ears or hearing, but Philo does make a somewhat cryptic reference to the circumcision of the eyes.²⁸ To the defense of Kraft, the faculties of seeing and hearing are often coupled together for Philo as they are “the lordliest of the senses” (*Spec.* 1.193) or the philosophical senses (*QG* 3.5).²⁹ So although the exact phrase is not found in Philo’s extant

27 Kraft, *Apostolic Fathers*, 3:106. Note that Kraft interprets the letter in general as a collection of pre-existence sources. As indicated in n. 2, this assumption has been rightly qualified. Hvalvik writes that “the author’s material is traditional; his use of the material, however, is often original” (Hvalvik, *Struggle for Scripture*, 330) as the letter in general discloses a coherent purpose, namely the right interpretation of Scripture (*ibid.*, 102-36) and the distinction between two peoples or ways (*ibid.*, 137-57). For the same conclusion and emphases, see Carleton Paget (*Epistle of Barnabas*, 2 and 258-60). That the combination of circumcision and the faculties of hearing does not occur anywhere else up to Barnabas’s time of writing would only reinforce the argument of Hvalvik and Carleton Paget.

28 “And when the mind is circumcised and contains only necessary and useful things, and when at the same time there is cut off whatever causes pride to increase, then with it are circumcised the eyes also, as though they could not (otherwise) see” (*QG* 3.47). All Philo quotes are based on the critical edition and English translation of *Philo*, 12 vols., trans Colson, Loeb Classical Library, 1929

29 Philo typically groups seeing and hearing together (*Migr.* 103, 119; *Spec.* 1.29, 337, 342), which are inferior to “the rational” faculties of “mind and speech,” but higher than smell and taste (*QG* 3.5). Hearing, however, is secondary to seeing (*Migr.* 49-52; *QG* 3.32, 59). The next closest writing to the circumcision of hearing or ears by Philo besides *QG* 3.47 would be: “For he who listens with the tips of his ears is able to get (only) a somewhat vague perception of what is said, while to him who listens carefully the words enter more clearly and the things heard travel on all the paths so that they form his mind with deep impressions, as if (it were) wax, lest it easily become stupid and (the impressions) leap away” (*QE* 2.13). However, in this quote, he is not suggesting that the tips of the ears need to be circumcised. Lastly, it should be noted that Barnabas’s metaphor differs in significant ways to Philo’s famous

writings, the general notion is certainly there. Perhaps more indicative of a Hellenistic influence on Barnabas is how Philo famously rebukes those who “repeal the law laid down for circumcising” (*Migr.* 92). This would imply that within Philo’s circles, which likely included other Hellenistic Jews who had the penchant for allegorizing, there were those who would have understood circumcision in the same way as Barnabas. If it were not for the historical distance between Philo and Barnabas, it would be reasonable to presume that Philo was speaking of Barnabas.³⁰ Second, the broad Hellenistic influence may have in part inspired Barnabas to view the entirety of the Jewish law figuratively. To continue Philo’s quote, there were certainly those in Philo’s circle that did neglect “the sanctity of the Temple and a thousand other things” (*Migr.* 92). Heikki Räisänen has already suggested that certain strands within Hellenistic Judaism were not only abandoning their hopes for the physical restoration of the Temple, but possibly eschewing the practice of literal circumcision.³¹ Third, and most important to our study, is that the uniqueness of this metaphor is all the more profound when considering that much of the scholarship on Barnabas, until recently, has argued the letter is merely a farrago of existing sources.³² That Barnabas would introduce a metaphor that is not attested up to his time of writing suggests that it is distinctive to Barnabas’s theology and warrants a closer examination of the metaphor.

treatment on circumcision (*Spec.* 1.1-11). Whereas Barnabas’s focus on his metaphorical circumcision is primarily hermeneutical, Philo’s is more diverse (e.g., healing from “anthrax or carbuncle” [1.4] cleanliness [1.5], “fertility of offspring” [1.7], “the excision of pleasures” [1.9]) and presupposes the literal practice of circumcision (so John M. G. Barclay, “Paul and Philo on Circumcision: Romans 2.25-9 in Social and Cultural Context,” *NTS* 44 [1998] 538-40).

³⁰ So Carleton Paget, “Paul and the Epistle of Barnabas,” 378.

³¹ *Jesus, Paul and Torah: Collected Essays* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1992) 149–202. See also Daniel R. Schwartz, *Studies in the Jewish Background of Christianity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1992) 10-19.

³² See n. 27 above.

All four of the references to the circumcision of hearing are placed at pivotal positions within Barnabas's overall argument (8:7; 9:3; 10:12; 16:10). As mentioned earlier, Barnabas opens his letter with his claim of divine $\gamma\nu\tilde{\omega}\sigma\iota\varsigma$ (1:5), which he demonstrates by reproving one Jewish practice after another. Hence, 1.1 to 8.6 is more or less a denunciation of Jewish ancestral customs. Such a radical assertion might raise the question for his hearers: how can so many practicing Jews, who have been perceived as being faithful to the covenant based on these specific practices, be so misled? According to Barnabas: "the things that have happened in this way are clear to us, but they are obscure to them, because they have not heard the voice of the Lord" (8:7). This first allusion to the circumcision of hearing—albeit, implicit—provides the rationale behind why "they" have been so misguided and why "we" can properly perceive true $\gamma\nu\tilde{\omega}\sigma\iota\varsigma$.³³

Conversely, 8:7 also previews the ensuing argument on circumcision proper (*Barn.* 9) where the circumcision of hearing is most explicit. After following the argumentative strategy of refuting the literal understanding of the scriptures, Barnabas explains how he and his hearers are different than those who have been unwittingly committing idolatry: "Thus he circumcised our hearing, that once we heard the word we might believe" (9:3). If believing and having proper faith are what God ultimately demands, then they can only come once the hearing has been circumcised as indicated by the $\dot{\iota}\nu\alpha$ (in order to) clause with the subjunctive form of $\pi\iota\sigma\tau\epsilon\acute{\upsilon}\omega$ (I believe) ("that

33 Failing to trace how 8:7 is connected to the previous chapters, and ultimately to the very beginning of the letter, is one of the reasons why the circumcision of hearing has not received sustained analysis up until now. Most commentators see 8:7 as merely an introduction to ch. 9, which is concluded with 10:12, e.g., Carleton Paget, *Epistle of Barnabas*, 149; Hvalvik, *Struggle for Scripture*, 184; however, Julien Smith sees that it is also connected to 3:6, while still being used to transition into ch. 9 ("*Epistle of Barnabas*," 477–89). Though not explicit, Rhodes implies what I am arguing, that the "main point" is the "capacity to understand and respond appropriately to the divine will," which are ideas that have been introduced from the very beginning of the letter (*Epistle of Barnabas*, 59).

once we heard the word we might believe” [ἵνα ἀκούσαντες λόγον πιστεύσωμεν ἡμεῖς]; see 11:11 for a similar correlation). Just as literal circumcision was the sign of the covenant, so is the epistemological, if not metaphysical, circumcision that Barnabas is advocating. Barnabas substantiates his assertion by including a cluster of scriptural citations (9:1-5),³⁴ refuting hypothetical counterarguments (9:6-7), and generously disclosing his most “reliable lesson,” which explains why Abraham and his household were nevertheless circumcised (9:8-9).

Although Barnabas introduces a new topic in the next chapter (i.e., dietary laws in *Barn.* 10), his argumentative strategy is consistent. That is, people fail to acknowledge his γνῶσις concerning dietary laws because their hearing has not been circumcised (10:12). The syntactical repetition of the ἵνα clause followed by a subjunctive verb (“that we may understand these things” [ἵνα συνιώμεν ταύτα]) that we saw in 9:3 reinforces the causal significance of this circumcision. Furthermore, referring to the circumcision of hearing at this juncture reveals that the relevance of the metaphor is not limited to his discussion on literal circumcision (ch. 9). This is precisely how Clement of Alexandria, whose work has been considered “the best commentary on Barnabas,”³⁵ later cites this metaphor in his own discussion on true knowledge (*Strom.* 5.8.51.6 cites *Barn.* 10:12).³⁶ Indeed, Clement makes the connection between knowledge and the circumcision of

34 To be exact, “9:1-3 alone contains eight short quotations concerning ‘hearing’ and ‘ears’ ” (Robert A. Kraft, *The Epistle of Barnabas: Its Quotations and Their Sources* [Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1961] 43).

35 Kraft, *Apostolic Fathers*, 3:45. Clement’s high regard for Barnabas has been well-documented: Carleton Paget notes that Clement explicitly cites Barnabas eight times in the *Stromateis* (*Jews, Christians and Jewish Christians in Antiquity* [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010] 95 n. 23); see also Ehrman, “Epistle of Barnabas,” 3, 7.

36 References to the *Stromateis* follow the critical edition of Otto Stählin, *Clemens Alexandrinus*, Griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, rev. ed. 1960).

hearing by including the accompanying subjunctive clause: ἵνα συνιώμεν ταύτα.³⁷ As we saw in 8:7, the metaphor not only explains the erroneous practices of chs. 1-8, but also the dietary laws of ch. 10.

The final instance of the circumcision of hearing occurs at one of the concluding statements of the entire letter. Additionally, it is placed at the heels of perhaps the most controversial portion of the letter (ch. 16). While the urgency of Barnabas's writing can be detected throughout the epistle (1:8; 2:1; 4:1-2, 6, 9-10, 13), this urgency intensifies in his discussion concerning the Temple (ch. 16). Scholars are therefore correct to view the Temple as one of the primary themes of Barnabas.³⁸ However, ch. 16 is not simply about the Temple; it is instead the natural culmination of the preceding arguments about the people (ch. 13), the covenant (ch. 14; also ch. 4), and the Sabbath (ch. 15). Rather than "they" who practice the literal interpretations of the scriptures (ch. 13) on the Sabbath (ch. 15) under the assumption of their broken, nullified covenant (ch. 14; also ch. 4), it is

37 Clement's epistemological usage of this metaphor is all the more remarkable when considering that his extant writings reveal his overarching concern with knowledge (Eric Osborn, *Clement of Alexandria* [Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2005] xiii, 1-4; Andrew C. Itter, *Esoteric Teaching in the Stromateis of Clement of Alexandria* [Leiden: Brill, 2009] 81). Interestingly, scholars have used ritualized language to describe how the pursuit of knowledge is one of the primary purposes of the *Stromateis*, e.g., "to initiate souls into the true philosophy of Christ and to have knowledge of the first principle of the universe" (Itter, *Esoteric Teaching*, 109); "the initiation into true gnosis" (Louis Roberts, "The Literary Form of the *Stromateis*," *SCe* 1 [1981] 213). That this chapter (*Strom.* 5.8) is specifically concerned with knowledge is apparent by noticing how Clement uses even the barbarians as examples of ones who employ the use of symbols (5.8.44.1, 45.1), and how he cites Theognis 35-6 (5.8.52.4) and Isa 1:3 (5.8.54.1).

38 E.g., Rhodes, *Epistle of Barnabas*, 81; Stephen G. Wilson, *Related Strangers: Jews and Christians, 70-170 C.E.* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 131-36; Martin B. Shukster and Peter Richardson, "Temple and *Bet Ha-midrash* in the Epistle of Barnabas," in *Anti-Judaism in Early Christianity* (ed. Stephen G. Wilson; Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University, 1986) 17-32.

“we” who will celebrate the true Sabbath (i.e., the eighth day, 16:6), in the spiritual Temple where God’s voice is directly heard (16:10). In this way, the image of the spiritual Temple is a convergence of both of these social principles: canonical interpretation (i.e., the voice of God in 16:10) and ritual (i.e., the eighth day in 16:6).³⁹ Hence, the distinction between the two, as it will be further argued below, should be understood as merely heuristic.⁴⁰

* * *

39 Though Martin B. Shukster and Peter Richardson also interpret 16.10 as a critical verse, representing the convergence of the two major themes of the letter, they see the themes as being different, i.e., the Temple and the *birkat ha-minim* (“Temple and *Bet Ha-midrash*”; also Peter Richardson and Martin B. Shukster, “Barnabas, Nerva, and the Yavnean Rabbis,” *JTS* 34 [1983] 31-55); however, Richardson and Shukster’s argument for the rebuilding of the Temple by Nerva is tenuous. They base it on Nerva’s coin, which does not necessarily have to mean what they suggest, and they also base it on the historically suspicious account of *Gen. Rab.* 64.8; also Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C.-A.D. 135)* (ed. Géza Vermès and Fergus Millar; 3 vols.; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1973) 1:535 (though Richardson and Shukster acknowledge this and also cite texts from the *Megillat Ta’ani*). For a recent analysis on Richardson and Shukster’s hypothesis, see Carleton Paget, *Epistle of Barnabas*, 15–7; concerning Richardson and Shukster’s suggestion of the *birkat ha-minim*, recent research has questioned the direct influence that the *birkat ha-minim* had on “Christians” in the Diaspora cities, e.g., Jonathan Bernier, *Aposynagōgos and the Historical Jesus in John: Rethinking the Historicity of the Johannine Expulsion Passages* (Boston: Brill, 2013) 40–41—though, Richardson and Shukster place the provenance of Barnabas in Syria. However, Richardson and Shukster’s observations of Barnabas responding to the *birkat ha-minim* via his exegesis can also be explained through the arguments proposed in this study.

40 Scholarship on early Christianity has also mentioned, but not explored, this connection, e.g., Stroumsa, “Early Christianity,” 165, 172; *Making of the Abrahamic Religions*, 39; Brakke, “Canon Formation and Social Conflict,” 403, 408.

In sum, the circumcision of hearing is a motif that plays the prerequisite role for the theme that governs the whole epistle: $\gamma\nu\tilde{\omega}\sigma\iota\varsigma$, which is referenced as Barnabas's only competitive advantage against his rival teachers. Without this circumcision, Barnabas's claim to $\gamma\nu\tilde{\omega}\sigma\iota\varsigma$ is meaningless. As we have seen with the emphasis on canon, Barnabas's failure to convince others of his canonical interpretation is his failure to create his own community. However, Barnabas's metaphor is not merely an analogy because it is found in multiple places in the letter with a critically causal role. More specifically, it functions as some sort of a ritual for Barnabas and should therefore be understood as the same way in which "they" believed that physical circumcision was the seal of their covenant (9:6).⁴¹ Circumcision of hearing is therefore the initiatory rite of the covenant for Barnabas and his hearers (8:7; 9:3). As Martin B. Shukster and Peter Richardson note: "The covenantal sign of Christian exegesis is the true circumcision."⁴² Consequently, this metaphorical ritual is critical for Barnabas and his hearers, compelling a closer investigation into the relationship between the epistle and rituals in general.

Rituals

Deconstruction or Destruction of Rituals?

For most, if not all, of the Jewish communities of Second Temple Judaism, rituals were particularly important. Shaye J. D. Cohen has argued that religion in the ancient world was not primarily based on faith or dogma, but practices, commandments, acts, and other customs. Accordingly, the

41 The argument is not that this metaphor was an actual ritual that took place in a social context, but that it addresses the most primary communal needs that are addressed primarily by rituals. In short, it functions as a ritual. See next section for more details.

42 "Temple and *Bet Ha-midrash*," 29.

boundary lines between Jews and gentiles were drawn mostly on differing observances.⁴³ “For the polytheists of the Greco-Roman world, the most characteristic features of Judaism were, aside from circumcision, the observance of the Sabbath and the abstention from pork.”⁴⁴ Cohen’s description is corroborated by the oft-quoted texts from writers like Juvenal (*Sat.* 14.96-106), Suetonius (*Dom.* 12.2), and Tacitus (*Hist.* 5.5.1-2). If one, like Barnabas, seeks to destroy this strand of Judaism, then one must attack its foundational practices—or, in this context, rituals. That Barnabas does so is readily apparent even at a cursory skim of the letter. This has led Geoffrey D. Dunn, following Pierre Prigent, to suggest that perhaps Barnabas is more anti-cultic than anti-

43 Of course, Cohen does not mean to say that the Jews did not have any faith or beliefs (*From the Maccabees*, 51–2); George W. E. Nickelsburg says that the difference between “Jews” and “Christians” was “christological,” however, he does say that “For Jews, the right life was bound up with the *observance* of the Torah,” (*Ancient Judaism and Christian Origins: Diversity, Continuity, and Transformation* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003] 60), italics mine. See also Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2004) 10.

44 Cohen, *From the Maccabees*, 65; however, see Cohen’s more detailed treatment that assesses circumcision, language, social mechanisms, etc., particularly in the setting of Diaspora Jews, where he concludes: “the diaspora Jews of antiquity were not easily recognizable, if, indeed, they were recognizable at all” (“‘Those Who Say They Are Jews and Are Not’: How Do You Know a Jew in Antiquity When You See One?” in *Diasporas in Antiquity* [ed. Shaye J. D. Cohen and Ernest S. Frerichs; Atlanta: Scholars, 1993] 39); J. Z. Smith also argues that circumcision was not reliably and universally a central mark for a Jew since many other people groups, especially the Egyptians, were also circumcised (*Barn.* 9:6)—Smith rather sees that the association to the synagogue was the most prominent marker based on funeral inscriptions (“Fences and Neighbors: Some Contours of Early Judaism,” in *Approaches to Ancient Judaism: Theory and Practice* [ed. William Scott Green; Missoula: Scholars, 1978] 2:1–25).

Judaic.⁴⁵ Barnabas can be seen as one who deconstructs Judaism, but his opprobrium against rituals cuts both ways. If Barnabas deconstructs Judaism and its rituals, then in what ways does he (ironically) advance his own ritual(s)? Is it possible for Barnabas to create a community that is devoid of any ritual?⁴⁶

Rituals and Social Distinctions

According to most ritual theorists, the answer to the previous question is negative. Rituals are needed for group identity because they address the group's need for social and ideological distinctions. Concerning the former, Richard Jenkins argues that group identity is reducible to (1) demarcating external boundaries to distinguish the group from the Other as well as (2) defining internal hierarchies to create group roles. Jenkins locates rituals as the means that allow groups to make these necessary external and internal distinctions, distinctions that can be categorized as social.⁴⁷

Although Barnabas appears to be anti-ritual when compared with most groups of Judaism at this time, Barnabas is clearly attempting to generate these external and internal differences that are not only integral for group formation but that are accomplished through rituals. Efforts to externally and internally differentiate recur throughout the epistle through Barnabas's "us"-and-

45 Geoffrey D. Dunn, "Tertullian and Rebekah: A Re-Reading of an 'Anti-Jewish' Argument in Early Christian Literature," *VC* 52 [1998] 140; Pierre Prigent, *Les Testimonia dans le christianisme primitif: l'Épître de Barnabé I-XVI et ses sources* [Paris: Gabalda, 1961] 29–83)

46 In 11:11, Barnabas does make a reference to baptism, but it is difficult to see if this is performed in a way that would make this ritual different than that from Jewish traditions.

47 *Social Identity* (New York: Routledge, rev. ed. 2008) 169–83; for more on the latter point, see Catherine M. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University, rev. ed. 2009) 102.

“them” language along with the frequent reminders of Barnabas’s pedagogical role (1:5, 8; 4:6; 6:9; 7:1; 8:2; 9:7, 9; 10:11; 12:3, 8; 14:4; 15:5; 16:7, 8; ch. 17; 18:1). Circumcision of hearing is able to make both of these social distinctions. As mentioned earlier, circumcision is a covenantal sign that separates “us” from “them.” From an internal standpoint, if Barnabas is the one with true γνῶσις that his recipients need to hear, then he is clearly setting his role apart from the rest of the group.⁴⁸ Hence, we see that not only does circumcision of hearing function as a ritual because of its repeated references with causal implications (i.e., more than a mere analogy), but because it creates the social distinctions that every group needs.

Rituals and Ideological Distinctions

Groups also need to create ideological distinctions. This point has already been mentioned in the above discussion on canon, but what has not been underscored is the role that rituals play in this regard. It is often quoted that “Ritual is, above all, an assertion of difference,” but it is important to recognize that in the fuller context of this quote, the difference is more ideological than social—or, as J. Z. Smith describes it, the “‘gnostic’ dimension to ritual.”⁴⁹ Smith’s reference to “gnostic”

48 For a discussion on the student-teacher emphasis in early Christianity, particularly in Egypt (the likely provenance of Barnabas), see Brakke, “Canon Formation and Social Conflict,” 400-403. Brakke is influenced by Hans von Campenhausen, who reconstructs the student-teacher emphasis primarily through Clement of Alexandria because there is no other textual evidence on this topic (*Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power in the Church of the First Three Centuries* [trans. J. A. Baker; London: Black, 1969] 195-211), though he does mention Barnabas (ibid., 192–95). I would contend, however, that the student-teacher emphasis can be traced earlier to Barnabas himself when examining the circumcision of hearing motif through canon and ritual, especially considering the close relationship between Barnabas and Clement (at least on ideological grounds) as mentioned in nn. 35-7 above.

49 Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1987) 109.

is significant as it implies that rituals have the ability to convey some kind of knowledge. Thus, we see more clearly the intricate relationship between canon and ritual. In other words, groups are formed around principles, as prescribed by their canon, that are expressed and understood through rituals. Rituals, therefore, “are more likely to serve as the foundation . . . of the community’s identity”⁵⁰ as “it is a powerful and visible embodiment of the abstraction of collective identity.”⁵¹

This convergence between canon and ritual that is required for communal identity is what makes the metaphor of the circumcision of hearing an apt one. To put simply, ears and hearing would correlate to the gnostic or canonical dimension, while circumcision would correlate with the ritualized dimension. This suggests that Barnabas is not rejecting rituals in their entirety but only certain types. Because circumcision of hearing has epistemological or hermeneutical implications, it satisfies Barnabas’s need for some kind of a ritual and provides an explanation on why some people have not fully submitted to his teachings. More specifically, what will be examined below is how Barnabas perceives his hearers now that their ears have been circumcised. On the one hand, the purpose of their circumcision was for them to be able to believe and to understand (9:3; 10:12). On the other hand, Barnabas does not write in such a way where he believes that his hearers truly believe and understand even though it appears that this circumcision

50 David Manier and William Hirst, “A Cognitive Taxonomy of Collective Memories,” in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook* (ed. Ansgar Nünning, Astrid Erll, and Sara B. Young; New York: de Gruyter, 2008) 251.

51 Jenkins, *Social Identity*, 177.

took place in the past. In fact, it is because of this delicate tension that this metaphorical ritual is most suitably described as circumcision.⁵²

The Tension of Barnabas's Hearers

According to Barnabas, the baseline for proper believing and understanding is found in the prophets—such as Moses (4:8; 10:1; 14:3), David (12:10; 13:10), and Abraham (9:8; 13:7)—and, unsurprisingly, himself (1:4, 5; 6:5; 17:1-2). Such unqualified attribution of knowledge and faith is not given to his hearers. Although Barnabas writes that “a great faith and love dwell within [them]” (1:4), he continues in the next line that he had “hastened . . . to send [them] a brief letter, that [they] may have perfect knowledge to accompany [their] faith” (1:5). Elaborating further on their faith, Barnabas mentions that it “will be of no use to us if we do not stand in resistance” (4:9). In other words, though his hearers have a degree of knowledge and faith, Barnabas later reveals that it simply is not enough. Barnabas still has urgency for them to increase their knowledge and faith, and, as it currently stands, their faith is vain unless they are able to stand in resistance.

In other instances, Barnabas claims that “we” have the true understanding. Despite the rhetoric, what he really means is that only he himself is presently privileged with this wisdom. This is most evident when he makes the claim that “the Master has made known to us what has happened and what now is” (1:7); however, the ensuing verse makes a counterclaim as Barnabas has the need to “show a few matters to [them]” in order that they “will gladden [their] hearts in the present circumstances” (1:8). There are, additionally, scattered references of what is currently transpiring

⁵² This point does not take away from the more obvious reason why Barnabas phrased this metaphorical ritual as circumcision, which is to subvert the literal practice of circumcision. However, see n. 44 above on why subversion is not the only reason why circumcision of hearing is phrased as such.

and in each of these references, Barnabas finds the need to explain the significance of these events (e.g., 5:3; 6:19; 8:7; 16:4, 5). Similarly, Barnabas expresses gratitude to the Lord because he has “placed the wisdom and knowledge of his secrets within us” (6:10). Their wisdom and knowledge, however, are nonetheless lacking as he later makes explicit (ch. 17). This point is also implied throughout the entire letter: citation after citation and explanation and after explanation only cement the current wisdom and knowledge of Barnabas, not that of his hearers.

Barnabas also expresses urgency—or even uncertainty—about his readers’ ability to understand and believe, despite his references to the circumcision of hearing. Though circumcision is intended so that they might understand and believe, nowhere does Barnabas actually state that they are presently understanding and believing (with the exception of 16:7).⁵³ The mood for all of the verbs related to understanding and believing, when referring to the recipients, are either subjunctive or infinitive and are not used in a way to convey the present reality of the recipients—though 3:6 is an indicative of πιστεύω, this is in the future tense.

Barnabas does, however, use similar verbs in the imperative mood or in conjunction with ὀφείλω (I ought). Nine times does Barnabas use the verb μανθάνω (I learn), seven of which are used in the second person imperative (e.g., 5:5; 6:9; 9:7, 8; 14:4; 16:2, 7).⁵⁴ The verb ὀφείλω is

⁵³ There is a total of eight instances of πιστεύω, six of them are used with the recipients as the subject (7:2; 9:3; 16:7; implied subject, 3:6; 6:3; 7:2). There is a total of seven instances of συνίημι (I understand); the recipients are the subject of three of these instances (4:6; 6:5; 10:12).

⁵⁴ By contrast, the New Testament does not use μανθάνω in the second person imperative in any of the epistles. This form of the verb is only found in Jesus’s sayings (Matt 9:13; 11:29; 24:32 // Mark 13:28). Perhaps it is only coincidental, but it is worth mentioning that these imperatives are used multiple times in the epistle’s more controversial discussions of circumcision (ch. 9) and the Temple (ch. 16), which strengthens Daniel Schwartz’s hypothesis on how Hadrian’s policies may have instigated the Bar Kokhba revolt (*Studies in the Jewish Background*,

also used frequently (2:1, 9, 10; 4:6; 6:18; 13:3), but what is significant about Barnabas's usage is how it is supplemented with an epistemological verb—usually αἰσθάνομαι (I am aware).⁵⁵ On the one hand, these imperatival expressions imply, to a certain degree, Barnabas's confidence that his hearers can fulfill what is being requested of them; on the other hand, these expressions imply the need for Barnabas to be particularly pointed in his teachings as if to sear them into their minds.

There are still further indications that the recipients are not fully understanding what Barnabas has to say, namely his rhetoric. The rhetoric is used in two ways: (1) Barnabas postures himself as one who is humble and genuine, and (2) he positions himself as one with superior knowledge. In the former, such rhetoric is often employed to accompany one of his (many) injunctions for the recipients to accept his teaching. Followed immediately after one of these injunctions that they “should understand,” he softens the tone by saying, “I am asking you this as one who is from among you and who loves each and every one of you more than my own soul” (4:6). Just a few verses later, he says, “I hasten to write, as your lowly scapegoat. Therefore [διό], we should pay close attention here in the final days” (4:9). Almost verbatim, Barnabas adds: “I am a lowly scapegoat for your love” after he expresses his desire for them to “understand” (6:4; also 1:8). When considering only this first use of his rhetoric, it is tempting to conclude that Barnabas has doubts about his own teachings and γνῶσις.

However, Barnabas's first rhetorical strategy should be balanced, if not interpreted through, his expressions of possessing superior knowledge. That is, Barnabas's self-perception is more

147–53); for an alternative view on this topic, see Giovanni Battista Bazzana, “The Bar Kokhba Revolt and Hadrian's Religious Policy,” in *Hadrian and the Christians* (ed. Marco Rizzi; New York: de Gruyter, 2010) 85–110.

55 Interestingly, in 2:10 the supplementing verb is from the rare verb, ἀκριβεύομαι or ἀκριβεύω (I pay strict attention).

likely to be the one of a wise teacher than a lowly scapegoat. In fact, Barnabas mentions frequently that his teachings have already been revealed previously (e.g., 1:7; 3:6; 5:3; 6:7, 12; 7:1; 11:1), so the fact that his hearers fail to fully understand is not an indictment on his part. But Barnabas does not put the blame solely on his hearers. After one of the more strained interpretations offered by Barnabas (i.e., his usage of the *nomina sacra* in 9:8), he is compelled to further substantiate his creative assertion by writing: “No one has learned a more reliable lesson from me. But I know that you are worthy” (9:9). Here, Barnabas is saying two things which correspond to his twofold rhetorical strategy: his teachings are reliable and his recipients are worthy. It is likely that Barnabas is more convinced of the former than the latter. For instance, Barnabas also mentions twice that he is holding back on his superior teaching because he is afraid that his hearers will not be able to understand: “I am writing to you in very simple terms, that you may understand” (6:5; also 17:2). Are these indications that Barnabas is doubting the ability of his hearers to understand his teachings? Or is Barnabas concerned that his hearers are unwilling to agree with his γνῶσις? If so, then how can we reconcile these possibilities with the fact that the hearing of his hearers have already been circumcised (9:3; 10:12)?

Circumcision Producing Liminality

Such a paradox corresponds to Victor Turner’s model of liminality.⁵⁶ Turner developed this notion within the context of Arnold van Gennep’s threefold phase of rites of passage (i.e., separation,

⁵⁶ *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell University, rev. ed. 1970) 93–111; an updated version of Turner’s chapter can be found in “Liminality and Communitas” in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New Brunswick: Aldine Transaction, rev. ed. 2007).

margin/liminality, and aggregation).⁵⁷ Based on his studies on the Ndembu tribe of Zambia, Turner observed that after initiatory rites such as circumcision, neophytes are placed in a fragile phase that is marked by the kind of inconsistency that has been outlined above. Turner observes that “in some boys’ initiations, newly circumcised boys are explicitly likened to menstruating women.”⁵⁸ The neophytes in this transitory phase are thus “neither living nor dead from one aspect, and both living and dead from another. Their condition is one of ambiguity and paradox, a confusion of all the customary categories.”⁵⁹

In the context of Barnabas, we see that though Barnabas regards circumcision as already “performed” in the past, there is no evidence that his hearers have reached their final phase of aggregation—the ability to believe and understand properly. This is not because Barnabas doubts his own teaching. Nor is it because his hearers are unwilling to listen or unable to understand. When considering how initiatory rites typically create a state of liminality, the likelier explanation on why Barnabas writes the way that he does is because he is aware of the recipients’ vulnerable state. They are impressionable to both Barnabas’s own teachings as well as the deleterious teachings of others (2:9, 10; 4:6, 14; 16:1).⁶⁰ In short, Barnabas is certain of the truthfulness of his

⁵⁷ Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, 94; Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (New York: Routledge, rev. ed. 2010).

⁵⁸ Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, 96.

⁵⁹ Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, 96–7. This fragile state is portrayed in Gen 34.

⁶⁰ This explains why there are other instances in the letter where Barnabas does not view his hearers as full members of the group that he is trying to construct. Barnabas’s thoroughly didactic explanations on why some of the “fundamental” practices of the Other are misguided all imply that his hearers were tempted to engage in these practices, if not already engaged in them (e.g., sacrifice in 2:4-10, fasting in 3:1-5, circumcision in 9:6, and the Sabbath in 15:1-9; the need for Barnabas to distinguish his hearers from the Other in 4:6; 13:1-7; 14:1-9). The notion of

own teachings, but shows concerted effort to ensure that his hearers are able to understand and believe his teachings because of the initiatory condition of his hearers.⁶¹ Turner's observations are once again pertinent:

The arcane knowledge or 'gnosis' obtained in the liminal period is felt to change the inmost nature of the neophyte, impressing him, as a seal impresses wax, with the characteristics of his new state. It is not a mere acquisition of knowledge, but a change in being. His apparent passivity is revealed as an absorption of powers which will become active after his social status has been redefined in the aggregation rites.⁶²

Once again we see the connection between ritual and gnosis, but we also gain a new perspective on what was observed above concerning Barnabas's choice of verbs, especially in the imperatival sense. In essence, Barnabas is seeking to impress upon his hearers "as a seal impresses wax." Hearing the epistle should not be understood as "mere acquisition of knowledge, but a change in being," which finds its consummation in "τον λαόν τον καινόν" of God (5:7; 6:19; 7:5). As Barnabas is quite forthcoming that the purpose of his writing is "that you may have perfect knowledge" (ἵνα μβτά της πίστεως νμών τελείαν έχητε τήν γνώσιν, 1:5), it is significant to see that toward the end of the letter, he can write, "we maintain that our knowledge is now perfect"

liminality also explains why Barnabas outlines the basics of salvation (17:1), yet insinuates that there is still more to learn (17:2). See also Derry, "One Stone on Another," 528; Dunn, "Tertullian and Rebekah"; Janni Loman, "The Letter of Barnabas in Early Second-Century Egypt," in *The Wisdom of Egypt: Jewish, Early Christian, and Gnostic Essays in Honour of Gerard P. Luttikhuisen* (ed. Anthony Hilhorst and Geurt Hendrik van Kooten; Boston: Brill, 2005) 247–66; Lanfranchi, "Attitudes to the Sabbath."

61 This emphasis is therefore a nuance to the interpretations of Julien Smith, Rhodes, and Hvalvik (see n. 24).

62 *Forest of Symbols*, 102; italics original.

(ἀπέχομεν τό τέλειον τῆς γνώσεως ημῶν, 13:7).⁶³ The placement of these two statements and their syntactical agreement indicate Barnabas's hope that he had impressed "arcane knowledge or 'gnosis' " upon his neophytes.⁶⁴

63 Carleton Paget regards the syntactical relationship to be "surely significant," (*Epistle of Barnabas*, 165; also Kraft, *Apostolic Fathers*, 3:23).

64 While it is beyond the scope of this study, it would be worthwhile to explore how the "reading event" of the *Epistle of Barnabas* itself can be construed as a ritual, particularly in light of Catherine Bell's flexible ritualization framework and the findings in ancient book culture (*Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*; for the phrase "reading event," see William A. Johnson, "Toward a Sociology of Reading in Classical Antiquity," *American Journal of Philology* 121 [2000] 602, n. 20). If so, then I suggest that at least the following four topics should be examined (to keep this note at a manageable length, I am only citing the most recent studies). First, research in Barnabas scholarship has understood the Two Ways section (*Barn.* 18-21) as having a ritualized, if not catechetical, function, particularly with the parallels with 1QS 3.13-4.27 and the *Didache* (Robert A. Kraft, "Early Developments of the 'Two-Ways Tradition[s],'" in *For a Later Generation: The Transformation of Tradition in Israel, Early Judaism, and Early Christianity* [ed. Randal A. Argall, Beverly Bow, and Rodney Alan Werline; Harrisburg: Trinity, 2000] 136-43; Jonathan A. Draper, "Vice Catalogues as Oral-Mnemonic Cues," in *Jesus, the Voice, and the Text: Beyond the Oral and the Written Gospel* [ed. Tom Thatcher; Waco: Baylor University, 2008] 111-33; James N. Rhodes, "The Two Ways Tradition in the Epistle of Barnabas: Revisiting an Old Question," *CBQ* 73 [2011] 797-816; Smith, "Epistle of Barnabas"). Second, the location of the Diaspora synagogue as being the ideal place where ritual and canonical interpretation converge (Lee I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years* [New Haven: Yale University, rev. ed. 2005] 155; Nickelsburg, *Ancient Judaism*, 157), as well as being open to those of "different religio-political outlooks" (Anders Runesson, Donald D. Binder, and Birger Olsson, *The Ancient Synagogue from Its Origins to 200 C.E.: A Source Book* [Boston: Brill, 2008] 3; see also Erich S. Gruen, *Diaspora: Jews Amidst Greeks and Romans* [Cambridge: Harvard University, 2002] 113; Cohen, *From the Maccabees*, 47). Third, the recent findings on ancient book culture, which was not only pervasive among the elite (William A. Johnson, *Readers and Reading Culture in the High Roman Empire: A Study of Elite Communities* [New York: Oxford University, 2010]), but was appropriated in many ways by

Conclusion

For Barnabas, his means of initiating the members of his community is through the circumcision of hearing (8:7; 9:3; 10:12; 16:10). This circumcision enables his hearers to deconstruct past interpretations, interpretations that will bring “error in through the backdoor” (2:10) so that they can orient themselves around Barnabas’s canonical interpretation. In this way, the circumcision makes external distinctions between “us” and “them,” as well as an internal distinction (i.e., Barnabas is the possessor of γνῶσις while his hearers are dependent upon him). Despite these distinctions, there is still ambiguity as Barnabas’s hearers are not yet able to fully grasp his γνῶσις because they are in the vulnerable state of liminality wherein the present circumstances are difficult to discern (1:8). Hence, Barnabas writes in such a way as to impress his “arcane knowledge and ‘*gnosis*’ ” onto his hearers,⁶⁵ leading them to become “τον λαόν τον καινόν” of God, which will not be fulfilled until the “eighth day” (6:19; 15:7-9; 16:8-9).

the early Christ movement (Gregory P. Fewster, “Ancient Book Culture and the Literacy of James: On the Production and Consumption of a Pseudepigraphal Letter,” *ZAC* 20 [2016] 387–417); more generally is the sociocultural implications of reading, which includes its ability to construct meaning and value for a particular group (Johnson, *Readers and Reading Culture*, 3-16). Finally, the theoretical tools to explore the performative aspects of texts (John R. Searle and Daniel Vanderveken, “Speech Acts and Illocutionary Logic,” in *Logic, Thought and Action*, [ed. Daniel Vanderveken; Netherlands: Springer, 2006] 109–32) and how they relate to rituals in particular (Roy A. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* [Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1999]); Paul Connerton’s observation is especially applicable for Barnabas with the mutual emphasis on the use of personal pronouns (i.e., “us” versus “them”) (*How Societies Remember* [New York: Cambridge University, 1989] 58).

⁶⁵ Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, 102; italics original.

This study has therefore sought to make a significant contribution to scholarship on both the *Epistle of Barnabas* in particular as well as group dynamics and early Jewish-Christian relations in general. At the most granular level, the references to the circumcision of hearing are shown to be placed at key points within the letter (8:7; 9:3; 10:12; 16:10; also 11:11). By illustrating the critical importance that this metaphorical ritual has in the text, this study addresses a lacuna in the scholarship on the epistle as sustained analysis on this matter has been wanting. More broadly, this study offers a richer picture into the liminality of the community that Barnabas was attempting to construct and maintain. While Ferdinand R. Prostmeier is generally correct to assert that “Der Antijudaismus des Barn *ist* innerchristliche Polemik,” much of the social analysis on the letter in Barnabas scholarship has focused on the intergroup dynamics, namely its relation to “Judaism.”⁶⁶ This study, on the other hand, reconstructs the fragile dynamics from a more intragroup standpoint.⁶⁷ Concerning the impact on the general area of early Jewish-Christian relations, the methodological approach taken in this study—which provides a more theoretical articulation on the key constituents of a communal group, that is, canon and ritual—presents fruitful analytical constructs to help explore this contentious topic in new and penetrating ways.⁶⁸

66 Ferdinand R. Prostmeier, “Antijudaismus im Rahmen christlicher Hermeneutik: zum Streit über christliche Identität in der Alten Kirche Notizen zum Barnabasbrief,” *ZAC* 6 (2002) 56; italics original. The intergroup emphasis can be seen in the studies of Derry (“One Stone on Another”) and Kok (“True Covenant People”; note, however, Kok's hypothetical qualification in *ibid.*, 88).

67 While Julien Smith does touch upon the intragroup dynamic, it is to focus mostly on the teaching authority—or, canonical interpretation—of Barnabas (“*Epistle of Barnabas*”) whereas the present study is focused more on the liminality of Barnabas’s hearers as well as providing a sustained examination on the circumcision of hearing with more conceptual depth.

68 See nn. 2 and 3.

Lastly, the utilization of cross-cultural and interdisciplinary studies allows modern (and mostly Western) scholars to see the rationale behind the oddities that have been well expressed in Barnabas scholarship.⁶⁹ By interpreting the letter along more conceptually thoughtful formulations on canon and ritual, it has been argued that what Barnabas was attempting to do is not different than what takes place in every communal group even in our present societies. Within the convergence of canonical interpretation and ritual performance, certain aspects of the strangeness of Barnabas begin to fade away. Even in modern times, blockbuster hits in the entertainment industry promise either a glimpse toward the *future* or a privileged perspective into the *past*.⁷⁰ It is likewise difficult to decide which question is most frequent at the water cooler: “how was your weekend?” or “do you have any plans this weekend?” Outside of our modern, Western culture, familial lineage is critical, as is one’s posterity. For Barnabas, this tension “betwixt and between”⁷¹ interpreting the past and creating a future is not only vital for his theology, but for the power of his rhetoric: his assertions are persuasive because they generate claims where “such possibilities cannot be realized”⁷²—at least in this world. Traditionally accepted interpretations of the past must be overhauled with Barnabas’s new γνῶσις —another example of how “the crucial issue is not

69 See n. 1.

70 See also Marco Cinnirella’s study on how social identity is usually based on the re-interpretation of the past as well as the shaping of the future (“Exploring Temporal Aspects of Social Identity: The Concept of Possible Social Identities,” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 28 [1998] 227–48). For this similar, temporal concept, see Smith, *To Take Place*, 109–12.

71 Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, 96

72 Smith, *To Take Place*, 109. From a cognitive-scientific standpoint on the power of religious claims, see Richard Sosis, “The Adaptive Value of Religious Ritual,” *American Scientist* 92 (2004) 172.

history but hermeneutics.”⁷³ On the other hand, Barnabas concedes that contemporaneous circumstances present paradoxes to his γυνῶσις, but this is only because his community is still in the liminal state, and because he and his community have not yet experienced their new creation status (6:19), and because the true Sabbath is on the always-future eighth day (15:7-9), and because the Temple is still being built (16:8-9), and so on.⁷⁴ In the interim, Barnabas and his community can find refuge in the fact that “Texts construct a world,” a world in which “authors and readers already inhabit and experience as ‘reality.’”⁷⁵ Where “our knowledge is now perfect” (13:7) and where “God truly resides within our place of dwelling—within us” (16:8). In other words, where “The imagined ceases to be imaginary.”⁷⁶

73 Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley: University of California, 1999) 349.

74 One might view this reference to liminality to be different than the more hermeneutical one mentioned earlier in this present study. A closer reading of the letter, however, suggests that this distinction does not exist for Barnabas since he elsewhere conflates the more eschatological or new-creational quality with the more hermeneutical or epistemological quality (*Barn.* 6:10-19; 16:6-9).

75 Lieu, *Christian Identity*, 61.

76 Jenkins, *Social Identity*, 177.