Barnabas, Jubilee Ethics, Social Location and the Stakes of Religious Identity

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Abstract
This paper considers Harold Remus's emphasis on the social stakes of religious boundary-drawing alongside the social dimensions of Barnabas's Sabbath and Jubilee rhetoric. The Epistle of Barnabas makes a particularly sharp case study for Remus' interest in how early Christian writers constructed their identity in relation to both Judaism and paganism through polemical contrast, since Barnabas's anti-Jewish polemic is among the most aggressive in early Christian literature.

The Epistle of Barnabas deploys Isaiah's Sabbath and Jubilee texts (Isa 1:13–15; 58:1–13; 61:1–2) as the exegetical backbone of its Christological argument, using them to construct a socio-economic vision of true covenant faithfulness. This paper examines Barnabas's use of these Isaianic texts to position his gentile readers as the true inheritors of the Isaianic covenant, contrasting them with an Israel rendered unworthy through false religiosity. The paper further explores Barnabas's slave-master imagery and warnings against private property through the lens of social location and the stakes of religious identity. Barnabas's Jubilee theology was not merely an abstract hermeneutical claim but a socially embedded discourse that carried real consequences for how his audience—which likely included both enslaved persons and slaveholders—understood their obligations to one another.

Résumé
Cet article examine l'accent mis par Harold Remus sur les enjeux sociaux du tracé des frontières religieuses, en dialogue avec les dimensions sociales de la rhétorique sabbatique et jubilaire de Barnabé. L'Épître de Barnabé constitue un cas d'étude particulièrement éclairant pour les préoccupations de Remus concernant la manière dont les auteurs chrétiens primitifs ont construit leur identité par le biais du contraste polémique avec le judaïsme et le paganisme, d'autant plus que la polémique anti-juive de Barnabé figure parmi les plus virulentes de la littérature chrétienne ancienne.

L'Épître de Barnabé mobilise les textes isaïens du sabbat et du jubilé (Is 1,13–15; 58,1–13 ; 61,1–2) comme fondement exégétique de son argumentation christologique, s'en servant pour construire une vision socio-économique de la fidélité authentique à l'alliance. Cet article examine la manière dont Barnabé utilise ces textes isaïens pour présenter ses lecteurs d'origine païenne comme les véritables héritiers de l'alliance isaïenne, en les opposant à un Israël rendu indigne par une fausse religiosité. L'article explore en outre les images de maîtres et d'esclaves chez Barnabé ainsi que ses mises en garde contre la propriété privée, à travers le prisme de la situation sociale et des enjeux de l'identité religieuse. La l'Épître de Barnabé n'était pas une simple affirmation herméneutique abstraite, mais un discours socialement ancré qui avait des conséquences réelles sur la manière dont son auditoire—comprenant vraisemblablement des personnes réduites en esclavage aussi bien que des propriétaires d'esclaves—comprenait ses obligations mutuelles.

I. Introduction: The Social Stakes of Religious Identity

In his 1982 article on sociology of knowledge and early Christianity, Harold Remus establishes that "knowledge" is not merely intellectual but constitutes the fabric of shared meaning that makes social life possible.[1] Remus's framework, drawn from Berger and Luckmann, shows that conversion to early Christianity was a process of "intensive resocialization," in which the community itself functions as a plausibility structure, or "laboratory", for a new symbolic universe.[2] Within that symbolic universe, one is resocialized into right "knowledge" and the social aspect of this process is proven by how this "knowledge" is embodied materially and therefore functioning on a societal level. For example, the command to "love one another" may be shorthand for an entire pattern of discourse, memory, symbols, and stories that constitute the life of the community.[3] Crucially, Remus shows that conflict is often essential to this process, as rival communities with competing symbolic universes bond through the very act of defining themselves against one another.[4]

Further, Remus's analysis of Justin Martyr demonstrates how early Christian writers constructed identity through polemical contrasts with both Judaism and paganism, reorienting their readers' social and cultural worlds to fit a Christian framework.[5] The Epistle of Barnabas represents a sharper, more urgent edge of this same dynamic. Remus's later work on boundary-marking terminology further illuminates what is at stake: early Christianity's sectarian identity was built through competing symbolic universes and the very act of setting "us" apart from "them" through distinctive, socially performative nomenclature.[6] This has methodological

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[1] Harold Remus, "Sociology of Knowledge and the Study of Early Christian," Sciences Religieuses/Studies in Religion 11/1 (1982): 46.

[2] Remus, "Sociology of Religion," 47.

[3] Remus, *Sociology*, 48

[4] Remus, *Sociology*, 56

[5] Harold Remus, "Justin Martyr's Argument with Judaism," in *Anti-Judaism in Early Christianity*, vol. 2: *Separation and Polemic*, ed. Stephen G. Wilson, Studies in Christianity and Judaism 2 (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1986), 59–80.

[6] Harold Remus, "The End of 'Paganism'?" *Studies in Religion / Sciences Religieuses* 33/2 (2004): 191–93. Remus observes that early Christianity exhibited self-conscious deviance expressed through

implications for reading the Epistle of Barnabas, whose implied audience was ethnically and socio-economically diverse. Certainly, many of the members of the Barnabean community were resocialized gentiles navigating a triple boundary (away from their polytheist past, away from the newly attractive Jewish present, and toward the new symbolic universe Barnabas is constructing). This means that the social location of his audience necessitated boundary-markers in the form of a distinct socio-economic ethic alongside Barnabas's framework of right "knowledge". The paper's central claim is that Barnabas engages the Isaianic tradition to establish "knowledge" within a stratified and ethnically diverse community as a concrete social enactment of economic generosity and reciprocity that distinguishes the true heirs of the covenant.

II. Knowledge, Anti-Jewish Polemic, and the Historical Stakes

Knowledge in Barnabas is the primary social identity marker, defined specifically as the capacity to rightly interpret scripture. In fact, Barn. 1:5 says that "knowledge" (γνῶσις) is the purpose of his epistle: "that you might have perfect knowledge in your faith".[7] Knowledge is not primarily esoteric for Barnabas, however. Right knowing is correlated to God's δικαιώματα (requirements/ordinances), and Barnabas places this term at the key structural joints of the letter: the opening (1:2) and the conclusion (21:1, 5). This bracketing suggests that the entire epistle insists that right knowledge is demonstrated by ethical action.[8] The knowledge Barnabas speaks of concerns the proper way to interpret the Jewish Scriptures. For Barnabas, knowledge comes from God insofar as God grants the ability to interpret or "know" scripture rightly (Barn. 6:9–10;

"exclusivity, distinctive beliefs and morality, sequestration and aloofness, group loyalty and various ways of maintaining and strengthening loyalty and boundaries," not least through the distinctive names that set insiders off from outsiders (192–93).

[7] Jonathon Lookadoo, *The Epistle of Barnabas: A Commentary*, Apostolic Fathers Commentary Series (Eugene: Cascade, 2022), 93. Lookadoo's commentary is the first English-language commentary on the Epistle of Barnabas since Robert A. Kraft, *Barnabas and the Didache*, The Apostolic Fathers 3 (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1965). Unless otherwise noted, all citations of and translations from the Epistle of Barnabas are drawn from Lookadoo.

[8] Lookadoo, *Barnabas*, 112.

9:9). In Barn. 6:10, Barnabas writes that Scripture is "a word in need of interpretation," and correct reading stems from a privileged relationship with God: "the Lord has given wisdom and understanding of his secrets so that Barnabas and his audience can rightly understand what the prophet says."[9]

On the basis of this hermeneutical privilege, Barnabas makes a sharp distinction between two interpretive communities. Israel is designated as "they" (ἐκεῖνοι) who are unable to "know" scripture rightly (cf. 20:2). "They" have been deceived by "an evil angel" (Barn. 9:4) into interpreting Jewish identifiers such as circumcision, temple, and sacrifice literally. Barnabas's community are "we" (ἡμεῖς) who have received the Spirit and become the true covenant heirs who interpret the scriptures rightly (Barn. 1:2–3; 4:8; 13:1–14:9). His key hermeneutical move is to divide scripture itself between what is spoken "to us" and "to them" (Barn. 2:7–10; 3:1–5; 8:7). As Lookadoo notes, because God's δικαιώματα come from God and not from Barnabas himself, the requirements placed on the community carry divine authority and are not subject to negotiation.[10] The Epistle of Barnabas is therefore an important dialogue partner for the sociology of knowledge. We find two communities with competing symbolic universes, social structures, personnel, and worship, fighting over who controls the meaning of the same texts. This is exactly what Remus identifies as the social logic of early Christian conflict.[11]

Understanding why this polemic is so aggressive requires attending to the historical moment. The most likely date for the Epistle of Barnabas is sometime between the 90s CE, during or shortly after the reign of Nerva (96–98 CE), and the reign of Hadrian (117–138 CE).[12] Post-70 CE, Christians interpreted the Temple's destruction as conclusive proof of Jewish forfeiture of the covenant. It is plausible, as Shukster and

[9] Lookadoo, *Barnabas*, 64.
[10] Lookadoo, *Barnabas*, 92.
[11] Remus, "Sociology of Knowledge," 56.
[12] Michael Kok, "The True Covenant People: Ethnic Reasoning in the Epistle of Barnabas," *Studies in Religion / Sciences Religieuses* 40/1 (2011): 81–97 (here, 92); Lookadoo, *Barnabas*, 47-50.

Richardson argue, that Nerva's reform of the *fiscus Iudaicus*, combined with widespread expectation that the Temple would be rebuilt, created the conditions for Judaism to appear rehabilitated.[13] Barnabas's reference to the Temple "being built now" (Barn. 16:4) is best read as a reference to an anticipated Jewish Temple project.[14] Within this social landscape, rabbinic authority became more prominent, and the prestige of the *Bet ha-midrash* grew accordingly. Perhaps this newly attractive form of Jewish exegetical life had already proven irresistible for some members of Barnabas's community. It seems that some were already conceding that "the covenant is both theirs and ours" (Barn. 4:6).[15] There is a tone of urgency which pervades the epistle and the author is convinced that these are the "last days" (4:9) controlled by the "worker of evil himself" (2:1). A beleaguered Christianity faced what Barnabas calls its "final stumbling block" (4:3) and Barnabas exhorts his audience to caution and hatred of "the error of this present time" (4:1). Despite these exhortations the Barnabas's prognosis for the community is bleak. At the turn of the first century, Josephus wrote that "the Pharisees … have the reputation of being unrivalled experts in our country's laws" *(Vita* 191; cf. *B.J.* 2:162). Barnabas recognized that this reputation as guarantors of correct interpretation posed a considerable danger to Christians, a danger that would only increase if the Temple were really going to be rebuilt. Barnabas, therefore, attempts to show that only Christians interpret scripture as God intended, and it is Christian teachers like himself, and not the rabbis of the *Bet ha-midrash*, who should be recognized as the most trustworthy expositors (10:12). In short, the Christian way of "knowing" teaches the believer to act as God has ordained.[16] However, while Barnabas may interpret scripture as granting the Christian community the authority to rule the

[13] Martin B. Shukster and Peter Richardson, "Temple and Bet Ha-midrash in the Epistle of Barnabas," in *Anti-Judaism in Early Christianity*, vol. 2: *Separation and Polemic*, ed. Stephen G. Wilson, Studies in Christianity and Judaism 2 (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1986), 20.

[14] Shukster and Richardson, "Temple and Bet Ha-midrash," 23.

[15] Shukster and Richardson, "Temple and Bet Ha-midrash," 22–23; Lookadoo, *Barnabas*, 57.

[16] Shukster and Richardson, "Temple and Bet Ha-midrash", 27.

world (6:18), Barnabas must concede that in the light of the present situation this eventual triumph has been postponed to an indefinite period in the future when Christians will be "made perfect as heirs of the covenant of the Lord" (6:19).

Barnabas's response to this crisis is threefold. He mounts a polemic against the Temple cult, arguing that God has no need of sacrifice (Barn. 2:6) and that baptism and the blood of Christ have replaced the Temple's mediatory function.[17] He mounts a parallel polemic against the *Bet ha-midrash*, arguing that it is Christian teachers (and not the rabbis) who are the true expositors of scripture. Christians alone are capable of understanding God's will because, as heirs to the covenant, they have been vouchsafed the unique gift of interpreting scripture as God intended. Recognizing that Jewish exegetical prestige posed a direct challenge to Christian claims about covenant inheritance,[18] Barnabas appears to urgently warn his community against associating with Jews at all, exhorting them to search the scriptures themselves so they do not become like "them."

III. Isaiah's Sabbath and Jubilee Texts as the Exegetical Backbone

Isaiah is Barnabas's most-used prophetic source, employed to ground arguments about the right understanding of cultic practices, Jesus's suffering, and the redemptive nature of Jesus's mission.[19] The Isaianic texts he draws on most prominently are Isa 1:11–13 (Barn. 2:5); Isa 58:4–10 (Barn. 3:1–5); Isa 28:16; 50:7–8 (Barn. 6:1–3); and Isa 61:1–2 (Barn. 14:7–9). Because Barnabas and his audience belong to God's people, they have received a special capacity to hear and understand how God has spoken through the prophets.

Barnabas cites Isa 58 at length in Barn. 3, again deploying the "us"/ "them" divide. Isaiah 58:4–5 is addressed to "them" (those who enact empty religious

[17] Shukster and Richardson, "Temple and Bet Ha-midrash," 30–31.
[18] Shukster and Richardson, "Temple and Bet Ha-midrash," 30–31.
[19] Shukster and Richardson, "Temple and Bet Ha-midrash," 27.

performance), and Isa 58:6–10 is addressed to "us" (those who enact true fasting in the form of liberation for the oppressed, release from unjust contracts, food for the hungry, and shelter for the unhoused).[20] In Barn. 2:5, he cites Isa 1:10-17 and critiques the Sabbaths of those whose religiosity lacks social enactment. Lookadoo observes that the social boundaries being drawn here are not between those who read allegorically and those who read literally, but between those whose right interpretation of scripture is enacted by an ethic of material generosity in the present.[21] Barnabas is not simply rejecting the Sabbath, as demonstrated by his engagement with Isa 58 in Barn. 3, "Behold, this is the fast I have chosen,' …break the bond of injustice…" (3:3, 5). The proper Sabbath, for Barnabas, is an eschatological orientation inaugurated by concrete economic practice in the present.[22]

Further, the movement from Isa 58 to Isa 61 in Barn. 14:7-9, traces the internal logic of the Jubilee tradition itself, from the Sabbath ethics of release and provision in Isa 58 to the programmatic Jubilee proclamation of Isa 61. In 14:9, Barnabas cites Isa 61:1-2,

> Again the prophet says: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me because he anointed me to proclaim good news of grace to the humble and because he has sent me to heal those who have been crushed in their hearts, to preach forgiveness to the captives and sight to the blind, to call for the favorable years of the Lord and the day of recompense, to comfort all who mourn".

Barnabas reads this arc as a unified mandate, and Barn. 14:7–9 is its Christological destination, where Jesus is charged with the Jubilee mandate drawn from Isa 61:1–2 to proclaim release to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and liberty to the oppressed. Barnabas interprets this as a socio-economic vision for the community, not a disembodied hermeneutic. In this vision, Barnabas's δικαιώματα framework then

[20] Lookadoo, *Barnabas*, 73–74.

[21] Lookadoo, *Barnabas*, 158.

[22] Clement of Alexandria's strikingly similar use of this passage (*Paed.* 3.90.1–2) suggests Barnabas was genuinely influential in this interpretive tradition. Clement of Alexandria, *Paed.* 3.90.1–2. Lookadoo, *Barnabas*, 158.

translates into concrete requirements. The Jubilee mandate that Jesus receives from the Father becomes the mandate that Barnabas's community receives from Jesus: to live, here and now, as though the Jubilee were already in effect. Further, 14:9 is the final verse before chapter 15 begins with a fresh consideration of the Sabbath, "Moreover, therefore, it is written about the Sabbath…if my sons keep the Sabbath, then I will bestow my mercy on them" (15:1-2). He then references the discussion on the divine rejection of the Sabbath in Isa 1:10-17 (cf. Barn. 2:5), reminding his audience that "the current Sabbaths are not acceptable to me…" (15:8).

IV. The Ethical Vision: A Stratified Community and Its Obligations

In this section, I will argue that the ethical vision at play in Barnabas cannot be separated from Barnabas's anti-Jewish hermeneutic. Much of Barnabas's scholarship focuses on his hermeneutics, but reading Barnabas through the lens of social location reveals stakes that a purely allegorical reading misses.

The community to which Barnabas writes includes both enslaved persons and slaveholders. This is a direct implication of his Two Ways teaching in Barn. 19–21, where he addresses masters and slaves within the same community with different but related obligations. Ultimately, a religious identity that utilizes love and right action toward one's neighbours, widows, orphans, children, parents, masters, and slaves (Barn. 20:2) as the metric for right "knowing" assumes a significant stratification within the community. Barnabas's δικαιώματα framework is significant here: the term appears at the structural brackets of the epistle precisely because right knowledge—the hermeneutical claim—and right action—the ethical demand—are for Barnabas a single, unified thing.[23]

The specific instructions in Barn. 19 reward close attention. Slaves are instructed to "submit to masters in fear and modesty like a pattern of God" (19:7), and masters are

[23] Lookadoo, *Barnabas*, 278.

warned not to issue bitter commands to slaves who "hope in the same God"—with the striking rationale that hostile commands may result in slaves failing to fear "the God who is over both" (19:7). Lookadoo's commentary on this passage captures precisely what is at stake:

> …whether Barnabas's believing audience is slave or master, they are called to relate well to one another within the confines of societal expectations of slave and master. All the while, Barnabas reminds readers that there is only one absolute ruler, thereby introducing a relativizing or perhaps even destabilizing note into the slave-master relationship.[24]

Immediately following, Barn. 19:8 commands that believers "share in all things with their neighbours and not claim that anything is their own"—reasoning from the shared spiritual inheritance (things incorruptible) to shared material resources (things corruptible).[25] The way of the Black One, by contrast, is defined in Barn. 20:2 precisely by the failure to attend to the widow and orphan, the failure to care for the poor, the wearing down of the oppressed, and the encouragement of the rich.

This is Jubilee language—the same tradition that runs through Isa 58's true fasting and Isa 61's proclamation of release. What Barnabas has done is take the Jubilee mission of Jesus within Barn. 14:7–9 and translate it into the concrete communal obligations of the Two Ways. The Jubilee is enacted now, in the sharing of possessions, the care for the oppressed, and the relativizing of the master-slave hierarchy by the sovereignty of the one God who stands over both.

The hermeneutical and ethical arguments are here revealed as one. The literal practices of Israel, such as sacrifice, circumcision, and the temple, are replaced in Barnabas by concrete economic practices: sharing possessions, caring for the poor, and rejecting private wealth. The boundaries within Barnabas's community are drawn between those who interpret scripture rightly and those who do not, but the "we/they"

[24] Lookadoo, *Barnabas*, 92.
[25] Lookadoo, *Barnabas*, 285–89.

structure functions at the economic level as well: those who "know" scripture rightly manifest their knowledge through material generosity, distinguishing themselves from Jewish readers of the same scriptures, whose reading produces no such economy of sharing.

This ethical dimension of knowledge within Barnabas is where Remus's framework is most illuminating. Remus argues that ethical statements function societally: "'Christ loved you' is a shorthand way of referring to a whole pattern of discourse and memory, of symbol and story, of experience and reflection belonging to the lore of the community."[26] Applied to Barnabas: "share all things in common" is a community-forming, identity-marking practice. Barnabas's vision for the community's economic practices constitutes the plausibility structure—the "laboratory" in Berger and Luckmann's terms, via Remus—in which the new symbolic universe is maintained against the competing attractions of the *Bet ha-midrash*.[27] Generosity and the sharing of "all things in common" are the lived, embodied enactment of Barnabas's hermeneutical claims. For both slaves and slaveholders within this community, the Jubilee ethics of Isa 58–61 create a compressed and urgent ethical demand: the social hierarchy is not abolished, but the obligations it generates are radically reframed by the recognition that there is one God over both.

V. Conclusion: Social Location, Religious Identity, and Contemporary Resonance

Barnabas's epistle is often read primarily as a hermeneutical document—a sharp instance of early Christian supersessionism in which Israel's scriptures are claimed wholesale for a gentile community. What this reading through Remus's sociology of knowledge reveals is that the hermeneutical argument and the social argument are

[26] Lookadoo, *Barnabas*, 288.

[27] Remus, "Sociology of Knowledge," 48. The "laboratory" metaphor is drawn from Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1967), 144, cited by Remus.

inseparable. The aggressive anti-Jewish polemic is the product of a community in crisis, fighting to maintain the boundaries of its symbolic universe against a resurgent Judaism that was simultaneously a political rival and a genuine spiritual attraction. The Jubilee ethics are the embodied form of the epistle's hermeneutical claim. Those who "know" are those who read the scriptures rightly and who enact an alternative economy of generosity. Knowledge without the δικαιώματα it requires is, for Barnabas, not knowledge at all.

The social stakes of this argument are not abstract. In a community that included both enslaved persons and slaveholders, the socio-economic vision of Isa 58–61 either transforms social relations, or they do not. Barnabas destabilizes slavery by insisting that God is the absolute ruler over both master and slave, that both share an imperishable inheritance. He further posits that this shared inheritance obligates the sharing of material goods, including perishable items. Whether his community lived this way is beyond our knowledge. What Remus's framework makes clear is that the ethical vision was the plausibility structure that held the community's symbolic universe together under pressure.

Remus wrote as a Canadian scholar deeply attentive to the social and institutional settings in which religious knowledge is produced and maintained. His framework invites Canadian Christian readers today to ask the same questions of their own communities: what economic practices constitute the plausibility structure of our shared symbolic universe? Whose social location is assumed when we speak of right knowledge? And—to put it in Barnabas's own terms—between those who live generously and those who do not, on which side of the boundary do we find ourselves?

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