

Is there a “Gospel of Barnabas”?

By Dr. Norman Geisler

(*Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, Baker Book House, 1999)

Muslims often cite *The Gospel of Barnabas* in defense of Islamic teaching. In fact, it is a bestseller in many Muslim countries. Suzanne Haneef, in her annotated bibliography on Islam, highly recommends it, saying, “Within it one finds the living Jesus portrayed far more vividly and in character with the mission with which he was entrusted than any other of the four New Testament Gospels has been able to portray him.” It is called “essential reading for any seeker of the truth” (Haneef, 186).

Typical of Muslim claims is that of Muhammad Ata ur-Rahim: “The Gospel of Barnabas is the only known surviving Gospel written by a disciple of Jesus.... [It] was accepted as a Canonical Gospel in the churches of Alexandria up until 325 A.D. (Ata ur-Rahim, 41). Another Muslim author M. A. Yusseff, argues confidently that “in antiquity and authenticity, no other gospel can come close to *The Gospel of Barnabas*” (Yusseff, 5).

The Contents of the Gospel. It is not surprising that Muslim apologists appeal to the *Gospel of Barnabas* in that it supports a central Islamic teaching in contrast to the New Testament. It claims that Jesus did not die on the cross (cf. sura 4:157). Rather, it argues that Judas Iscariot died in Jesus’ stead (sect. 217), having been substituted for him at the last minute. This view has been adopted by many Muslims, since the vast majority of them believe that someone else was substituted on the cross for Jesus.

Authenticity of the Gospel. Reputable scholars who have carefully examined it find absolutely no basis for this writing’s authenticity. After reviewing the evidence in a scholarly article in *Islamochristiana*, J. Slomp concluded: “in my opinion scholarly research has proved absolutely that this ‘gospel’ is a fake. This opinion is also held by a number of Muslim scholars” (Slomp, 68). In their introduction to the Oxford edition of *The Gospel of Barnabas*, Longsdale and Ragg conclude that “the true date lies... nearer to the sixteenth century than to the first” (Longsdale, 37).

The evidence that this was not a first-century gospel, written by a disciple of Christ, is overwhelming:

The earliest reference to it comes from a fifth-century work, *Decretum Gelasianum* (Gelasian Decree, by Pope Gelasius, A.D. 492-495). But even this reference is in doubt (Slomp, 74). Moreover, there is no original language manuscript evidence for its existence. Slomp says flatly, “There is no text tradition whatsoever of the G.B.V. [Gospel of Barnabas Vienna manuscript]” (ibid.). By contrast, the New Testament books are verified by more than 5300 Greek manuscripts that begin over the first three centuries.

Second, L. Bevan Jones notes that “the earliest form of it known to us is in an Italian manuscript. This has been closely analyzed by scholars and is judged to belong to the fifteenth or sixteenth century, that is, 1400 years after the time of Barnabas” (Jones, 79). Even Muslim defenders of it, like Muhammad ur-Rahim, admit that they have no manuscripts from before the 1500s.

This gospel is widely used by Muslim apologists today, yet there is no reference to it by any Muslim writer before the fifteenth or sixteenth century. Surely they would have used it

had it been in existence. There were many Muslim writers who wrote books who would no doubt have referred to such a work, had it been in existence. But not one of them, or anyone else, ever refers to it between the seventh and fifteenth centuries, when Muslims and Christians were in heated debate.

No father or teacher of the Christian church ever quoted it from the first to the fifteenth centuries, despite the fact that they quoted every verse of every book of the New Testament except 11 (Geisler, *General Introduction to the Bible*). If *The Gospel of Barnabas* had been considered authentic, it more surely would have been cited many times, as were all the other canonical books of Scripture. Had this gospel even been in existence, authentic or not, certainly it would have been cited by someone. But no father cited it, either pro or con, for over 1500 years.

Sometimes it is confused with the first-century *Epistle of [Pseudo] Barnabas* (ca. A.D. 70-90), which is an entirely different book (Slomp, 37-38). Because of references to this volume, Muslim scholars falsely allege support for an early date. Muhammad Ata ur-Rahim confuses the two books and so wrongly claims that the gospel was in circulation in the second and third centuries A.D. This is a strange error since he admits that they are listed as different books in the "Sixty Books" as Serial No. 18 Epistle of Barnabas and Serial No. 24 Gospel of Barnabas. Rahim even cites by name the "Epistle of Barnabas" as evidence of the existence of the *Gospel of Barnabas* (Ata ur-Rahim, 42-43).

Some have mistakenly assumed that the reference to a gospel used by Barnabas referred to in the *Apocryphal Acts of Barnabas* (pre-478) was *The Gospel of Barnabas*. However, this is clearly false, as the quotation reveals: "Barnabas, having unrolled the Gospel, which we have received from Matthew his fellow-labourer began to teach the Jews" (Slomp, 110). By deliberately omitting this emphasized phrase, the impression is given that there is a *Gospel of Barnabas*.

The message of the *Gospel of Barnabas* is completely refuted by eyewitness first-century documents of the New Testament. For example, its teaching that Jesus did not claim to be the Messiah and that he did not die on the cross are thoroughly refuted by eyewitness first-century documents. In fact, no Muslim should accept the authenticity of *The Gospel of Barnabas* since it clearly contradicts the *Qur'an's* claim that Jesus was the Messiah. It claims, "Jesus confessed, and said the truth; 'I am not the Messiah.... I am indeed sent to the house of Israel as a prophet of salvation; but after me shall come the Messiah'" (sects. 42, 48). The *Qur'an* repeatedly calls Jesus the "Messiah" [the "Christ"] (cf. suras 5:19, 75).

Even the book's Muslim promoters, such as Haneef, have to admit that "the authenticity of this book has not been unquestionably established.... It is believed to be an *Apocryphal* account of the life of Jesus." Haneef claims it was "lost to the world for centuries due to its suppression as a heretical document, but there is not a shred of documented evidence for this. As noted, it was not even mentioned by anyone before it in the sixth century. Other Muslim scholars doubt its authenticity too (see Slomp, 68). For the book contains anachronisms and descriptions of medieval life in western Europe that reveal that it was not written before the fourteenth century. For example, it refers to the year of Jubilee coming every 100 years, instead of fifty (*The Gospel of Barnabas*, 82). The papal declaration to change it to every 100 years was made by the church in 1343. John Gilchrist in his work titled, *Origins and Sources of the Gospel of Barnabas*, concludes that "only one solution can account for this remarkable coincidence. The author of the Gospel of Barnabas only quoted

Jesus as speaking of the jubilee year as coming every hundred years because he knew of the decree of Pope Boniface.” He added, “but how could he know of this decree unless he lived at the same time as the Pope or sometime afterwards? This is a clear anachronism which compels us to conclude that the Gospel of Barnabas could not have been written earlier than the fourteenth century after Christ” (Gilchrist, 16-17). One significant anachronism is that *The Gospel of Barnabas* uses the text from the fourth-century Roman Catholic Latin Vulgate translation of the Bible. Other examples of anachronisms include a vassal who owes a share of his crop to his lord (*The Gospel of Barnabas*, 122), an illustration of medieval feudalism, a reference to wooden wine casks (152), rather than wine skins as were used in Palestine, and a medieval court procedure (121).

J. Jomier provides a list of mistakes and exaggerations: The writing says that Jesus was born when Pilate was governor, though he did not become governor until A.D 26 or 27. Jesus sailed to Nazareth, though it was not on the sea shore. Likewise, *the Gospel of Barnabas* contains exaggerations, such as mention of 144,000 prophets and 10,000 prophets being slain “by Jizebel” (see Slomp).

Jomier’s study shows fourteen Islamic elements throughout the text that prove that a Muslim author, probably a convert, worked on the book. The pinnacle of the temple, where Jesus is said to have preached—hardly a good place—was translated into Arabic by *dikka*, a platform used in mosques (7). Also, Jesus is represented as coming only for Israel but Muhammad “for the salvation of the whole world” (chap. 11). Finally, the denial of Jesus to be the Son of God is Qur’anic, as is the fact that Jesus’ sermon is modeled after a Muslim *hutba* which begins with praising God and his holy Prophet (chap. 12).

Conclusion. Muslim use of *The Gospel of Barnabas* to support their teaching is devoid of evidence. Its teachings even contradict the *Qur’an*. This work, far from being an authentic first-century account of the facts about Jesus, is patently a late medieval fabrication. The best first-century records we have of the life of Christ are found in the New Testament, which categorically contradicts the teaching of the *Gospel of Barnabas*. Even early non-Christian references contradict the Gospel of Barnabas in key points. For a further critique the reader should consult David Sox’s excellent book, *The Gospel of Bamabas*.

Sources

M. Ata ur-Rahim, *Jesus: Prophet of Islam*

N. L. Geisler, *General Introduction to the Bible*

_____ and A. Saleeb, *Answering Islam*

S. Haneef, *What Everyone Should Know about Islam and Muslims*

J. Jomier, *Egypt Reflexions sur la Recontre al-Azhar*

L. B. Jones, *Christianity Explained to Muslims*

J. Slomp, “*The Gospel Dispute*,” *Islamochristiana*

D. Sox, *The Gospel of Barnabas*

M. A. Yusseff, *The Dead Sea Scrolls, the Gospel of Barnabas, and the New Testament*