

Muslims and Barnabas

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [February 22, 2012](#) issue



Detail of *Barnabas curing the poor* by [Paolo Veronese](#), [Musée des Beaux-Arts de Rouen](#).

As churches grow outside the traditional Christian heartlands in the West, they have to deal not only with new questions about practice and belief but with issues that hark back to the very earliest stages of the faith, such as: Which texts belong in the canon of scripture? Do other gospels tell us as much about Jesus as the canonical four?

We have all heard about the apocryphal gospels, ancient and usually long-lost texts that have resurfaced through the work of archaeologists or textual critics. At least one such gospel is much more than a curious antique. It has not only circulated freely for centuries, but still today provides potent rhetorical ammunition in the worldwide battle of words between Christians and Muslims.

Although few Americans have ever heard of the *Gospel of Barnabas*, the work enjoys immense popularity in the Muslim world, where it is regarded as the decisive knockdown argument against Christian claims. What makes *Barnabas* so powerful is that it looks somewhat like a canonical Christian Gospel, with many miracles and sermons taken wholesale from the Synoptics.

Where it differs from the familiar texts is in the claims that Jesus makes for himself. In *Barnabas*, Jesus says firmly that he is a prophet, not the Son of God. St. Paul is simply "deceived" and the doctrine of the Trinity is condemned. It is Judas rather

than Jesus who is crucified. Jesus is taken up to heaven, as is described in the Qur'an. And this gospel includes the frank declaration that "there is only one God, and Muhammad is the Messenger of God."

Any Christian who travels in Muslim countries or on the frontier between the faiths—and these days, that borderland runs through Europe as well as the Middle East, Africa and Asia—may well encounter *Barnabas* and be asked to respond to its claims. If a Christian denies having heard of it, as Westerners usually do, Muslims will interpret that response as a subterfuge, a cowardly ruse to avoid confronting this lethal challenge to Christian orthodoxy.

Muslims present *Barnabas* as the only true gospel, the *Injil (evangelium)* of the prophet Jesus. For centuries it has been by far the most powerful single argument in street-level Islamic proselytizing. Churches of the Global South struggle to instruct their members how best to resist and refute this text. Their task has become still harder as *Barnabas*-related websites proliferate on the Internet and the gospel has penetrated other forms of mass media.

In 2008, Iranian television showed *The Messiah*, a lavish depiction of the life of Jesus derived chiefly from *Barnabas*. Dubbed into Arabic, this epic film and miniseries was shown throughout the Middle East as a Ramadan special. Partly it was intended as an answer to the celebrated Jesus video of the same name, which Western evangelicals have used so successfully around the globe. Like its Christian equivalent, *The Messiah* was intended to proselytize.

The origins of *Barnabas* are puzzling—and highly controversial. In its present form, the gospel was probably written about 1600, either in Spain or Italy. A text that sounds much like it was first described in the early 17th century. It would be convenient to dismiss the work as a simple Muslim forgery, perhaps sponsored by Ottoman scholars at a time of bloody warfare against Christian Spain and the Holy Roman Empire. Yet the story is nothing so simple.

Beyond question, Muslim controversialists have at some point doctored an existing Christian text to make it sound overtly Islamic, and the references to Muhammad are clearly a late insertion. But no less certainly those Muslim scholars and apologists did not invent *Barnabas* out of whole cloth. They had an original text to play with, and that original might have been very old indeed.

Startlingly, some reputable scholars have claimed that *Barnabas* may in places include sections of the now lost diatessaron, the harmony or synthesis of the four Gospels composed in the second century by the great Syriac scholar Tatian. *Barnabas* contains passages that conflict with the Latin Vulgate Bible but recall other gospel traditions that definitely belong to the diatessaron. Scholars disagree fiercely over whether that early stratum of text amounts to a few verses and motifs or a substantial portion of the work as we have it—but those ancient layers are there.

Christians worldwide must therefore still battle against an ancient heretical gospel that might have roots going back to near-apostolic times. Sometimes it seems as if the churches must continually refight the battles of the second century.