

“They’re Real People! — Barnabas”

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Acts 9:11-17

²⁶ And when Saul had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. ²⁷ But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus. ²⁸ So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. ²⁹ And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists. But they were seeking to kill him. ³⁰ And when the brothers learned this, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

³¹ So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied. [ESV]

“They’re Real People! — Barnabas”

We first meet this man in Luke’s *Acts of the Apostles*. His name is actually *Joseph*. In the earliest days of the Church, congregants were selling things in order to provide for those in need.

“There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet.” [Acts 4:34-37 ESV]

This short introduction to the gentleman tells us several things about him. First, he was a Levite. As such, he was a part of the priesthood that served in the Temple. He was probably well-known to the High Priests Annas, Caiaphas, and Theophilus.

Second, he was a Cypriot, a native of the Isle of Cyprus, due west of Palestine in the Mediterranean Sea. However, we know that he was a Jew of the Diaspora living in Jerusalem at this time.

Third, we know that he was a property owner. In order to help the poor, he had sold a field he owned, and gave the proceeds to the Apostles.

Fourth, he was nicknamed “Barnabas” — actually “Bar Nabas” — an Aramaic phrase meaning, as Luke tells us, “Son of Encourage-ment.” Apparently he was an easy-going, supportive person, ever willing to help and encourage others.

He is mentioned 29 times in the New Testament. We know from early Christian traditions that Joseph Bar Nabas was already a disciple of Jesus prior to Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection. According to Clement of Alexandria [A.D. 153-217], Joseph Bar Nabas was one of the 70 Jesus sent out on missionary journeys as recorded in Luke 10:1. [A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, editors, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 2, p. 736.] Tertullian [A.D. 200-250] considered Joseph Bar Nabas to be the actual author of the *Epistle to the Hebrews*. [Ibid., Vol. 4, p. 197.] It is more likely, however, that Joseph Bar Nabas transcribed one of Paul’s sermons.

He was eventually overshadowed by a person he defended before the other Apostles — Saul, later named Paul. After his conversion on the Damascus Road, Saul immediately preached in the synagogues of Damascus that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God. Saul’s theophany on the Damascus Road was enough to totally transform Saul’s understanding of who Jesus was. According to Luke, after Saul was rescued by believers from Jews who were plotting to kill him

(he was lowered in a basket through a window in the Damascus wall by night; see Acts 9:23-29), he went to Jerusalem to meet the other Apostles.

“And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple.” [Acts 9:26 ESV]

It is here that Joseph Bar Nabas stepped into Saul’s life. He had obviously heard of Saul’s conversion story and subsequent actions in the synagogues of Damascus.

“But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus.” [Acts 9:27 ESV]

One wonders whether Saul would have ever been accepted among the Apostles if it were not for Joseph Bar Nabas’ intercession in Saul’s behalf. Be that as it may, Saul began preaching to the citizens of Jerusalem —

“So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists. But they were seeking to kill him. And when the brothers learned this, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.” [Acts 9:28-30 ESV]

Saul obviously made quite an impression, so much so that the Greek speaking Jews — the Hellenists — wanted to do to him what he had done to Stephen — kill him! The brethren wisely shipped him off to Caesarea to go back to his home town of Tarsus.

Joseph Bar Nabas appears again in Antioch. Several of the saints who had fled for their lives under Saul’s persecution ended up in Antioch in Syria.

“Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord.” [Acts 11:19-21 ESV]

When the Apostles in Jerusalem heard of this, they sent Joseph Bar Nabas to Antioch to report on what was happening there. It is at this point that we learn more about the character of Joseph Bar Nabas.

“The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he came and saw the grace of God, *he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith.* And a great many people were added to the Lord.” [Acts 11:22-24 ESV]

For whatever reason, Joseph Bar Nabas decided he needed to bring Saul out of exile from Tarsus to Antioch. It was an act made in heaven, obviously.

“So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.”

[Acts 11:25-26 ESV]

This was another turning point moment. It was the stoning of Stephen followed by Saul’s persecution which sent the Gospel there. That was the first turning point. Now Joseph Bar Nabas brings the catalyst for the founding of the Church in Antioch — Saul — to Antioch! One of Joseph Bar Nabas and Saul’s first acts was to carry famine relief back to Jerusalem. [Acts 11:29-30]

On their return to Antioch from Jerusalem, a new person enters the story — John Mark, Joseph Bar Nabas’ young cousin. (This young man would later create the Gospel that bears his name. But that is for later in another story.)

We next learn that Joseph Bar Nabas is one of the prophets and teachers in Antioch — along with SAUL! What a transformation! Joseph Bar Nabas went to Tarsus to get Saul, and now, together, they are key leaders of the Antiochene congregation.

Unfortunately, Joseph Bar Nabas joined Peter in the hypocrisy that happened when James, Jesus' brother, sent emissaries from Jerusalem to see what was happening up north. Both Joseph Bar Nabas and Peter felt Paul's biting ire over their duplicity. [Galatians 1:11-21]

It is at this time, after their hypocrisy had been corrected, that the Holy Spirit told the congregation to set both Joseph Bar Nabas and Saul apart for a special mission to the Gentile world of Asia.

“While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off. [Acts 13:2-3 ESV]

Thus began the series of evangelistic journeys through the Asian world which resulted in the founding of multiple congregations, and the writings of most of the New Testament — Saul's (now called Paul) Epistles. Their first stop was Joseph Bar Nabas' home region, Cyprus.

This first evangelistic journey was eventful to say the least. Up to this time, whenever Joseph Bar Nabas was mentioned with Saul, he was named first; however, as the journey progressed, the order was reversed — now it was “Paul and Bar Nabas.”

Their experiences went from being declared to be the gods Zeus and Hermes in Lystra, to Paul being stoned (he felt Stephen's pain!)

Throughout their journey, Paul and Joseph Bar Nabas had been debating the right-wing Judaisers about what the minimum requirements were in order to be accepted as a follower of Christ. This debate, carried into Jerusalem, resulted in the First Ecumenical Council of the Christian Church — the Jerusalem Council. [Acts 15] James, the brother of Jesus, settled it.

As Joseph Bar Nabas and Paul began planning their second journey, the two of them had a falling out over Joseph Bar Nabas' cousin John Mark. John Mark was probably a teenager when he left with them on the first journey; he became homesick and went back home mid-tour. Paul didn't like that! So they parted company. Barnabas took John Mark with him back to Cyprus; Paul took another believer, Silas, with him on his second evangelistic journey.

It is at this point that Joseph Bar Nabas drops out of the narrative. We know from later Christian traditions, that Joseph Bar Nabas was the founder of the churches in Cyprus. His tomb is located near Salamis on the Isle of Cyprus. There is an Orthodox Church on the site, dedicated to him.

We owe a debt of deep gratitude to Joseph Bar Nabas — without him, we would not have had Paul, and the incredible literary legacy he left us.

For Further Contemplation:

It was in Antioch that the disciples were first called Christians. The name was given them because Christ was the main theme of their preaching, their teaching, and their conversation. Continually they were recounting the incidents that had occurred during the days of His earthly ministry, when His disciples were blessed with His personal presence. Untiringly they dwelt upon His teachings and His miracles of healing... His resurrection and ascension, and His work in heaven as the Mediator for fallen man, were topics on which they rejoiced to dwell. [Ellen G. White, *Acts of the Apostles*, p. 157.]