CHAPTER 14

Anti-Judaism and Pedagogy: Greek and Latin Patristic Interpretations of the Calf Incident

Wesley Dingman

The patristic appropriation of the golden calf incident is paradoxical. On the one hand, some Christian authors employ the golden calf to argue that the Jews have an essentially defective character: unlike Christians, they are simply unable to obey God. Their initial repudiation of Moses and ongoing rejection of Jesus bookend a history of apostasy. This first, dominant interpretation of the calf incident sees a relationship of discontinuity between Jews and Christians. It is often virulently anti-Jewish and may be regarded as a staple of Christian adversus Judaeos literature. On the other hand, other authors use the story to warn Christians. Like the ancient Hebrews, Christians have received salvation and benefited from God’s mercy. Nevertheless, they may still lose what they have gained if they lapse into apostasy. They must therefore learn from the Hebrews’ sin with the calf so as to avoid their fate. This second, subsidiary interpretation sees a relationship of continuity between Jews and Christians such that the former can teach the latter. For this reason, it may be considered pedagogical. This chapter examines the growth and development of these two parallel yet intertwined interpretations of the calf incident in the second through fifth centuries by selected Greek and Latin patristic writers.

First Witnesses: 1 Clement, the Epistle of Barnabas and Justin’s Dialogue with Trypho

The three earliest surviving extrabiblical Christian references to the calf incident are from 1 Clement, the Epistle of Barnabas, and Justin’s Dialogue with Trypho. First Clement, a letter from the Roman church to the Corinthian church, may be the oldest of the three, although probably not by much.1 The latter two are roughly contemporaneous. Justin (ca. 100–ca. 165 CE) was an adult convert to Christianity from pagan philosophy. His Dialogue, probably written in Rome, is the stylized account of his debate with the eponymous

1 For the dating of 1 Clement, see Welborn 1984.
Jew, Trypho. According to Eusebius, this debate took place in Ephesus (Hist. eccl. 4.18.6) shortly after the Bar Kokhba revolt (ca. 135; see Dial. 1.3). The Epistle of Barnabas is an anonymous work that Clement of Alexandria erroneously attributes to Paul’s one-time companion, Barnabas (see, e.g., Strom. 2.6). Because the epistle mentions the destruction of Herod’s temple (Barn. 16:3) and was cited by Clement of Alexandria ca. 200 (Paget 1994, 9), the work must date between 70–200 C.E. Since the author anticipates that the Jews’ enemies will rebuild on the site of the ruins (16:3–4), Barnabas may have been penned before ca. 135, the year when Hadrian had a pagan temple erected on the site (Kraft 1965, 42–43).2

Justin brings up the calf incident as a response to Trypho’s observation that Christians do not observe the law of Moses (Dial. 10.2). Trypho is puzzled that while Christians suppose themselves to be better than others, they do not live in a manner that distinguishes them from others (10.3). His particular concern is Christians’ nonobservance of the Sabbath, Jewish festivals, and circumcision. Trypho is surprised: “You [Christians] place your hope in a crucified man, and still expect to receive favors from God when you disregard his commandments” (10.3).3

Justin explains Christians’ nonobservance by claiming that they know the real reason why God imposed the law of Moses on the Jews: it was because of their sinfulness and hardness of heart (Dial. 18.2), qualities made especially evident at “the time of Moses, when your [Trypho’s] people showed itself wicked and ungrateful to God by molding a golden calf as an idol in the desert” (19.5).4 For Justin, this act demonstrated the Jews’ interminable predilection for idolatry (see 46.6; 67.8). But God, rather than abandon them, chose instead to accommodate (ἁρμοσάμενος) his laws to their sinful tendencies. He commanded them to offer sacrifices so that they would not offer them to idols (19.6). Thus for Justin the incident of the calf is the proximate cause for God establishing the Jewish sacrificial cult. The dietary laws are a similar accommodation (20.1), as are the other ritual commandments (46.5). But Christians, Justin argues,

2 J. Carleton Paget questions the usefulness of Barn. 16:3–4 for dating the epistle to Hadrian’s reign (1994, 17–30); nevertheless, he sees the absence of references to the Bar Kokhba revolt (132–136 C.E.) as evidence that it was written before this event (1994, 9). If he is correct, then Barnabas is probably older than Justin’s Dialogue. (Paget in fact considers a date during the reign of Nerva [96–98] to be “almost probable” [1994, 28].) Another interpretation of 16:3–4 sees the rebuilt temple as referring spiritually to the Christian community (Scorza Barcellona 1975, 60–61). If this one is correct, then the passage does not aid the dating of the epistle.

3 Translations of Dialogue are from Falls in Justin Martyr 2003.

4 Note that the Greek text does not contain the word “golden” but uses instead the Greek verb μοσχοποιέω, “make a calf.”