BARNABAS 9:4: A PECULIAR VERSE ON CIRCUMCISION

BY

J. N. B. CARLETON PAGET

In recent times interest in the study of Epistle of Barnabas has centered on the author’s use of sources. One of the results of this approach has been the realisation that material in the epistle previously regarded as anti-Jewish is taken from Judaism itself. Hence to describe the author as anti-Jewish is to misrepresent him. So R. A. Kraft, in his review of P. Prigent’s 1961 publication, writes: “One would do well to dismiss this term (anti-Jewish) altogether from the description of the epistle.” Not only is this statement a little unimaginative (a criticism extra muros is in tone quite different from a criticism intra muros), but it fails to take account of harsh statements in the epistle that, in the opinion of the present writer, come from the pen of Barnabas himself (from now on B.). It is the aim of this paper to examine a verse in which such a statement occurs, and argue for the uniqueness of its sentiment, claiming that it originates with its author. In a broader context an attempt will be made to show how the verse illuminates the situation B. is addressing.

At the beginning of the second section of his discussion of circumcision B. writes: ἀλλὰ καὶ ἡ περιτομὴ, ἐφ’ ἡ πεποίθασιν, κατήργηται. περιτομὴν γὰρ εἶρηκεν οὐ σαρκὸς γεννηθῆναι. ἀλλὰ παρέβησαν, ὅτι ἄγγελος πονηρός ἔσώφιζεν αὐτούς (B.9:4). K. Lake translates: “'But moreover the circumcision in which they trusted has been abolished. For he declared that circumcision is not of the flesh, but they erred because an evil angel was deceiving them.'”

An alteration of this rendering might be suggested at two points. First, the perfect passive κατήργηται should be translated as ‘rejected’, for this more clearly conveys the idea indicated in the verse, that literal circumcision never had any validity in the eyes of God; ‘abolish’ implies that it did. Secondly, παρέβησαν is better translated as ‘sinned’ (not ‘erred’). This is significant, because in the LXX παραβαίνω is used frequently to describe the sins of Israel against God. Hence the use of this
word implies that for B. the literal implementation of circumcision is a sin against God, a statement that constitutes an extraordinary inversion of the Genesis account, where it is stated that he who is not circumcised "shall be cut off from the kin of his father" (Gen. 17:14). B. goes further in his inversion of canonical traditions by claiming that the commandment was the work of an evil angel. Bardenhewer was accurate when he wrote that, according to B., "beruhte der jüdische Gebrauch der Beschneidung nicht auf göttlicher Einsetzung, sondern auf einer Täuschung der Juden durch einen bösen Engel." In effect B. has demonised the covenantal rite.

In the first part of this paper I will undertake to discover the possible sources or theological influences behind this verse.

What B. writes in 9:4 appears partly an attempt to support his highly symbolical interpretation of the rite (see what precedes and follows this verse). Nowhere does he deny that there was a commandment to circumcise; he merely refutes the belief that the command was ever meant literally. In adopting such an allegorical understanding of the rite, he was journeying down an exegetical path well trodden by his Jewish predecessors. Such an interpretation appears in partial form in the prophetic insistence on the circumcision of the heart, but finds its clearest surviving expression in Philo. So, for instance, the latter writes: "I consider circumcision to be a symbol of the things most necessary to our well being. One is the excision of pleasures which bewitch the mind ... The other reason is that a man should know himself and banish from the soul grievous maladies." (De Spec. Leg. I 8-10). He expresses similar views in Quaest. Gen. 3:45-6; Quaest. Ex. 2:2; Agr. 39, and Somn. 2:25. However, while Philo is willing to endorse the application of the allegorical method to circumcision, nowhere does he deny that circumcision was meant to be implemented literally (in contrast to B.). Indeed, in De Spec. Leg. and Quaest. Gen., he appends sound medical reasons for circumcision; while in De Mig. Abr. he explicitly rejects the argument that an allegorical interpretation of the rite excludes de facto a literal interpretation.

This final passage is especially noteworthy, informing us, albeit in threadbare form, that some Jews, favouring a more abstract interpretation of Torah, disregarded its literal intention. It has been suggested that B., particularly at this point in his epistle, is indebted to a Jewish tradition emanating from such a group.

Even if this were the case, that would account only for the κατ' ορθήται.