

# The Gospel of Barnabas

While a ‘Gospel of Barnabas’ is mentioned as early as the 7<sup>th</sup> century, nothing more is known about it for some centuries. In 1734, parts of a gospel in Spanish attributed to Barnabas were mentioned by George Sale in the preliminary discourse to his translation of the Qur’an, but it was the references made by Raḥmatullāh al-*Kayrānawī* in his debate with Karl Gottlieb Pfander in 1854, and the edition and translation of the Italian version of the Gospel by Laura and Lonsdale Ragg in 1907, that triggered a series of translations throughout the Muslim world and a long succession of polemical debates by both Muslims and Christians.

The Barnabas of this Gospel, the supposed author, is emphatically present throughout the work. His name occurs 19 times, and he is referred to as ‘He who writeth’ another 27 times (Cirillo and Frémaux, *Évangile de Barnabé*, 1999<sup>2</sup>, pp. 339-40); in the list of the apostles (Ragg and Ragg, *Gospel of Barnabas*, ch. 14), only Peter and Andrew have precedence over him, while he, rather than Peter, becomes the spokesman of the group, and he joins Peter, James and John to witness the transfiguration of Jesus on Mt Tabor (ch. 42); Jesus looks on him as his closest confidant, and often informs him about past and future events, significantly that Jesus came into the world ‘to prepare the way for the messenger of God who shall bring salvation to the world’ (chs 72, 82), and that Jesus is not God or the Messiah and he will not himself be punished but ‘be tormented in another person’ (ch. 198); however, the truth about his nature and what happened to him would be misrepresented until the coming of Muḥammad (referring to the Muslim belief that a substitute was crucified in place of Jesus, and that Jesus’s true nature as no more than a human messenger of God was misrepresented in the early Church). Many have thought that this is sufficient to confirm the Barnabas of the New Testament as the author. But others have looked for a more recent author, and have inquired nearer the putative home of the Gospel.

In India, Raḥmatullāh al-*Kayrānawī*, the Muslim opponent of Pfander in the debate that took place at Agra in 1854, appears to have been the first to mention the Gospel (Schirrmacher, ‘Influence of higher Bible criticism’, p. 274), basing himself on the brief

reference by Sale (Ragg and Ragg, *The Gospel of Barnabas*, p. xvi). In Peshawar in 1885, the missionary scholar T.P. Hughes included in his *Dictionary of Islam* an article on Barnabas based solely on Sale's information. This begins, 'The Muhammadans assert that a gospel of Barnabas existed in Arabic, and it is believed by some that Muhammad obtained his account of Christianity from this spurious gospel.' This could still to be found in the 1935 edition, but was omitted in the Lahore 1964 edition, leaving a space of five lines. In 1899, the founder of the Ahmadiyya Movement, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, appealed to the Gospel for support of his views (J.N. Farquhar, *Modern religious movements in India*, New York, 1915, p. 140).

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Christian missionaries became increasingly embarrassed by their opponents' claim that the church was hiding the Gospel because it would prove the truth of Islam. The manuscript of the Italian text was found in Vienna, and Laura Ragg and her brother Lonsdale were requested to translate it and provide an introduction showing its spuriousness. Their edition of 1907 contains almost all the information known about the work up to that date. However, far from ending the discussion, this stirred it up all the more (Schirmacher, 'Das Barnabasevangelium als Beispiel', pp. 282-5).

In Egypt, Rashīd Riḍā (1865-1935), who had the Ragg English translation translated into Arabic by the Christian Khalīl Sa'āda, was probably the first Muslim to defend the biblical Barnabas as the work's author. He argued in his preface that the original text was authentic but that the present text, just like the four canonical Gospels, had been altered by Christians because the original must have contained a reference to the Paraclete, predicting the coming of Muḥammad (Injīl Birnābā, p. 20). He contended that the conflict between Barnabas and Paul mentioned in Acts 13:13 was on theological issues, and that the Gospel of Barnabas contains the original Christian doctrine (Schirmacher, *Mit den Waffen des Gegners*, p. 295). When 'the belief of Paul became more dominant and became the pillar of Christianity, it was no wonder that the Church considered the Gospel of Barnabas as non-canonical or incorrect' (Ryad, *Islamic reformism*, p. 231). In his later *Tafsīr al-Manār*, Riḍā used al-Kayrānawī's *Izhār al-ḥaqq* (translated into Arabic in 1867 and reprinted in 1897), which declared that the Gospel 'included the greatest *bishāra* [foretelling] about the Prophet of Islam' (Ryad, *Islamic reformism*, p. 234). His views were followed by several Arab authors (see Borrmans, *Jésus et les musulmans*; Slomp, "'Gospel of Barnabas" in recent research', pp. 102-3, where their texts are listed and analysed).

Riḍā's views were contradicted by the Anglican missionary Temple Gairdner, while 'Abd al-Masīḥ Bājūrī, a convert from Islam, accused Riḍā of using the Gospel as a tool to attack the Christian minority in Egypt (Ryad, "'Aussi éphémère que l'abricot'", p. 107).

Fifty years later, Jacques Jomier of the Institut Dominicain des Études Orientales in Cairo continued the debate, responding to the invitation addressed to all Christians by Muḥammad Abū Zahra, Shaykh al-Azhar: ‘The most significant service to render to the religions and to humanity would be that the church takes the trouble to study and refute [the Gospel] and to bring the proofs on which this refutation is based’ (Jomier, ‘L’Évangile selon Barnabé’, p. 142). The debate in Egypt continues to the present day.

In January 1973, Muḥammad ‘Ata ur-Rahim, assisted by K.A. Rashid, launched a campaign to spread the Gospel in Pakistan. In the same year, Mirza Masum Beg of the Ahmadiyya published the English text in Rawalpindi, and in 1974 the Jamaat-e-Islami brought out a new Urdu translation. These were discussed in several newspapers and journals, in English and Urdu. Rahim used the Raggs’ translation, though their critical introduction was replaced by a text defending the authenticity of the Gospel. Between January 1973 and January 1982, 113,000 copies were sold or distributed freely. Between 25 November 1973 and 19 January 1974, *The Pakistan Times* printed the text of the Gospel in nine instalments.

Influenced by Riḍa’s views, Rahim claims in his *Jesus, Prophet of Islam* that the Gospel is authentic, and it ‘is the only known surviving gospel written by a disciple of Jesus’. Referring to Acts 13:13, he postulates a doctrinal conflict between the Unitarian Judaizer Barnabas and the Trinitarian Hellenist Paul, who adulterated pure monotheism with Roman polytheism. Following what is said by ‘Fra Marino’ in the preface to the Gospel in the Spanish manuscript, he refers to the 2<sup>nd</sup>-century theologian Irenaeus supposedly quoting from the Gospel in his attack on Paul’s views. (Bernabé Pons, ‘Zur Wahrheit und Echtheit’, p. 142, explains that this Fra Marino, the supposed discoverer of the Gospel in the papal library, made this reference to Irenaeus as part of his attempt to create a chain of transmission for the Gospel back to the early Church.) Rahim also claims that the Gospel was accepted as canonical by churches in Alexandria until 325, when it was ordered to be destroyed by the Council of Nicea, and he adds that, although ‘any one possessing [the Gospel] would be put to death’, in 383 the pope secured a copy and kept it in his private library (*Jesus, Prophet of Islam*, pp. 39-40). Rahim has become one of the main protagonists of identifying the Barnabas of the Acts of the Apostles with the author of the Gospel, and his views are repeated in the introductions of many Muslim and other editions of the Gospel.

The Pakistani writer Abū l-A‘lā Mawḍūdī (1903-78) also defended the authenticity of the Gospel in his introduction to the Urdu translation, as well as in his Qur’an commentary and his Urdu biography of Muḥammad (Slomp, “Gospel of Barnabas” in recent research’, p. 105). Given his great influence, his views have exerted an impact on Muslim

opinion worldwide. Heated debate about the authenticity of the Gospel has continued in many parts of the Islamic world.

When considering the identity of the author of the Gospel, many scholars take as their starting point the Raggs' conclusion that it is a forgery, and look for a Morisco author. While in 1734 Sale, following a suggestion made by Adriaan Reland in 1705, wrote: 'Of this Gospel the Moriscos in Africa have a translation in Spanish' (Sale in Wherry, *A comprehensive commentary on the Qurán*, p. 123), the first person to suggest a Morisco origin was the Austrian Jesuit Michael Denis (1729-1800), who says: *Evangelium nostrum Barbaroitalum, ... ut mihi videtur, effusum ante Maurisorum expulsionem in Hispania, vel in Africae litoribus* ['It appears to me ... that our Gospel of Barnabas was issued before the expulsion of the Moriscos in Spain, or along the coast of Africa'] (Ragg and Ragg, *Gospel of Barnabas*, pp. lxxiv-v). This would date the Gospel to the late 16<sup>th</sup> or early 17<sup>th</sup> century, when between 1609 and 1614 all Moriscos were finally expelled from Spain.

Evidently unaware of Denis's suggestion, in 1962 the Spanish author E. García Gómez also raised the possibility of a Morisco author, while in 1963 M. de Epalza argued for a possible Spanish author. His studies were further developed by Luis F. Bernabé Pons, Gerard Wiegers and others. The following indications in the Gospel, largely based on studies by Bernabé Pons and Wiegers, support a Morisco origin:

1. One of the two versions of the text is in Spanish.
2. The Gospel is quoted in MS Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España – 9653, fol. 178r, dating from around 1634, a text that is intended to instruct expelled Moriscos in Tunis. The author (who some think was Ibrāhīm Taybilī) states: *Y así mismo en el Evangelio de San Bernabé, donde se hallará la luz* ('And in the same way in the Gospel of St Barnabas, in which is found light') (Bernabé Pons, *El Evangelio de San Bernabé*, p. 31; Cardaillac, *Morisques et chrétiens*, p. 294).
3. The same Christian thought patterns that are found in the Gospel are also found in anti-Christian polemical works written by Moriscos, though they are absent from Muslim polemical literature elsewhere in the Muslim world (Cardaillac, *Morisques et chrétiens*, pp. 293-94).
4. The orthographical mistakes in the Italian text of the Gospel are typical of a native Spanish speaker who is using Italian as a second language (de Epalza, 'Sobre un posible autor español').

5. The Gospel (Ragg and Ragg, *Gospel of Barnabas*, pp. 1, 222) agrees with Morisco anti-Pauline literature in emphasising that Paul was more deceived than deceiver (van Koningsveld, 'Islamic image of Paul').

6. Between 1595 and 1599, 22 supposedly early Christian texts written on lead, predominantly in Arabic, though also in Latin and Castilian, were discovered under what later came to be called the Sacromonte (Harvey, 'Political, social and cultural history', pp. 228-30; Bernabé Pons, 'Zur Wahrheit und Echtheit', pp. 165-6; García-Arenal, 'Alonso del Castillo', p. 165). They were initially regarded as genuine texts that had been translated by a number of persons, including the Morisco scholars Alonso del Castillo and Miguel de Luna, the father of Alonso de Luna (on whom see below), who as translators at the royal court in Madrid were trusted as genuine Christians. These two must be regarded as the likely perpetrators of this literary fraud (Bernabé Pons, 'Los mecanismos de una resistencia', p. 497). These texts show many similarities in form and content with the Gospel of Barnabas (Bernabé Pons, 'Los mecanismos de una resistencia', p. 496; Wiegers, quoted in García-Arenal, 'Alonso del Castillo', pp. 152, 153), containing 'a Christianity pruned of those doctrinal features that a pious Muslim would find offensive or unacceptable (such as the divine sonship)' (Harvey, 'Political, social and cultural history', p. 229). They further resemble the Gospel in giving an Islamic vision of early Christianity that is free from Pauline theology and the creeds of the early Councils (Bernabé Pons, 'Los libros plúmbeos', pp. 79-81).

Taken together, these are very persuasive indications of a Morisco origin of the Gospel.

Several possible authors have been suggested, among them Fray Anselmo Turmeda ('Abd Allāh al-Tarjumān), who was born into a Christian family in Mallorca in about 1352, and later turned Muslim, and Ibrahīm Taybilī, who was expelled from Aragon and went to Tunis in 1609, and was perhaps the first to quote the Gospel of Barnabas. But none adequately meets the requirements.

Alonso de Luna was born in 1570 in Linares in Andalusia. He was a medical doctor by profession (Wiegers, *Het inquisitieproces van Alonso de Luna*, pp. 11-12). Summoned before the Inquisition in Murcia between June 1618 and 22 December 1619 for spreading heretical ideas, he confessed that he had been a secret Muslim since 1590 and declared that he was 'chosen by God' (*eligido por Dios*) to explain the Islamic message of the *Plomos* (Wiegers, 'El contenido de los textos arabes', p. 213). Intriguingly, *eligido* in Arabic is *muṣṭafā*, the name given in the Spanish preface (Mustafa de Aranda) as the translator of the Italian version of the text into Spanish. Alonso said he believed that these *Plomos* announced the final victory of Islam at the end of time.

Alonso had travelled to all the places connected with the Spanish and Italian manuscripts of the Gospel. He was in Istanbul in 1612, which is where the paper of the Italian manuscript of the Gospel originated (the book itself was also made by someone who knew about Ottoman book production; Cirillo and Frémaux, *Évangile de Barnabé*, p. 5; van Koningsveld, 'Islamic image of Paul'). Incidentally, Mustafa de Aranda, the supposed translator of the Italian text of the Gospel into Spanish, lived in Istanbul. Alonso also had close links with the Vatican. He is known to have written a letter to Pope Sixtus V (r. 1585-90), whom he may have heard of or even met when the latter was Grand Inquisitor in Venice, and to have visited the pope's private physician in the Vatican, from where, according to the preface of the Spanish text, a certain 'Fra Marino' stole the Italian Gospel. Alonso knew all the languages that were used in the writing of the Gospel – Spanish, Italian, Latin and Arabic – and he actually taught Arabic to the priests who were commissioned by the archbishop of Granada to assist with the translation of the *Plomos*.

While Alonso de Luna in many ways fits the profile of the author of the Gospel, not all questions about him can as yet be answered (Wiegers, 'Nueva luz'). Nevertheless, the argument for a Morisco origin of the Gospel appears to be conclusive. Scholars who have proposed other origins, such as from the Ebionites, Essenes, Samaritans or Carmelites, or assume an early Judeo-Christian core text, all tend to focus on certain aspects or details and amplify the importance of these at the expense of other aspects. The argument for a Morisco origin can explain all aspects and most of the details of the text.

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