

The Epistle of Barnabas: An Early Example of Allegorical Interpretation of the Old Testament

Allegory is a principle of interpretation that treats the text as having a less-than-straightforward meaning. Thus in the first century-BCE, one of the earliest theorists of allegory defined it as “speaking one thing and signifying something other than what is said.”¹ It was readily applied to inspired writings, that is, the writings of the Greek poets, on the grounds that inspiration preserves the poet from error and ensures that what he says has a meaning that is universal, in contrast to the limited and local significance of ordinary speech. Allegorical interpretation suggests that we seek another meaning other than the obvious “surface” meaning. In contrast to such a “surface” meaning (the so-called “literal” meaning), the allegorical meaning is “deeper” or “hidden.” Such an approach to inspired (or sacred) writing was commonplace in the ancient world, and is to be found in the Classical and Hellenistic tradition, in the Jewish world and in Christianity.

The use of allegory as a method of biblical interpretation has a further justification within Christianity. The earliest Christians were those Jews who believed that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah, the “anointed one” promised by the prophets. So, in contrast to their fellow Jews, these Christian Jews treasured especially the Prophets, rather than the Law. From evident prophecies of the Messiah, Christians began to treat the whole prophetic corpus as pointing to Jesus (especially the “Servant Songs” of Deutero-Isaiah), and ultimately regarded the whole of the scriptures (viz. the “Old Testament”) as prophetic — of Jesus. (This is reflected in the way Christians began to reorganize the “Old Testament,” so that it led up to, and culminated in, the prophetic books.) Such a “prophetic” interpretation of the Old Testament is a form of allegory as it treats the whole Bible as “speaking one thing (viz. about the religious experience of Israel) and signifying other than what is said (viz. the fulfillment of all in Jesus).”

The process of interpreting the scriptures allegorically as foreshadowing Jesus is evident in the New Testament, in the way the Gospel narratives frequently shape the events of Christ’s life so as to see in them fulfillment of Old Testament passages, and more self-consciously in the Fourth Gospel (e.g. John 3:14), Paul (e.g. Gal. 4:21-31, which contains an explicit defense of allegory; cf. 1 Cor. 9:9f.; Rom. 15:4), and 1 Peter 3:18-22. The events that foreshadowed Christ are often called “types”: they are patterns that point to the reality fulfilled in Christ.²

The Epistle of Barnabas (first-century or early second-century, perhaps 132-135 CE) gives many early examples of Christian allegorical interpretation.

Barnabas allegorizes Jewish food laws (chapter 10). Moses’ arms being held out in the battle against the Amalekites is a type of the cross (12.2-3). The bronze serpent in the wilderness is a type of Christ (12.5-7). Joshua, who the people are to listen to, prefigures Christ (12.8). The Church is the younger son Jacob to the Jewish people’s Esau (chapter 13). The Jews were not worthy of the covenant, so Moses broke the tablets, but the Lord gave it to the Church by his suffering for us (14.1-4).

Barnabas’ tour de force: (9.7-9) 7. “Learn fully then, children of love, concerning all things, for Abraham, who first circumcised, did so looking forward, in the spirit of Jesus, and had received the doctrine of the three letters. 8. For Scripture says, “And Abraham circumcised from his household eighteen and three hundred men.”³ What then was the knowledge that was given him? Notice that he first mentions the eighteen, and after a pause the three hundred. The eighteen is I (=ten) and H (the Greek letter eta=8) — you have Jesus — and because the cross was destined to have grace in the T (=300) he says “and three hundred.” So he indicates Jesus in the two letters and the cross in the other. 9. He knows this who placed the gift of this teaching in our hearts. No one has heard a more genuine lesson from me, but I know you are worthy.”

10. Now when Moses said, “You shall not eat swine, nor an eagle, nor a hawk, nor a crow, nor any fish without scales,”⁴ he had three doctrines in mind. 2. Moreover he says to them in Deuteronomy, “And I will lay my ordinances among this people.”⁵ So then there is no commandment of God to not eat, but rather Moses spoke in the spirit.

¹Heraclitus, *Homeric Questions*, 5.1.

²The preceding paragraphs are taken from Andrew Louth’s article, “Allegorical Interpretation,” in *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, R. J. Coggins and J. L. Houlden, eds., (Philadelphia: Trinity International Press, 1990) 12.

³cf. Gen. 14:14; 17:23.

⁴cf. Lev. 11; Deut. 14.

⁵cf. Deut 4:1, 5.

3. He mentioned the swine for this reason: you shall not associate, he means, with people who are like swine. That is, people who, when they have plenty forget the Lord, but when they are in want recognize the Lord, just as the swine when it eats ignores⁶ its master, but when it is hungry it cries out, and after receiving food is again silent.

4. “Neither shall you eat the eagle nor the hawk nor the kite nor the crow.”⁷ You shall not, he means, associate with or become like such people, who do not know how to obtain their food by their labor and sweat, but plunder other people’s property in their lawlessness and lie in wait for it. All the while they are walking about apparently innocently, they are sharply looking around to see who they might rob to satisfy their greed—just as these birds alone provide no food for themselves but, sitting idle, look for a chance to devour the prey that other animals have killed,⁸ —mischievous pests they are!

5. “You shall not eat,” he says, “the sea eel nor the octopus nor the squid.” You shall not, he means, associate with or become like such people who are utterly ungodly and who are already condemned to death, just as these fish alone are accursed and float in the deep water, not swimming [near the surface] like the others but living in the mud at the bottom of the sea.

6. Moreover, “thou shalt not eat the rabbit.” Why? Because thou shalt not, he means, become a corrupter of boys [that is, a homosexual] nor like such. For the rabbit yearly increases the number of its anuses, for however many years its lives, that is how many holes it has.⁹

7. Moreover, “thou shalt not eat the hyena.”¹⁰ Thou shalt not, he means, become an adulterer or a seducer nor shalt thou become like such people. For what reason? Because this animal annually changes its sex and is at one time male and another female.¹¹

8. Moreover Moses rightly detested the weasel.¹² Thou shalt not, he says, be like those we have heard of who commit iniquity with the mouth on account of their uncleanness. Nor shall you be joined to those unclean women who commit iniquity with the mouth. For this animal [the weasel] conceives through the mouth.¹³

9. Moses received three doctrines concerning food and thus spoke of them in the Spirit; but they [the Jews], carnally-minded as they were, received them as referring to real food. 10. But David received knowledge concerning the same three doctrines and says, “Blessed is the man who has not gone in the counsel of the ungodly” as the fishes go in darkness in the deep waters, “and has not stood in the way of sinners” like those who seem to fear the Lord but sin like the swine, “and has not sat in the seat of the scorers” (Ps. 1:1) like the birds who sit and wait for their prey. Grasp fully the doctrines about food.

11. Moses says again, “Eat of every animal that is cloven-hoofed and chews the cud.” What does he mean? [The ruminant animal denotes] those who, on receiving food recognize the one who feeds them, and, being satisfied by him, are visibly glad. Well did he [Moses] speak with regard to the commandment. What then does he mean? You shall associate with those who fear the Lord, with those who meditate in their hearts on the commandment they have received, with those who speak and keep the judgments of the Lord and who ruminate on the word of the Lord. But what does “the cloven hoofed” mean? That the righteous person both walks in this world and looks forward to the holy eternity. You see what an excellent legislator Moses was!

12. But how was it possible for them [the Jews] to understand or comprehend these things? But we, rightly understanding his commandments, explain them as the Lord intended. For this purpose he circumcised our ears and our hearts, that we might understand these things.

⁶lit. “does not know.”

⁷cf. Lev. 11:13-16.

⁸lit. “the flesh of others.”

⁹cf. Pliny, *Natural History* 8, 81, 218; Aelianus, *De anim.* 1.25; Clement of Alexandria, *Paed.* 2.10.83.4.

¹⁰This commandment is not found in the Pentateuch.

¹¹Pliny, *Natural History*, 8.30; Tertullian, *De Pallia* 3.

¹²cf. Lev. 11:29.

¹³That is, during copulation the female weasel receives the penis in the mouth (fellatio) rather than in the vagina.