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Chapter 9

ABRAHAM IN THE APOSTOLIC FATHERS

Seth M. Ehorn

Introduction

The Abraham story is pliable and there is, perhaps, no better corpus for observing this than the Apostolic Fathers.¹ Many of these authors were engaged in extensive identity formation, and, because family relations are among the most important identities, Abraham's lineage (either literal or spiritual) proved to be a topic of interest among many early Christian writers. As we will see in the corpus of the Apostolic Fathers, different authors evoked and modified the narrative in order to support their own aims and interests.² Specifically, *1 Clement*, Ignatius of Antioch, and *Barnabas* each evoke Abraham in order to provide moral examples and spiritual ancestry for Gentile readers.

Abraham in 1 Clement

The early Christian text we know as *1 Clement* is typically dated to 95 or 96 CE and was written as a letter to “the church of God that sojourns in Corinth” (τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ τοῦ θεοῦ τῇ παροικοῦσῃ Κόρινθον, 1.0).³ The figure of Abraham is evoked three

1. For ease of reading, I refer to “Abraham” throughout this chapter, acknowledging that prior to Genesis 17 he is called “Abram” in the biblical text.

2. Although scholars remain keenly interested in the reception of the Abraham story in early Judaism and Christianity, very few studies consider the significance of Abraham in the Apostolic Fathers. E.g., there is no chapter on the Apostolic Fathers in M. Goodman, G.H. van Kooten, and J.T.A.G.M. van Ruiten, eds., *Abraham, the Nations, and the Hagarites: Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Perspectives on Kinship with Abraham* (TBN, 13; Leiden: Brill, 2010).

3. For a general orientation to the letter, including issues of authorship and dating, see A.F. Gregory, “*1 Clement*: An Introduction”, in *The Writings of the Apostolic Fathers*, ed. P. Foster (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2007), 21–31; cf. H.E. Lona, *Der Erste Clemensbrief* (KAV, 2; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998), 75–8. Some scholars believe the letter dates earlier: K. Erlemann, “Die Datierung des ersten Klemensbriefes—Anfragen an eine Communis Opinio”, *NTS* 44 (1998): 591–607.

times in *1 Clement* (10.1–7; 17.2; 31.2), each time as an example of how his readers should behave as Christians.

1 Clement 10.1–7

The author of *1 Clement* first evokes Abraham when he is encouraging readers to “fix our eyes on those who perfectly served [God’s] magnificent glory” (ἀτενίσωμεν εἰς τοὺς τελείως λειτουργήσαντας τῇ μεγαλοπρεπεῖ δόξῃ αὐτοῦ, 9.2). Following brief references to Enoch (9.3) and Noah (9.4), the author introduces Abraham in an extended discussion of his works and deeds (10.1–7). In addition to the Genesis narrative, this sequence follows Hebrews (11:5, 7, 8–12, 17–19, etc.) and is probably dependent upon it.⁴

The bulk of Abraham material in *1 Clement* 10 is presented as direct, essentially verbatim quotations of LXX Gen. 12:1–3 (*1 Clem.* 10.3), Gen. 13:14–16 (*1 Clem.* 10.4–5), and Gen. 15:5–6 (*1 Clem.* 10.6).⁵ The quotations function as proof of *1 Clement*’s claims from 10.1–2 that Abraham obeyed God. But here, *1 Clement* sets up the theme of Abraham’s obedience in a paradoxical way. Although ostensibly commenting on his obedience (cf. ὑπήκοος, *1 Clem.* 10.1; ὑπακοῆς, *1 Clem.* 10.2), the author, at the same time, downplays this dynamic⁶: “Abraham, who was called ‘the friend,’ was found faithful when he became obedient to the words of God. He obediently went forth from his country, from his people, and from his father’s house, leaving a small country, a weak people, and an insignificant house in order that he might inherit the promises of God” (10.1–2). Abraham departs from ‘a *small* country’ (γῆν ὀλίγην), ‘a *weak* people’ (συγγένειαν ἀσθενῆ), and ‘an *insignificant* house’ (οἶκον μικρόν). These adjectival modifiers are not part of the source text from Gen. 12:17: “Ἐξελθε ἐκ τῆς γῆς σου καὶ ἐκ τῆς συγγενείας σου καὶ ἐκ τοῦ οἴκου τοῦ πατρὸς σου εἰς τὴν γῆν, ἣν ἂν σοι δείξω” (Go forth from your country and from your kindred and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you). These added descriptions in *1 Clem.* 10.2 downplay the significance of Abraham’s obedience. The purpose, it seems, is not to diminish Abraham’s commitment to God but to align with the author’s emphasis on ‘humility’ (e.g., ταπεινοφρονέω in 2.1 and esp. 31.4) and to help create space for another theme: hospitality.

4. See A.F. Gregory, “*1 Clement* and the Writings that Later Formed the New Testament”, in *The Reception of the New Testament in the Apostolic Fathers*, eds. A.F. Gregory et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 129–57; cf. D.A. Hagner, *The Use of the Old and New Testaments in Clement of Rome* (NovTSup, 34; Leiden: Brill, 1973), 184.

5. On the text of the quotations, see esp. Hagner, *Use of the Old and New Testaments*, 185.

6. For the Greek and English texts of the Apostolic Fathers, I follow M.W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 3rd edn., 2007), 33–9. At times, I emend the English translations myself.

7. I note that the Göttingen edition of Genesis does not present any variant readings that correspond to *1 Clement* here.

The theme of Abraham's hospitality (φιλοξενία) emerges overtly in 10.7: "because of his faith and hospitality a son was given to him in his old age" (διὰ πίστιν καὶ φιλοξενίαν ἐδόθη αὐτῷ υἱὸς ἐν γήρῃ). Although this is a common theme in early Jewish and Christian interpretations of Abraham (and others, like Lot and Rahab),⁸ the argument that faith and hospitality result in Abraham's blessing is based upon a reading of the Abraham story itself. Following God's promises to Abraham in Gen. 15:1-6 and 17:1-14, Abraham shows hospitality to three visitors (Gen. 18:1-15).⁹

Abraham's righteousness, then, is demonstrated both by his faith and hospitality. *1 Clement* further develops this theme by appealing to Lot's (11.1) and Rahab's hospitality (12.1) as a (partial) ground for being saved (σώζω in 11.1; 12.1). In *1 Clem.* 10.1-7 Abraham is one of several examples presented to motivate Christian behavior in light of the fact that believers at Corinth have "assumed that attitude of unrighteous and ungodly jealousy through which death entered into the world" (ζηλον ἄδικον καὶ ἀσεβῆ ἀνειληφότας, δι' οὗ καὶ θάνατος εἰσῆλθεν εἰς τὸν κόσμον, 3.4).

1 Clement 17.2

In *1 Clem.* 17.2 Abraham is presented as one (of many) example(s) of humility. The author refers to Abraham as "friend of God" (cf. *1 Clem.* 10.1), and sets this in parallel with Abraham's claim that "I am only dust and ashes" (Εγὼ δέ εἰμι γῆ καὶ σποδός, 17.2).¹⁰ The title "friend" (φίλος) ultimately derives from two passages in the Hebrew Bible that refer to Abraham as אָבִיחַ (Isa. 41:8; 2 Chron. 20:7).¹¹ But, in light of numismatic evidence, the claim to be "friend" in the Greek tradition, including *1 Clement*, may well include not simply a personal notion of "friendship", but also the dimension of allegiance.¹² This sense comes through clearly in 10.1, where "Abraham, who was called 'the friend,' was found faithful when he became

8. See esp. H. Chadwick, "Justification by Faith and Hospitality", in *Studia Patristica*, vol. 4, ed. F.L. Cross (TU, 79; Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1961), 281-5; C.D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); J. Jipp, *Saved by Faith and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017).

9. On this passage, see S.M. Ehorn, "Galatians 1:8 and Paul's Reading of Abraham's Story", *JTS* 64, no.2 (2013): 439-44.

10. Here I depart from Holmes's translation: "Abraham was greatly renowned and was called 'the friend of God'; yet [καὶ] . . ."

11. D.J.A. Clines (ed.), *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*. 9 vols. (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 1993-2014), Vol. 1, 140: "friend, lover;" cf. CD 3.2-3; 4QpGen^a 2.8; 4Q372 1.21. The sense I argue for in what follows may also be suggested by the parallel between אָבִיחַ ("my friend") and עַבְדִּי ("my servant") in Isa. 41:8.

12. See M.P. Theophilus, "John 15.14 and the ΦΙΛΑ- Lexeme in Light of Numismatic Evidence: Friendship or Obedience?", *NTS* 64 (2018): 33-43.

obedient to the words of God” (Ἀβραάμ, ὁ φίλος προσαγορευθεὶς, πιστὸς εὐρέθη ἐν τῷ αὐτὸν ὑπήκοον γενέσθαι τοῖς ῥήμασιν τοῦ θεοῦ).

The claim to be “dust and ashes” is a verbatim quotation of LXX Gen. 18:27b, which comes from an OT context where Abraham dialogues with God about the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. Specifically, Abraham discusses God’s justice and righteousness, presuming to think that God would not destroy an entire city if it contained even a few righteous people. As the negotiation begins, Abraham admits his inferiority by claiming to be “dust and ashes.” This rhetorical posturing sets him up to make the bold request that God should act mercifully toward the city. Abraham serves as a model of humility and as an example of someone who “fixed their eyes upon [God]” (ἀτενίζω). In every other use of this significant term in *1 Clement*, the author uses the first-person plural to motivate his readers and describe their actions: ἀτενίσωμεν (“let us fix our eyes,” 7.4; 9.2; 19.2) and ἀτενίσομεν (“we look steadily,” 36.2). In *1 Clement* only Abraham is an example of someone who fixed his gaze upon God and, thus, he is a model for how believers might do this and make requests of God.

1 Clement 31.2 and 32.2

Abraham emerges briefly again in *1 Clem.* 31.2, where the author notes that Abraham’s blessing is attained “through faith” (διὰ πίστεως). The blessing is related specifically in *1 Clem.* 32.2, which conflates Gen. 15:5 and 22:17, referring to both as the promise.¹³ In all tables, I utilize underlining to indicate verbatim agreement between columns 1 and 2 and **bold** to indicate verbatim agreement between columns 2 and 3. *Italics* are added to indicate non-verbatim agreement (e.g., same lexeme inflected in a different case).

Gen. 15:5	1 Clem. 32.2	Gen. 22:17
ἐξήγαγεν δὲ αὐτὸν ἔξω καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ Ἀνάβλεψον διῆ εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ ἀριθμήσον τοὺς ἀστέρας, εἰ δυνήσῃ ἐξαριθμῆσαι αὐτούς. καὶ εἶπεν Οὕτως <u>ἔσται τὸ σπέρμα σου</u> .	... ὡς ἐπαγγελιαμένου τοῦ θεοῦ ὅτι <u>ἔσται τὸ σπέρμα σου</u> ὡς οἱ ἀστέρες τοῦ οὐρανοῦ.	ἢ μὴν εὐλογῶν εὐλογήσω σε καὶ πληθύνων πληθυνῶ τὸ σπέρμα σου ὡς τοὺς ἀστέρας τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καὶ ὡς τὴν ἄμμον τὴν παρὰ τὸ χεῖλος τῆς θαλάσσης, καὶ κληρονομήσει τὸ σπέρμα σου τὰς πόλεις τῶν ὑπεναντίων.
Then he brought him outside and said to him, “Look up to heaven, and number the stars, if you will be able to count them.” And he said, “So shall your offspring be.”	... seeing that God promised that “ your offspring shall be as the stars of heaven. ”	I will indeed bless you with blessings, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is by the seashore, and your offspring shall possess the cities of their adversaries.

13. See Hagner, *Use of the Old and New Testaments*, 55–6; A. Lindemann, *Die Clemensbriefe* (AV, 1; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1992), 99.

Although Gen. 22:17 is linguistically primary, the contribution of Gen. 15:5 is important not only because it contributes unique wording to the quotation but because Gen. 15:5 is the first instance of the promise to Abraham.¹⁴

1 *Clement*'s citation parallels discussion of these Genesis texts in both Romans 4 and Galatians 3. While Paul discusses these texts in close contact with one another, 1 *Clement* combines them into a single promise, summarizing the larger narrative context.¹⁵ What is more interesting, however, is that 1 *Clement* understands this promise as implying both a *quantitative* increase and a *qualitative* increase in greatness.¹⁶ While the quantitative reading of the Abrahamic promise is common (cf. Deut. 1:10; 10:22; 1 Chron. 27:23; Neh. 9:23), some early Jewish and Christian interpreters found this reading limited because it failed to distinguish Abraham from other figures in the narrative.¹⁷ For example, Hagar receives a promise through the angel of the Lord that "I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude" (Gen. 16:10). How is Abraham's promise unique? Why will his descendants be "as the stars" (ὡς οἱ ἀστέρες)?

Several early Jewish (e.g., *Jub.* 25:15-16; *Sir.* 44:21) and Christian (e.g., *Rom.* 4:18) texts bear witness to a qualitative reading of the Genesis text. Noteworthy is Philo, who explicitly rejects the quantitative reading:

When the Lord led him [= Abraham] outside He said "Look up into heaven and count the stars, if thou canst count their sum. So shall be thy seed" (Gen. xv. 5). Well does the text say "so" not "so many," that is, "of equal number to the stars." For He wishes to suggest not number merely, but a multitude of other things, such as tend to happiness perfect and complete. The seed shall be, He says, as the ethereal sight spread out before him, celestial as that is, full of light unshadowed and pure as that is, for night is banished from heaven and darkness from ether. It shall be the very likeness of the stars.

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14. Hagner, *Use of the Old and New Testaments*, 56, may be correct that texts are conflated due to memory quotation. However, this is by no means an assured conclusion given the practice of composite quotations in other writers of the time.

15. On summarizing or condensing quotations, see S.A. Adams and S.M. Ehorn, "Introduction", in *Composite Citations in Antiquity*, Vol. 2: *New Testament Uses*, eds. S.A. Adams et al. (LNTS, 593; London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018), 1–15 (4–5); Hagner, *Use of the Old and New Testaments*, 56, believes that Clement is quoting from memory.

16. Pace Lindemann, *Die Clemensbriefe*, 100, who emphasizes only the quantitative reading: "die 'nicht geringe δοξα' bezöge sich dann auf die zahlenmäßige Größe der Stämme."

17. See M. Theissen, *Paul and the Gentile Problem* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 135–6.

Here Philo employs a lexical strategy where he explores the possible meanings of “so” (οὕτως) in the quoted part of the Abraham narrative. Significant for present purposes, Philo not only rejects the quantitative reading but he suggests that Abraham’s seed “shall be the very likeness of the stars” (ἔσται ... ἀστεροειδέστατον).¹⁸

The author of *1 Clement* shares a similar perspective. In particular, the combined quotation of Gen. 15:5 and 22:17 in *1 Clem.* 32.2 is surrounded by δόξα-terminology to describe the quality of those who inherit Abraham’s promise: “τὰ δὲ λοιπὰ σκῆπτρα αὐτοῦ οὐκ ἐν μικρᾷ δόξῃ ὑπάρχουσιν, ὡς ἐπαγγειλαμένου τοῦ θεοῦ ὅτι ἔσται τὸ σπέρμα σου ὡς οἱ ἀστέρες τοῦ οὐρανοῦ. πάντες οὖν ἐδοξάσθησαν καὶ ἐμεγαλύνθησαν” (and his other tribes are held in no small honor, seeing that God promised that “your seed shall be as the stars of heaven.” All, therefore, were glorified and magnified) (32.2c-3a). *1 Clement* is not simply comparing the growth of Abraham’s seed with vast number of stars. Rather, he is noting the “star-like” quality of Abraham’s seed.¹⁹ Here the author uses δόξα in one of its common senses to refer to “a [transcendent] being deserving of honor.”²⁰ In the late second century CE, Irenaeus picks up this theme as well, noting that, in addition to the numerical growth, Abraham “might also know the *glory* of his seed ... God led him outside at night and said to him, ‘look toward heaven and see if you can count the stars of heaven; so shall be your seed’” (*Epid.* 24).²¹ Following Theissen, this “star-like” quality is connected to angelic beings, who are depicted as pneumatic and not simply corporal beings (e.g., LXX Ps. 103:4; cf. Heb. 1:7).

The overall point for *1 Clement* is that God’s promise to Abraham that “your seed shall be as the stars of the heaven” is not simply a recognition of numerical growth, rather, it is a recognition of “magnificence of the gifts that are given by [God]” (μεγαλεῖα τῶν ὑπ’ αὐτοῦ δεδομένων δωρεῶν, 32.1). Here, the promise to Abraham is not set aside or abandoned, but it is understood to play an integral part in the shaping of Christian identity for *1 Clement’s* readers.

In summary, *1 Clement* uses Abraham to motivate readers toward righteous behavior (10.1–7) by following the example of Abraham, who fixed his eyes on God (17.2). Moreover, as Abraham’s seed, Christians are “glorified and magnified” in accordance with God’s will (32.3), which is a partial realization of God’s promise to Abraham (32.2).

18. Ibid, 136–7.

19. Ibid, 138; cf. D.A. Burnett, “So Shall Your Seed Be’: Paul’s Use of Genesis 15:5 in Romans 4:18 in Light of Early Jewish Deification Traditions”, *JSPL* 5, no.2 (2015): 211–36.

20. F.W. Danker, W. Bauer, W.F. Arndt, and F.W. Gingrich. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (3rd ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 257.4.

21. Cited in Theissen, *Paul and the Gentile Problem*, 138.

Abraham in Ignatius

It is generally agreed upon that Ignatius of Antioch was killed during Trajan's reign (c. 110 CE).²² Prior to his death (likely martyrdom), he wrote letters to multiple churches, including one to the Philadelphians. The one brief reference to Abraham in Ignatius's writing occurs within a letter that is highly polemical against Ἰουδαϊσμός (Ignatius, *Phld.* 6.1). Ignatius encourages his readers not to listen "if someone expounds Judaism to you" (ἐὰν δέ τις Ἰουδαϊσμόν ἐρμηνεύῃ ὑμῖν).²³

This broader polemical context helps to make sense of Ignatius's reference to Abraham in *Phld.* 9.1. In context, Ignatius notes that some people are contrasting what is found "in the archives" (ἐν τοῖς ἀρχείοις, 8.2) with what is found "in the gospel" (ἐν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ, 8.2).²⁴ Ignatius, then, equates Jesus Christ with the archives (ἐμοὶ δὲ ἀρχεῖά ἐστιν Ἰησοῦς Χριστός, 8.2). This discussion ultimately leads Ignatius to evoke Abraham in *Phld.* 9.1:

αὐτὸς ὢν θύρα τοῦ πατρός, δι' ἧς εἰσέρχονται Ἀβραὰμ καὶ Ἰσαὰκ καὶ Ἰακώβ καὶ οἱ προφῆται καὶ οἱ ἀπόστολοι καὶ ἡ ἐκκλησία. πάντα ταῦτα εἰς ἐνότητα θεοῦ.

for he himself is the door of the Father, through which Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and the prophets and the apostles and the church enter in. All these come together in the unity of God.

Here Abraham (and the other patriarchs) are said to approach God through "him" (αὐτός), i.e., Christ. Because Abraham enters through "the door" of Christ (cf. *Phld.* 8.2), he "seems essentially to be a Christian," a least for Ignatius.²⁵ Of importance for Ignatius's readers, then, is that they understand the broad message of Christ: "It is enough to recognize the sufficiency of Jesus Christ and to know that Scripture pointed forward to him."²⁶

22. J.B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers: Clement, Ignatius, and Polycarp* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1989), Vol. 2.2, 435–72 is still the best treatment of introductory issues. See also P. Foster, "The Epistles of Ignatius of Antioch", in *The Writings of the Apostolic Fathers*, ed. P. Foster (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2007), 81–107.

23. Although addressing only pre-Christian uses of Ἰουδαϊσμός, still see M.V. Novenson, "Paul's Former Occupation in *Ioudaismos*", in *Galatians and Christian Theology: Justification, The Gospel, and Ethics in Paul's Letters*, eds. M.W. Elliott et al. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014), 24–39.

24. W.R. Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch: A Commentary on the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 208, notes that "archives" should be taken as a reference to (OT) Scripture (cf. Philo, *Congr.* 175; *Fug.* 132; *Somn.* 1.33, 48; 2.265, 301; *Praem. Poen.* 2).

25. J.S. Siker, *Disinheriting the Jews: Abraham in Early Christian Controversy* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991), 151.

26. Schoedel, *Ignatius*, 210.

Abraham in Barnabas

Because the epistle of *Barnabas* is a pseudepigraphic letter, we cannot date it precisely, but it is generally accepted to be from within the range of 70 CE to 135 CE.²⁷ Taken broadly within this timeframe, *Barnabas* presents readers with a fascinating window into early Christian biblical interpretation. The overall argument of *Barnabas* seeks to demonstrate how Christians, not Jews, are the true heirs of God's covenant.²⁸ In two instances, Abraham is evoked as a witness to Christ (*Barn.* 8.1–4; 9.7–8); in two other instances Abraham is associated with God's promise *for the nations* (6.8) and as “the father of the nations who believe in God without being circumcised” (πατέρα ἐθνῶν τῶν πιστευόντων δι’ ἀκροβυστίας τῷ θεῷ, 13.7).

Barnabas 6.8

The text of *Barn.* 6.8 is a condensed quotation of Exod. 33:1–3, which evokes the land promise made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.²⁹

Exod. 33:1–3

Καὶ εἶπεν κύριος πρὸς Μωυσήν Πορεύου ἀνάβηθι ἐντεῦθεν σὺ καὶ ὁ λαός σου, οὓς ἐξήγαγες ἐκ γῆς Αἰγύπτου, εἰς τὴν γῆν, ἣν ὠμοσα τῷ Ἀβραὰμ καὶ Ἰσαὰκ καὶ Ἰακώβ λέγων Τῷ σπέρματι ὑμῶν δώσω αὐτήν.² καὶ συναποστελῶ τὸν ἄγγελόν μου πρὸ προσώπου σου, καὶ ἐκβαλεῖ τὸν Ἀμορραῖον καὶ Χετταῖον καὶ Φερεζαῖον καὶ Γεργεσαῖον καὶ Εὐαῖον καὶ Ἰεβουσαῖον.³ καὶ εἰσάξω σε εἰς γῆν ῥέουσαν γάλα καὶ μέλι· οὐ γὰρ μὴ συναναβῶ μετὰ σοῦ διὰ τὸ λαὸν σκληροτράχηλόν σε εἶναι, ἵνα μὴ ἐξαναλώσω σε ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ.

And the Lord said to Moses, “Go, ascend from here, you and your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt, into the land that I swore to Abraam, Isaak and Jakob, saying, ‘To your seed I will give it.’² And I will send along my angel before you, and he will cast out the Amorrite and Chettite and Pherezite and Gergesite and Heuite and Iebousite.³ And he will lead you into a land flowing with milk and honey. For I shall never go up together with you because you are a stiff-necked people, lest I exterminate you in the way.”

Barn. 6.8

τί λέγει ὁ ἄλλος προφήτης Μωϋσῆς αὐτοῖς; Ἰδοὺ, τάδε λέγει κύριος ὁ θεός· Εἰσελθατε εἰς τὴν γῆν τὴν ἀγαθὴν, ἣν ὠμοσεν κύριος τῷ Ἀβραὰμ καὶ Ἰσαὰκ καὶ Ἰακώβ, καὶ κατακληρονομήσατε αὐτήν, γῆν ῥέουσαν γάλα καὶ μέλι.

What does the other prophet, Moses, say to them? “Behold, thus says the Lord God: ‘Enter into the good land, which the Lord promised by oath to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, and take possession of it as an inheritance, a land flowing with milk and honey.’?”

27. J.C. Paget, “The Epistle of Barnabas”, in *The Writings of the Apostolic Fathers*, ed. P. Foster (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2007), 72–80; more extensively, see J.C. Paget, *Epistle of Barnabas: Outlook and Background* (WUNT, 2/64; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1994), 9–30.

28. A helpful discussion of critical introductory issues is found in Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 370–9.

29. See esp. N.A. Dahl, “La terre où coulent le lait et le miel selon Barnabé 6, 8–19”, in *Aux sources de la tradition chrétienne*, ed. M.M. Goguel (Neuchâtel-Paris: Delachaux & Niestle 1950), 62–70.

The following context of *Barnabas* provides interpretive comments on several of the key phrases from 6.8. It is significant that “a land flowing with milk and honey” is spiritualized, referring to how a child is nourished with honey first, then milk (πρῶτον τὸ παιδίον μέλιτι, εἶτα γάλακτι, 6.17). And, in the spiritual possession of this land, Christian readers (= Gentiles) take possession of “the good land” (6.16). This is where the condensing of the passage is extremely convenient for *Barnabas*’s reading of the text. Exod. 33:2 states that God will send “my messenger” (ἄγγελόν μου) to remove the Gentile inhabitants from the land: ἐκβαλεῖ τὸν Ἀμορραῖον καὶ Χετταῖον καὶ Φερεζαῖον καὶ Γεργεσαῖον καὶ Εὐαῖον καὶ Ἰεβουσαῖον. The verb ἐκβάλλω is used here, as elsewhere, to describe the act of sending someone or a group of people away, often with force (e.g., Gen. 3:24; 21:10; Exod. 6:1; etc.). Because *Barnabas* is interested in presenting the Gentiles as the true heirs of the land, it seems likely that the author omitted (or found agreeable the omission of) key wording from this passage.³⁰ This selective condensing—removing the inconvenient fact that various Gentile groups were removed from the land—is very amenable to *Barnabas*’ wider theological perspective, where it is the Gentiles who receive an inheritance rather than the Jews (cf. 5.13).³¹

In *Barn.* 6.8 the promise made to Abraham is (re-)interpreted to refer to Gentile Christian readers. *Barnabas* supports this with a condensed biblical quotation and creative biblical interpretation that follows the quotation. It is noteworthy that, in the mid-second century, Justin Martyr offered a similar interpretation of the land promise. Most clearly, in *Dial.* 119.5, Justin states that “along with Abraham we shall inherit the holy land, when we shall receive the inheritance for an endless eternity, being children of Abraham through the like faith.” Here Justin, not unlike *Barnabas*, “takes the divine promises to Abraham in Genesis and redefines them so that they apply exclusively to Christians.”³²

Barnabas 8.1–4

Throughout much of *Barnabas* 7–8 the author demonstrates various *types* of Christ in Israel’s Scriptures (cf. τύπος in 7.3, 7, 10, 11; 8.1 [twice]). This includes Isaac as

30. It is commonly held that *Barn.* 6.8–19 is comprised of traditional materials that pre-date *Barnabas*. See P. Prigent, *Les Testimonia dans le christianisme primitif. L’Épître de Barnabé I–XVI et ses sources* (Ebib; Paris: Gabalda, 1961), 84–90. Given how amenable this modified text is to *Barnabas*’ argument, I am sceptical that he depends solely on a borrowed text. It seems just as likely that *Barnabas* has modified this quotation, tailoring it exactly to suit his purposes.

31. Modification of the Abraham story is common in extant sources. E.g., in 1QapGen ar 19: 18–21, God (and not Abraham!) initiates the deception of the Egyptians by telling them that Sarah is Abraham’s sister.

32. Siker, *Disinheriting the Jews*, 178; cf. O. Skarsaune, *The Proof from Prophecy—A Study in Justin Martyr’s Proof-Text Tradition: Text-Type, Provenance, Theological Profile* (NovTSup, 56; Leiden: Brill, 1987), 336.

a type of Christ (7.3), sacrificial goats that are burnt and cursed (7.7, 10), scarlet wool and wood (7.11), and the red heifer from Num. 19:17-22 (*Barn.* 8.11). Each of these types are evoked by *Barnabas* in order to connect Jesus and his suffering with Israel's Scriptures.

It is within the typology of the red heifer that *Barnabas* evokes Abraham. He is recalled because the "three children" (τρεις παῖδες) who sprinkled water and ashes (cf. Num. 19:17-19) appeared "as a witness" (εἰς μαρτύριον) to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob because (ὅτι) these three were great in God's sight (*Barn.* 8.4).³³ Abraham is portrayed here as one of several biblical figures who "preached to us the good news about the forgiveness of sins and the purification of the heart" (*Barn.* 8.3). Just as quickly as he appears, Abraham fades away in the argument. Yet, as noted earlier about *Barn.* 6.8, Abraham's significance for Gentiles has been underscored.³⁴

Barnabas 9.7-8

Barnabas 9 is an argument about the nature of circumcision. *Barnabas* describes circumcision of the heart (9.1) and ears (9.4) and he contrasts these with a more traditional Jewish understanding of circumcision: "the circumcision in which they have trusted has been abolished, for he declared that circumcision was not a matter of the flesh" (ἡ περιτομή ἐφ' ἣ πεποιθασιν κατήργηται, περιτομήν γὰρ εἶρηκεν οὐ σαρκὸς γεννηθῆναι, 9.4). Part of his rationale for rejecting a standard Jewish definition of circumcision involves a consideration of Abraham. As noted by Hvalvik, this is a risky move because Abraham himself was given the covenant of circumcision and, according to Genesis, practiced it as a physical rite.³⁵ *Barnabas'* reading of Abraham's circumcision, then, is typological and this allows him to read it as an anticipation of the cross of Christ.

The main interpretive move appears in *Barn.* 9.7-8, where *Barnabas* offers a striking interpretation of the number 318, which he refers to as "the teaching of the three letters" (τριῶν γραμμάτων δόγματα). The entire interpretation finds its basis in a quotation from the Abraham narrative, combining wording from Gen. 14:14 and 17:23 into a single text form.³⁶

33. F.R. Prostmeier, *Der Barnabasbrief* (KAV, 8; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999), 329.

34. Ibid., 330, rightly notes that "V 4 beansprucht also die Patriarchen für die Kirche."

35. R. Hvalvik, *The Struggle for Scripture and Covenant: The Purpose of the Epistles of Barnabas and Jewish-Christian Competition in the Second Century* (WUNT 2/82; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996), 186.

36. Prostmeier, *Der Barnabasbrief*, 368, refers to this as a "Mischzitat aus Gen 17,23 und Gen 14,14." See the discussion of conflated text forms in various chapters of S.A. Adams and S.M. Ehorn, *Composite Citations in Antiquity*, Vol. 1, *Jewish, Graeco-Roman, and Early Christian Uses* (LNTS, 525; London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016).

Gen. 14:14	Barn. 9.8	Gen. 17:23
ἀκούσας δὲ Ἀβραμ ὅτι ἡχμαλώτεται Λωτ ὁ ἀδελφὸς αὐτοῦ, ἠρίθμησεν τοὺς ἰδίους οἰκογενεῖς αὐτοῦ, <u>τριακοσίους δέκα</u> <u>καὶ ὀκτώ</u> , καὶ κατεδίωξεν ὀπίσω αὐτῶν ἕως Δαν.	λέγει γάρ· καὶ περιέτεμεν Ἀβραάμ ἐκ τοῦ οἴκου αὐτοῦ ἄνδρας <u>δεκαοκτὼ</u> καὶ <u>τριακοσίους</u> .	Καὶ ἔλαβεν Ἀβρααμ Ἰσμαὴλ τὸν υἱὸν αὐτοῦ καὶ πάντας τοὺς οἰκογενεῖς αὐτοῦ καὶ πάντας τοὺς ἀργυρωνήτους καὶ πᾶν ἄρσεν τῶν ἀνδρῶν τῶν ἐν τῷ οἴκῳ Ἀβρααμ καὶ περιέτεμεν τὰς ἀκροβυστίας αὐτῶν ἐν τῷ καιρῷ τῆς ἡμέρας ἐκείνης, καθὰ ἐλάλησεν αὐτῷ ὁ θεός.
And when Abram heard that his kinsman Lot had been taken captive, he counted his own homebreds, <u>three</u> <u>hundred eighteen</u> , and chased after them as far as Dan.	For it says: “ And Abraham circumcised <u>ten and eight and three</u> <u>hundred men of his</u> household .”	And Abraam took his son Ismael and all his homebreds and all the ones bought with money and every male of the men that were in Abraam’s house, and he circumcised their foreskins at the opportune time of that day, as God had said to him.

As Clayton Jefford notes, “[n]ew revelations quickly arose for interpreters who combined various scriptural texts on the basis of key words shared by those texts and then extracted hidden interpretations from these new combinations.”³⁷ In this instance, the combination of these two scriptural contexts seems to be warranted by a shared reference to Abraham’s own “homebreds” (οἰκογενής).³⁸ In Gen. 17:23 Abraham circumcises “all his homebreds” (πάντας τοὺς οἰκογενεῖς αὐτοῦ) along with Ishmael and the slaves owned by his household. However, Gen. 17:23 provides no indication of the size of this group. It is from Gen. 14:14 that “his own homebreds” (τοὺς ἰδίους οἰκογενεῖς) are specifically numbered to 318. Of particular importance is that *Barnabas* latches onto the significance of the number, represented in Greek by TIH (T = 300; IH = 18). These letters, *Barnabas* tells us, have symbolic significance: “As for the ‘ten and eight’, the I is ten and the H is eight; thus you have ‘Jesus’. And because the cross, which is shaped like the T, was destined to convey grace, it mentions also the ‘three hundred’. So he reveals Jesus in the two letters, and the cross in the other” (*Barn.* 9.8). The name “Jesus” is understood from the abbreviated form IH, a common *nomen sacrum* in early Christian manuscripts.³⁹ Similarly, *Barnabas* understands the Greek letter

37. C.N. Jefford, *Reading the Apostolic Fathers: A Student’s Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 17.

38. On the phenomenon of conflating scriptural narratives, see esp. S. Docherty, “Composite Citations and Conflation of Scriptural Narratives in Hebrews”, in *Composite Citations in Antiquity*, Vol. 2, *New Testament Uses*, eds. S.A. Adams et al. (LNTS, 593; London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018), 190–208, here 200–2.

39. Hvalvik, *The Struggle for Scripture and Covenant*, 126; L.W. Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts: Manuscripts and Christian Origins* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 95–134, here 97. Cf. R. Hvalvik, “Barnabas 9,7–9 and the Use of Gematria”, *NTS* 33 (1987): 276–82.

tau (T) as a reference to Jesus's cross. On two occasions, Justin Martyr mentions that early Christians saw references to Jesus by appealing to the shape of the letter *tau* (1 *Apol.* 55; 66). *Barnabas's* overall interpretation of 318 is also shared by Clement of Alexandria (*Strom.* 6.278–80).

Whereas most readers understand the Genesis narrative as the foundational text that gives the command of literal circumcision to the Jews, *Barnabas* interprets the Abraham text typologically, turning it into a witness to Jesus's death. Moreover, *Barnabas* makes a distinction between Abraham's physical circumcision (including the 318 of his household) and the circumcision practiced by Jews, which he claims was taught to them by "an evil angel" (*Barn.* 9.4). By associating physical circumcision with demonic activity rather than divine promise, *Barnabas* spurns the typical Jewish practice of circumcision in his own day because it puts false hope in the flesh.⁴⁰ Thus, *Barnabas* speaks positively about circumcision but *only* about Abraham's because it bears witness to Christ.

Barnabas 13.7

Whereas the earlier evocations of Abraham in *Barnabas* give the story a decidedly Christian flavor, *Barn.* 13.7 moves a step beyond this by claiming the patriarch for Gentile Christians exclusively. This can be seen most clearly by reading 13.7 in its immediate and wider literary context.

Observe how by these means he has ordained that this people should be first, and heir of the covenant. Now if in addition to this the same point is also made through Abraham, we add the final touch to our knowledge. What, then, does he say to Abraham, when he alone believed and was established in righteousness? "Behold, I have established you, Abraham, as the father of the nations who believe in God without being circumcised."

Barn. 13.6–7

The language of "covenant" (διαθήκη) is employed frequently in *Barnabas* in reference to Gentile Christians inheriting God's covenant (e.g., 4.3; 6.19; 13.1, 6; 14.4, 5). As the argument of *Barnabas* 13 begins, the author asks "let us see whether this people or the former people is the heir, and whether the covenant is for us or for them." This culminates in *Barnabas's* clear statement that Abraham has been "established . . . as the father of the nations who believe in God without being circumcised" (τέθεικά . . . πατέρα ἐθνῶν τῶν πιστευόντων δι' ἀκροβυστίας τῷ θεῷ).

40. Due to *Barnabas's* waffling between perspectives, many scholars argue that *Barn.* 9.7–9 is an interpolation. But, following, F. Scorza-Barcellona, *Epistola di Barnaba* (CP, 1; Turin: Società Editrice Internazionale, 1975), 147–8, it is more likely that *Barnabas* distinguishes Abraham's physical circumcision (an inconvenient truth) with circumcision practiced more widely by Jews.

The citation that *Barnabas* adduces here is provocative because of its departure from the wording and meaning of his putative sources. The covenant from Genesis is clearly in view, but it likely includes a strand of interpretation connected with the Pauline tradition.⁴¹

Gen. 15:6; 17:4-5	Barn. 13.7	Rom. 4:11, 17
<p>καὶ ἐπίστευσεν Ἀβραμ τῷ θεῷ, καὶ ἐλογίσθη αὐτῷ εἰς δικαιοσύνην.</p> <p>Καὶ ἐγὼ ἰδοὺ ἡ διαθήκη μου μετὰ σοῦ, καὶ ἔση πατήρ πλήθους ἐθνῶν.⁵ καὶ οὐ κληθήσεται ἔτι τὸ ὄνομά σου Ἀβραμ, ἀλλ' ἔσται τὸ ὄνομά σου Ἀβρααμ, ὅτι <u>πατέρα πολλῶν ἐθνῶν τέθεικά σε.</u></p>	<p>τί οὖν λέγει τῷ Ἀβραάμ, ὅτε μόνος πιστεύσας ἐτέθη εἰς δικαιοσύνην; Ἰδοὺ, τέθεικά σε, Ἀβραάμ, πατέρα ἐθνῶν τῶν πιστευόντων δι' ἀκροβυστίας τῷ θεῷ.</p>	<p>καὶ σημεῖον ἔλαβεν περιτομῆς σφραγίδα τῆς δικαιοσύνης τῆς πίστεως τῆς ἐν τῇ ἀκροβυστίᾳ, εἰς τὸ εἶναι αὐτὸν πατέρα πάντων τῶν πιστευόντων δι' ἀκροβυστίας, εἰς τὸ λογισθῆναι [καὶ] αὐτοῖς [τὴν] δικαιοσύνην,</p> <p>καθὼς γέγραπται ὅτι πατέρα πολλῶν ἐθνῶν τέθεικά σε, κατέναντι οὗ ἐπίστευσεν θεοῦ τοῦ ζῶσαντος τοὺς νεκροὺς καὶ καλοῦντος τὰ μὴ ὄντα ὡς ὄντα.</p>
<p>And Abram believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.</p> <p>“And as for me, see, my covenant is with you, and you shall be an ancestor of a multitude of nations.⁵ And no longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraam, for <u>I have made you an ancestor of many nations.</u>”</p>	<p>What, then, does he say to Abraham, when he alone believed and was established in righteousness? “Behold, I have established you, Abraham, as the father of the nations who believe in God without being circumcised.”</p>	<p>He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the ancestor of all who believe without being circumcised and who thus have righteousness reckoned to them,</p> <p>as it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations”—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.</p>

Although ostensibly borrowing language from Paul, *Barnabas* departs from Paul's argument by rejecting its ultimate trajectory. Whereas Paul argues in Romans 4 that Abraham is the ancestor of *both* Jews and Gentiles (cf. Rom. 4:12), *Barnabas* denies this fact in his appeal to Abraham. Abraham is presented as the father of the nations *and not the Jews*.

This claim coheres with *Barnabas*'s wider agenda. Specifically, in *Barn.* 4.14, the author clearly states the Jews have been “abandoned” (ἐγκαταλείπω) by God; and in 5.7, the author notes that God is preparing “the new people” (τὸν λαὸν τὸν

41. Paget, *Epistle of Barnabas*, 164–5.

καὶνὸν). Gentiles, then, are depicted as the true heirs of God's covenant and the promises to Abraham.⁴²

Conclusion

The adoption of Abraham as a central figure in the developing Christian narrative is a curious feature that has its origins, it seems, in the apostle Paul. Rather than abandon the Patriarch altogether, ceding him to his opponents, Paul develops an argument that even the Gentiles must become children of Abraham, just not through the natural or "fleshy" means. By developing this argument, Paul lays the groundwork for later Christians to pick up the Abraham story for themselves in diverse ways. As noted above, this use of Abraham and his story ranged from picking out small examples from Abraham's life to be emulated, to the wholesale co-opting of the Abrahamic narrative for Gentiles.

Some of the texts surveyed above are letters: either real or pseudepigraphic. This, no doubt, influences how Abraham is evoked within these texts. For, as is common in ancient letters, ancient figures/characters can be produced as examples for current readers. Additionally, *Barnabas* is likely a polemical essay placed within an epistolary framework.⁴³ As such, it contains complex (if not convoluted) arguments that appeal to Scripture, including the Abraham narrative. Comparison with the book of Hebrews is instructive, where one finds a sermon or word of exhortation couched within an epistolary framework. Both Hebrews and *Barnabas* make extensive appeals to Scripture in support of their different arguments.

In *1 Clement* we saw that Abraham's faith, and especially his hospitality, were employed to motivate Christian faithfulness (*1 Clem.* 10.2). Abraham is, likewise, an example of humility in *1 Clem.* 17.2 and provides the model of one who fixed his eyes on God from which later Christians can learn (*1 Clem.* 7.4; 9.2; 19.2; 36.2). Moreover, reflecting an emerging Jewish and Christian interpretation of the Abraham story, *1 Clem.* 32.2 associates the Abrahamic promise with "star-like" qualities of the recipients of the promise. For *1 Clement*, this is part of the magnificence of God's gifts to his people that shape who they are and how they should live.

The one brief reference to Abraham in Ignatius' *Letter to the Philadelphians* represents a different trajectory than *1 Clement*. There is an overt conflict *adversus Judaeos* in Ignatius's letter, and this frames the way he engages with the Abraham story. For Ignatius, Abraham is basically a Christian who "enters through the door" of Christ (Ignatius, *Phld.* 9.1–2). While Ignatius has not gone as far as *Barnabas* in denying Abrahamic paternity to the Jews, his Christianizing of Abraham is broadly amenable to that perspective.

42. Siker, *Disinheriting the Jews*, 151.

43. Although, judging by the scholarly literature on *Barnabas*, the question of genre is much debated.

The notion that Abraham was the father of many nations is well-attested in Jewish literature (e.g., Sir. 44:19; *Jub.* 15:6-8),⁴⁴ but *Barnabas*'s use of this idea makes a noticeable departure. Whereas some were willing to universalize Abraham's significance for the nations, *Barnabas* co-opts Abraham, seizing him from Jewish tradition and claiming him for the Gentiles and, emphatically, not for the Jews. This idea comes through most clearly in *Barn.* 13.6-7, but is seen also in 6.8 when Gentiles are the ones who inherit the land.

In order to arrive at these conclusions, *Barnabas* does not reject Israel's Scripture overtly. However, he does perform (or inherit) revisionary readings by blending multiple texts together to form new conclusions (e.g., *Barn.* 9.8), by condensing a text to omit inconvenient parts (e.g., 6.8), and by reading typologically to find Abraham as a witness to Christ (e.g., 8.1-4).

Before concluding, I note also that other key figures from the Abraham narrative do not make an appearance in the Apostolic Fathers. Neither Sarah nor Hagar are mentioned at all, even when texts that have been associated with one (or both) of them are quoted and discussed at some length (e.g., *2 Clem.* 2.1 quotes Isa. 54:1; cf. Gal. 4:27). It is difficult to make inferences about what is not there, but perhaps we can say, at minimum, that the desire to connect Gentiles to Abraham might have led some authors to avoid mentioning Sarah and Hagar, especially because these characters both provided connections to Abraham that have been exploited in different trajectories: Sarah (children of the promise, i.e., Jews) and Hagar (children of the flesh, i.e., Gentiles). However, given the general silence of the sources, this can only be a tentative suggestion.

Throughout the Apostolic Fathers we see examples of Christian authors grappling with Israel's Scriptures and the key figures contained within them. Although Abraham is but one of many examples of this, he is a significant example because to him belongs the significant scriptural promises of inheritance and land.

44. Perhaps most universal is the idea in Mt. 3:9 that God can create children of Abraham from stones!