

Boundary Construction in Barnabas:
Rereading an *Adversus Judaeos* Text

1. Introduction

Relatively little is known about the historical situation from which the Epistle of Barnabas emerges.¹ But what is patently clear, even on a cursory reading, is the prominent position that Barnabas² ascribes to questions of social identity.³ In fact, one could characterize the letter as addressing two fundamental issues: 1) who are *we*? and 2) who are *they*? The recipients of this letter, likely former gentiles, are united by their allegiance to Jesus and the renewing influence of the Spirit. Barnabas describes them as a second creation (6.13), a new people (5.7; 7.5), the true temple of God (4.11; 6.15; 16.8), and as having a new law (2.6). These early Christ-followers are starkly contrasted with a group variously characterized as Israel (4.14; 5.2, 8; 6.7; 8.1, 3; 9.2; 12.2, 5; 16.5), sinners (4.2; 12.10), the first people (13.1), the older brother (13.2, 5), and the wretched people being led astray (16.1). The text implies that this latter group is a threat to the nascent community of Christ-followers (4.6), raising the specter of assimilation. To undermine this threat and delegitimize his opponents, Barnabas maintains that he and his recipients are the holy people of God (14.6), the right readers of

¹ See the discussion in Ferdinand R. Prostmeier, *Der Barnabasbrief*, Kommentar zu den Apostolischen Vätern 8 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999), 111–34. Prostmeier rightly acknowledges, “Der Barn nennt weder seinen Entstehungs- noch eine Bestimmungsort” (119). With the majority of scholars today, Prostmeier argues that the epistle is pseudepigraphal, though the author “versteht sich als Tradent und authentischer Sachwalter der Paradosis” (130). For other discussions of the authorship and origins of Barnabas, see Peter Richardson and Martin B. Shukster, “Barnabas, Nerva, and the Yavnean Rabbis,” *JTS* 34 (1983): 31–55; James Carleton Paget, *The Epistle of Barnabas: Outlook and Background*, WUNT 2/64 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1994), 3–42; Reidar Hvalvik, *The Struggle for Scripture and Covenant: The Purpose of the Epistle of Barnabas and Jewish-Christian Competition in the Second Century*, WUNT 2/82 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996), 6–55.

² In this paper, I will refer to the author as Barnabas for the sake of convenience.

³ Nina Nikki remarks, “Polemical texts are highly ideological in nature and offer ample material for detecting how boundaries between in- and outgroups are drawn and reinforced, and how ingroup status is heightened at the expense of the outgroup.” See Nina Nikki, *Opponents and Identity in Philippians*, NovTSup 173 (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 42.

Israel's scriptures (1.7; 2.4; 3.6; 7.1), and the true heirs of the promises (1.4; 5.7; 6:17, 19; 15.7; 16.9).⁴

These observations, of course, are not new. But given the epistle's sustained focus on questions of identity, it is quite surprising that, aside from Julien Smith's insightful 2014 article, I have not found any secondary literature which has utilized categories of social identity in an examination of Barnabas.⁵ What I hope to do in this paper is make a start at this task. Barnabas engages in a project of boundary construction, erecting distinctions between Jews and Christians through lexical, rhetorical, and narratival means. Lexical borders are established via the employment of insider and outsider designations in the community's sociolect. Rhetorical boundaries are created through the use of binary characterizations (us/them contrasts) to structure and advance the argument of the text. Narratival validation for the Christian community is formed by the appropriation and recasting of elements of the story of Israel. While these three threads are tightly woven throughout the letter, in this paper I will focus my attention on the first—identifying and assessing the function of insider and outsider designations. Before launching into this examination, I will briefly introduce and summarize the social identity categories which will be used in my evaluation of Barnabas's designations.

⁴ William Horbury thus remarks that for Barnabas, "The ways have parted already..., however, the ways still run close together." See William Horbury, "Jewish-Christian Relations in Barnabas and Justin Martyr," in *Jews and Christians: The Parting of the Ways, A. D. 70 to 135*, ed. James D. G. Dunn, WUNT 2/66 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1992), 315–45, here 315. This assertion has been problematized by Geoffrey D. Dunn, "Tertullian and Rebekah: A Re-Reading of an 'Anti-Jewish' Argument in Early Christian Literature," *VC* 52 (1998): 119–45, esp. 126–33.

⁵ Julien C. H. Smith, "The 'Epistle of Barnabas' and the Two Ways of Teaching Authority," *VC* 68 (2014): 465–97. Smith confines his analysis to elements of the Two Ways found throughout the letter. Many studies, however, have examined more generally the relation between early Christianity and early Judaism in Barnabas. See, for example, S. Lowy, "The Confutation of Judaism in the Epistle of Barnabas," *JJS* 10 (1960): 1–33; Miriam S. Taylor, *Anti-Judaism and Early Christian Identity: A Critique of the Scholarly Consensus*, SPB 46 (Leiden: Brill, 1995); Ferdinand R. Prostmeier, "Antijudaismus im Rahmen ehristlicher Hermeneutik: Zum Streit über christliche Identität in der Alten Kirche Notizen zum Barnabasbrief," *ZAC* 6 (2002): 38–58. The classic discussion is found in Marcel Simon's *Verus Israel: A Study of the Relations between Christians and Jews in the Roman Empire (135–425)*, trans. H. McKeating (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

2. Social Identity Theory: A Summary⁶

The various subfields and perspectives classed under the banner of social identity theory can be traced back to the pioneering work of Henri Tajfel, who produced what has become the standard definition for the field: “Social identity will be understood as that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his [*sic*] knowledge of his [*sic*] membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership.”⁷ Put another way, how people perceive themselves is influenced to some extent by the groups to which they belong.⁸ The degree to which membership in a particular group affects one’s self-conception, principles, goals, and behavior will vary based on how highly membership in that group is valued by the individual at that moment.

Moreover, Tajfel argues that “no social group is an island.”⁹ A key element of social identity construction lies in the act of comparison. In other words, one’s self-conception is not only influenced by belonging to certain groups (an “ingroup”), but also by *not* belonging to other groups (the “outgroup”). According to Tajfel, humans have an innate preference for the ingroup, and thus they will seek to differentiate themselves from outgroups.¹⁰ This is especially important when members of the ingroup perceive their group as inferior in some way. In such situations, three kinds of intergroup action are possible. First, members might leave the ingroup due to the perceived advantages of joining the outgroup (i.e., assimilation).

⁶ For a more fulsome overview of social identity theory (or, in her terminology, the “social identity approach”) and its application to biblical studies, see Nina Nikki, *Opponents and Identity in Philippians*, 45–64.

⁷ Henri Tajfel, “Social Categorization, Social Identity and Social Comparison,” in *Differentiation between Social Groups: Studies in the Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, ed. Henri Tajfel, EMSP 14 (London: Academic, 1978), 63.

⁸ Though they preceded the advent of social identity theory, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann similarly maintain, “Identity is a phenomenon that emerges from the dialectic between individual and society.” They explain: “Identity is, of course, a key element of subjective reality and, like all subjective reality, stands in a dialectical relationship with society. Identity is formed by social processes. Once crystallized, it is maintained, modified, or even reshaped by social relations.” See Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Penguin, 1966), 194–200, here 194–95.

⁹ Tajfel, “Social Categorization,” 66.

¹⁰ Tajfel, “Social Categorization,” 67.

In situations where change is not possible, a second option is to reinterpret the characteristics of the ingroup in order to present group membership as more attractive and advantageous. The third possibility is to engage in “social competition” by seeking to undermine and overturn the perceived advantages of the outgroup. In other words, those features which appear to be the outgroup’s strengths are in fact shown to be liabilities.¹¹ Within socially competitive environments in which the ingroup is threatened in some way, the norms of the group—namely, those “regularities in attitudes and behavior that characterize a social group and differentiate it from other social groups”—rise to become prominent and salient features of group identity.¹²

One way in which identity construction and differentiation take place is through the language and vocabulary employed by the group (its “sociolect”). Paul Trebilco summarizes well:

While a community will use language in its own distinctive way to construct and maintain its identity, to construct meaning, and to symbolise loyalty and solidarity, that language, once used, impacts on [*sic*] how identity is understood. Identity is constructed in language, and language in turn shapes identity.¹³

As Trebilco’s own work has explored, social groups differentiate themselves through the assignment of labels or designations for the ingroup and the outgroup.¹⁴ Trebilco’s study looks at three kinds of designations of the early Christian communities in the NT: 1) nominal labels, 2) referring expressions, and 3) terms of address.¹⁵ As will become apparent, Barnabas

¹¹ Philip F. Esler, “An Outline of Social Identity Theory,” in *T&T Clark Handbook to Social Identity in the New Testament*, ed. J. Brian Tucker and Coleman A. Baker (London: T&T Clark, 2014), 21–22. In another essay in the same volume, Esler argues that the Beatitudes exemplify this third category of social competition. Perceived social advantages are overturned, while perceived social disadvantages are recast as positive characteristics. See Philip F. Esler, “Group Norms and Prototypes in Matthew 5.3–12: A Social Identity Interpretation of the Matthaean Beatitudes,” in *T&T Clark Handbook to Social Identity in the New Testament*, ed. J. Brian Tucker and Coleman A. Baker (London: T&T Clark, 2014), 147–71.

¹² Michael A. Hogg and Scott A. Reid, “Social Identity, Self-Categorization, and the Communication of Group Norms,” *Communication Theory* 16 (2006): 7–30, here 7.

¹³ Paul R. Trebilco, *Self-Designations and Group Identity in the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 8.

¹⁴ In addition to Trebilco, *Self-Designations*, see Paul R. Trebilco, *Outsider Designations and Boundary Construction in the New Testament: Early Christian Communities and the Formation of Group Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

¹⁵ For more on these terms, see Trebilco, *Self-Designations*, 2.

also creates lexical borders between ingroup and outgroup members through the employment of insider and outsider designations. My goal here is not to provide an exhaustive analysis, which would be tedious, but simply to identify and sketch the function of his most prominent designations.

3. Lexical Borders

Kinship Language and Group Cohesion

The first set of self-designations used by Barnabas create kinship ties through the use of familial terminology. In this, Barnabas mirrors the patterns found in the NT epistles. Commenting on kinship language in the NT, Trebilco notes: “This fictive familial language within associations seems to express a sense of solidarity and of close ties within a group.”¹⁶ A sense of solidarity is further fostered by Barnabas’s own self-characterization. He repudiates the title “Teacher” (διδάσκαλος) (1.8; 4.9), instead choosing to portray himself as “one of you” (εἷς ἐξ ὑμῶν) in 1.8, a statement reaffirmed verbatim in 4.6.¹⁷ In 4.9 Barnabas demeans himself even further, casting himself as a mere scribe who wants to do a thorough job and calling himself “your most humble servant” (περίψημα ὑμῶν) (cf. 6.5).¹⁸ But despite his self-effacement, Barnabas clearly thinks of himself as their spiritual father, addressing the recipients in 1:1 as “sons and daughters” (υἱοὶ καὶ θυγατέρες) and indicating that he played a role in their establishment as a congregation (1.3–4). Moreover, he repeatedly commands them to “learn” (μάθετε) (cf. 5.6; 6.9; 9.7, 8; 14.4; 16.2, 7, 8) and portrays himself as passing on instruction to them (cf. 1.5, 8; 9.9; 17.1–2; 21.9). While numerous solutions have been

¹⁶ Trebilco, *Self-Designations*, 18.

¹⁷ This hesitancy is perhaps due to the command of Jesus in Matt 23:8 or possibly the admonition of Jas 3:1.

¹⁸ See BDAG, s.v. “περίψημα.” Cf. the use of περίψημα in 1 Cor 4:13; Ign. *Eph.* 8.1; 18.1.

suggested to make sense of this tension, I would suggest that Barnabas chooses to minimize the perceived social distance between himself and his audience because of his desire to maximize group cohesion among the members of the ingroup. In other words, he downplays differences in order to emphasize their commonalities.¹⁹ Together, he and they share a common “faith” and are advancing toward—or, in Barnabas’s case, possess—“perfect knowledge” (1.5). Together, they stand firm against the coming stumbling blocks in this age of lawlessness “as is fitting for children of God” (ὡς πρέπει υἱοῦ θεοῦ) (4.9). These family traits set Christ-followers apart as a distinctive and cohesive group.

Establishing group cohesion is clearly a priority early in the letter. The designation “brothers and sisters” (ἀδελφοί), extremely common in the NT letters, occurs seven times in the first six chapters (2.10; 3.6; 4.14; 5.5; 6.10, 15, 16) and once more in the Two Ways material at 19.4.²⁰ These instances often appear in tandem with imperatives, thus serving to foster emotional warmth and a sense of intimacy at strategic points in his exhortation. For example, in 2.10 Barnabas forcefully warns of the wiles of the evil one, cautioning them, “Therefore, brothers and sisters, we ought to pay careful attention concerning our salvation,” lest they fall away. A similar fear in 4.13–14 again prompts Barnabas to urge the ἀδελφοί to consider how Israel lost its calling, so that they might not experience an analogous fate. And while not occurring with an imperative, the use of ἀδελφοί in 3.6 accompanies a concern that the recipients not be dashed and overcome like those who become adherents to “their law” (ἐκείνων νόμῳ). Pulling on this thread a bit further, it should be noted that ἀδελφοί functions as a term of address only in Barn. 1–6, after which it disappears. I would suggest this has to do with the foundational nature of Barn. 1–6 in forming ingroup identity. As the epistle progresses past this point, the rhetoric becomes increasingly polemical, shifting from

¹⁹ For more conventional evaluations, see Hvalvik, *Struggle*, 46–52; Paget, *Barnabas*, 84–85; Robert A. Kraft, “The Epistle of Barnabas: Its Quotations and Their Sources,” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1961), 12n8.

²⁰ With Trebilco, I understand ἀδελφοί to be inclusive. See Trebilco, *Self-Designations*, 25–26.

expressions of concern for the ingroup to a project of delegitimizing the outgroup through a reinterpretation of Israel’s scriptural history.

Interestingly, the abandonment of ἀδελφοί in direct address from 7.1 onwards corresponds with the adoption of another term of kinship. Barnabas takes up the neuter plural τέκνα, often with a modifier, to address the recipients. Thus in 7.1 he describes them as “children of gladness” (τέκνα εὐφροσύνης), and in 9.7 he describes them as “children of love” (τέκνα ἀγάπης). In 21.9 he concludes his epistle with the more elaborate “children of love and peace” (ἀγάπης τέκνα καὶ εἰρήνης). By contrast, at 9.3 (as part of a citation of Isa 40:3 LXX) and 15.4 (2×) Barnabas employs an unmodified τέκνα. Except for 21.9, all the instances of τέκνα are accompanied by imperatives urging the recipients to “understand” (νοεῖτε) (7.1), “hear” (ἀκούσατε) (9.3), “learn” (μάθετε) (9.7), or “pay attention” (προσέχετε) (15.4) as he dazzles them with his exegetical skill or shares with them a special insight into the scriptural text. Thus, while the terms of address in the latter chapters are frequently more ornate, they also betray an increasingly didactic tone. As Barnabas shifts his focus to scriptural reinterpretation, he falls back into the role of a teacher instructing his children in the way of truth.

Divine Dwellings and a New People

Two other referential expressions deserve mention. On four occasions Barnabas describes the recipients using the metaphor of a “temple” (ναός).²¹ First, within a string of eight hortatory subjunctives in 4.9–14, Barnabas urges the recipients in 4.11, “Let us become spiritual; let us become a perfect temple [ναός τέλειος] for God.” In the context, Barnabas has reminded the recipients that they are “in the last days” (ἐν ταῖς ἐσχάταις ἡμέραις) (4.9b) and that the

²¹ The precise denotation of ναός varies based on context, but given the usage later in the epistle, it most likely refers to the building at the heart of the temple complex. See *NIDNTTE*, s.v. “ναός.”

eschatological judgment is imminent (4.12). The corresponding implication is that they must “be on their guard” (4.9b, 14) and persevere until the end, resisting the wiles of “the black one” and all his works (4.9b–10a). Instead, they are to meditate on the fear of God and strive to keep his commandments (4.11b), a statement which is deeply Deuteronomic in character (cp. the similar linking of φυλάσσω and ἐντολή in Deut 4:2, 40; 5:29; 6:2, 17; 7:9, 11; et al.). Importantly, it should be noted that becoming a “perfect temple” is a communal calling. As 4:10 indicates, one falls prey to “the evil way” by living in separation from others. Instead, “by coming together, live together for the common good” (συνερχόμενοι συνζητεῖτε περὶ τοῦ κοινῆ συμφέροντος). Only as a group can they mature into a complete and holy dwelling place for God. The passage ends with a reminder that Israel failed in this respect (4:14).

The second instance of ναός-language comes in 6.15, where Barnabas asserts that “the dwelling place of our heart is a holy temple [ναὸς ἅγιος] for the Lord.” This passage comes immediately after he proclaims that Christ-followers have been fashioned anew (cf. Wis 15.7) and cites the restoration promise in Ezek 36:26 (cf. 11:19). The Lord can dwell in their hearts because the Spirit has removed their hearts of stone and given them hearts of flesh. However, the citation has been amended by an important qualification. Barnabas claims that those who receive this transformation of heart are only “those whom the Spirit of God foresaw.” This qualification hearkens back to 3.15, where Barnabas refers to the ingroup as those whom God foresaw. They alone are the ones who believed in the “Beloved.”

The final instances where ναός is used as a designation for the ingroup occur in 16.7 and 10. Barnabas opens chapter 16 by announcing that he will speak “concerning the temple” (περὶ τοῦ ναοῦ) and attempts to prove the vanity of setting one’s hope on a physical building (16.1).²² He points to the inadequacy of a physical building to provide a dwelling place for

²² The interpretation of chapter 16 is heavily contested. These verses seem to suggest a renewed hope for a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem, but opinions are divided about the context and dating. See Paget, *Barnabas*, 17–28.

God (16.2), to the inadequacy (and pollutedness?) of human efforts to rebuild the temple (16.3), and to a prophecy about the fall of “the city, the temple, and the people of Israel” (ἡ πόλις καὶ ὁ ναὸς καὶ ὁ λαὸς Ἰσραήλ) (16.4). By contrast, God himself will build a house for his name (16.6). Barnabas explains that God took “the dwelling place of our heart,” which had been a polluted “temple built by human hands” (οἰκοδομητὸς ναὸς διὰ χειρός) (16.7), and cleansed it, making it new. For Barnabas, the community of Christ-followers have become a “spiritual temple” (πνευματικὸς ναός) being built by the Lord (16.10).

I will now mention one other key insider designation employed by Barnabas: “people” (λαός). This term occurs twenty-six times throughout the epistle and is given strategic importance by being used indiscriminately to refer to both the ingroup and the outgroup.²³ For example, in 3.6 Barnabas calls present-day Christ-followers “the people [ὁ λαός] whom he prepared in his Beloved.” But in 4.8, in the context of a citation from Exod 34, Barnabas uses it to refer to Israel as covenant-breakers: God says to Moses, “Your people [ὁ λαός σου] have committed lawlessness.” And in 5.7, Barnabas maintains that Jesus’s suffering and resurrection were instrumental in “preparing the new people [τὸν λαὸν τὸν καινόν] for himself.”²⁴ By employing the label λαός to describe both social groups, Barnabas underscores the contested identity of the ingroup and sharpens the epistle’s polemical edge. Which group has a better claim to scriptural and theological legitimacy? Which group can rightly be called the people of God?²⁵

The issue comes to a head in chapters 13–14. Barnabas comes out of the gate swinging, issuing a bold challenge in 13.1: “Now let us see whether this people [οὗτος ὁ

²³ Found in 3.6; 4.8; 5.7; 7.5 (2×); 8.1; 9.3, 5, 6; 10.2; 11.2; 12.4, 6, 8; 13.1, 2, 3, 5, 6; 14.1, 2 (2×), 3, 4, 6; 16.5.

²⁴ The specific term “new people” is also found at 7.5. Other modifiers for λαός include “people of inheritance” (14.4), “holy people” (14.6), and “people of Israel” (16.5).

²⁵ “As a result of its equivalence with Heb. אֱמִתּוּ, the term λαός became expressive of the special relationship of Israel to Yahweh To be sure, the term λαός by itself does not take on the sense ‘God’s special people,’ but its freq. association with that concept undoubtedly gave the word a distinctive connotation.” See “λαός,” *NIDNTTE* 3:89.

λαός] inherits or the first people [ὁ πρῶτος], and whether the covenant is for us or them.” He then cites the words of God to Rebekah from Gen 25 in 13.2: “Two nations [δύο ἔθνη] are in your belly and two peoples [δύο λαοί] in your womb, and [one] people will surpass the [other] people, and the older will serve the younger.”²⁶ Barnabas is not simply citing scripture but appealing to a persistent, fundamental motif within the biblical narratives in which a “rightful” hierarchy is divinely overturned, of which Jacob and Esau is just one example. The humble are exalted, the weak are made strong, and the last will be first. Barnabas then goes on to cite one more example of this motif—the elevation of Ephraim over Manasseh to receive Jacob’s blessing. This is a fascinating choice, if for no other reason than that Barnabas claims Jacob “saw in the Spirit a type [τύπον] of the people who would follow” (13.5). But why should he choose this example? Why not pick David, youngest of the sons of Jesse? What about the blessing of *Ephraim* makes it particularly apropos for demonstrating that “this people” (τὸν λαὸν τοῦτον) has been appointed by God to be first and heir of the covenant?²⁷

A final point which should be noted is Barnabas’s undermining of the usual contrast in the LXX between λαός, connoting God’s covenant people, and “the nations” (τὰ ἔθνη), representing the outsiders distant from God (e.g., Exod 19:5; 23:22; 33:16; Deut 7:6; 26:19; 1 Macc 4:58). In the epistle, ἔθνος occurs seven times. In six of those instances, ἔθνος has become an insider term, or at least does not convey a negative connotation (9.5; 12.11; 13.2, 7; 14.7, 8). Barnabas avers that Jesus came to rescue τὰ ἔθνη (14.7); they are the ones who willingly obey (12.11). The exception is 16.2, where Barnabas asserts that Israel has

²⁶ Though both Bart Ehrman and Michael A. Holmes take ὁ μείζων δουλεύσει τῷ ἐλάσσονι as “the greater will serve the lesser,” it is better to understand this expression as referring to chronological priority, especially in light of the temporal descriptor ὁ πρῶτος in 13.1 (cf. the same expression in Rom 9:12). For Ehrman’s and Holmes’s translations, see Bart D. Ehrman, ed. and trans., *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 2, LCL 25 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 61; Michael A. Holmes, ed. and trans., *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 423.

²⁷ Space constraints prohibit exploring this question further.

worshiped God wrongly. They “almost” [σχεδόν] became like τὰ ἔθνη by consecrating God by the temple, rather than the other way around. In short, Barnabas seeks to redraw the boundaries and redefine what it means to be an insider.

Outsider Designations

Likewise, Barnabas clearly articulates what it means to be an outsider, even as he avoids forthrightly identifying the outgroup polemicized against. Though Barnabas’s outsiders fit the profile of what other early Christian authors would describe as οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι or τοὺς ἐκ περιτομῆς, he refuses to ascribe these labels to them, instead preferring to construct his discourse within a polarized yet anonymized us/them frame.²⁸ In fact, the most common way Barnabas designates outsiders is through the use of third-person plural pronouns—“they” or “them”—36× in all.²⁹ The rhetorical distance between “us” and “them” is heightened by the frequent use of the demonstrative pronoun ἐκεῖνος (2.9; 3.6; 4.7; 8.7; 10.12; 13.1, 3). The prominence of the impersonal collective “they” in the discourse contributes to stereotyping, further driving a wedge between the ingroup and outgroup.

The glaring omission of Ἰουδαῖοι from the letter has spurred various explanations. Dunn contends this absence is due to the author not possessing the vocabulary of “Jew” and “Christian,” a suggestion which I find incredible.³⁰ Smith’s assessment is more reasonable:

The author’s studious avoidance of the terms ‘Jew’ or ‘Judaism,’ preferring the historically oriented ‘Israel’ or the more imprecise ‘them,’ strongly suggests that Jewish and gentile Christians are still relating to each other within the authorial

²⁸ For more on standard practices in ancient polemics with particular reference to anti-Jewish rhetoric, see Luke T. Johnson, “The New Testament’s Anti-Jewish Slander and the Conventions of Ancient Polemic,” *JBL* 108 (1989): 419–41.

²⁹ Plural forms of αὐτός occur in 2.7, 8; 3.1; 4.2, 8, 14; 5.12 (2×); 6.7, 8; 9.4, 5, 6; 10.2; 12.2 (2×), 5 (3×), 7 (3×); 14.1 (2×), 3; 15.2, 8; 16.1 (2×), 2, 3, 4, 5; 20.1, 2.

³⁰ Dunn, “Tertullian and Rebekah,” 127. Ἰουδαῖοι not only occurs in Matthew, John, Acts, Romans, and Galatians, but is also found extensively in late Second Temple Jewish literature, including the works of Philo and Josephus. Acts 11:26 (cf. 26:28) would seem to indicate that Χριστιανός was already being used as a label by outsiders for Christians by the mid-first century. Even if that usage is mistaken or a retrojection onto earlier events, the lexeme also occurs in 1 Pet 4:16, surely suggesting it was in vogue at least by the end of the first century CE.

audience, and that he cannot afford to alienate those who still have high regard for the markers of Jewish identity.³¹

While the mutual proximity of members of the ingroup and the outgroup probably contributes to the absence of certain terminology, I am not sure even this can provide a full explanation. Jason Staples has recently problematized scholarly assumptions that 1) *Ιουδαῖοι* served as a functionally equivalent expression for *Ἰσραήλ* (instead, he argues *Ιουδαῖοι* forms a distinct subset of the larger, twelve-tribe entity known as “Israel”), 2) that *Ιουδαῖοι* was usually a designation used by outsiders for Jews, and 3) that *Ιουδαῖοι* carried negative connotations in antiquity.³² If any of these assumptions are true—and certainly if all three are!—we would expect a polemical work like Barnabas to use the designation *Ιουδαῖοι* to some degree, just as similar, near-contemporaneous works do.³³

But instead of using *Ιουδαῖοι*, Barnabas chooses to associate the outgroup with “Israel” (*Ἰσραήλ*) twelve times in the course of the letter (4.14; 5.2, 8; 6.7; 8.1, 3; 9.2; 11.1; 12.2 [2×], 5; 16.5).³⁴ Given the historical significance of the label, this is a startling decision. Barnabas repeatedly claims that Israel has been rejected by God (4.14; 16.5) and is given over to destruction. To be clear, this is not from a lack of divine love toward them. As Barnabas indicates in 5.8, by teaching Israel and doing miraculous wonders among them, Jesus “preached and loved them intensely.” But they lost their calling through their persistent disobedience, especially idolatry (cf. 4.8; 20.1). Relatedly, Barnabas describes them as “evil” people (*πονηροί*) (4.2, 12) who made an “evil plan” (*βουλή πονηρά*) (6.7) to kill the messiah. This was in part because they had been deceived by an evil angel (*ἄγγελος πονηρός*) and

³¹ Smith, “Two Ways,” 490.

³² See Jason A. Staples, *The Idea of Israel in Second Temple Judaism: A New Theory of People, Exile, and Israelite Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 25–53.

³³ *Ιουδαῖος* is thus found 5× in the Epistle to Diognetus, 1× in the letters of Ignatius, and 4× in the Martyrdom of Polycarp.

³⁴ The number of instances might not be simply coincidental. E. P. Sanders maintains that “the expectation of the reassembly of Israel was so widespread, and the memory of the twelve tribes remained so acute, that ‘twelve’ would necessarily mean ‘restoration.’” See E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 77–119, here 98. Cf. the reference to the twelve tribes in Barn. 8.3.

consequently were unable to obey God or understand his commands (9.4; cf. 2.10; 4.13; 21.3). The end result, according to Barnabas, is that they have become “the miserable ones who are being led astray” (πλανώμενοι οἱ ταλαίπωροι) (16.1).

This leads to a final set of designations—those having to do with behavior. There are a handful of occasions when Barnabas calls the outsiders “sinners” (ἁμαρτωλοί) (4.2; 8.2 [2×]; 10.10; 11.7; 12.10) and “impious” (ἄσεβεῖς) (10.5, 10; 11.7 [3×]; 15.5). The brevity and undifferentiatedness of these descriptors serve to stereotype the opponents, thus hardening the boundaries between the groups. Furthermore, to be labeled as such means that a person is travelling along the way of “the black one,” the way that leads to darkness and death. However, the Two Ways is not simply a catechetical device for shaping individual ethics. Smith has pointed out that the Two Ways material runs throughout the letter and functions as a tool for identity analysis: “The audience is exhorted not only to behave in a certain way, but to identify themselves with a community that is characterized by this behavior.”³⁵ Conversely, the dire portrait Barnabas paints of the outgroup being led astray down a path which ends in death functions to dissuade those who might be inclined to join them.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, I argued that the Epistle of Barnabas engages in a project of boundary construction by erecting distinctions between Jews and Christians through lexical, rhetorical, and narrational means. Drawing on categories from Social Identity Theory, I examined features of the group’s sociolect—specifically its designations for insiders and outsiders. Through a process of identity construction and boundary redefinition, Barnabas increases the attractiveness of belonging to the ingroup (Christ-followers) and seeks to delegitimize the outgroup (Israel), thereby reducing the threat of assimilation.

³⁵ Smith, “Two Ways,”