



# When the second man takes the lead: reflections on Joseph Barnabas and Paul of Tarsus and their relationship in the New Testament

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## Abstract

**When the second man takes the lead: reflections on Joseph Barnabas and Paul of Tarsus and their relationship in the New Testament**

*Upon scrutiny Joseph Barnabas, mentioned in the New Testament mainly in the Book of Acts but also elsewhere, emerges as one of the great leaders and mentors in early Christianity. This article offers a biographical sketch of Barnabas with a particular focus on his relationship with Paul. While Barnabas appears to have been the mentor of Paul at an early stage and the leader at the beginning of the first missionary journey, he later on made room for Paul to take the lead while he (Barnabas) continued to support Paul faithfully. It seems that much of what Paul later practised in his own mission work and the way he sought for and trained co-workers had its origin in his mentorship by Barnabas. This relationship of Barnabas and Paul provides a case study of how leaders can develop and how relationships may change. The biblical portrait of this relationship addresses several crucial issues in leadership and*

poses several challenges to those concerned with Christian leadership.

## Opsomming

### Wanneer die tweede in bevel die leiding neem: 'n fokus op Josef Barnabas en Paulus van Tarsus en hulle verhouding in die Nuwe Testament

*By nadere ondersoek blyk dit dat Josef Barnabas, van wie daar in die Nuwe Testament en veral in Handelingte gelees word, een van die groot leiers en mentors tydens die vroeë Christendom was. Hierdie artikel bied 'n lewenskets van Barnabas met spesifieke fokus op sy verhouding met Paulus. Dit lyk asof Barnabas Paulus se mentor was tydens die vroeë fase van die Christendom, asook die leier aan die begin van die eerste sendingreis. Hy laat Paulus egter later die leiding neem en bied hom sy volle en getroue ondersteuning. Dit blyk verder dat baie van Paulus se praktyke tydens sy eie sendingwerk, sowel as die manier waarop hy sy medewerkers gewerf en opgelei het, uit Barnabas se mentorskap spruit. Die verhouding tussen Barnabas en Paulus bied 'n gevallestudie van hoe leiers kan ontwikkel en hoe verhoudings kan verander. Die Bybelse uitbeelding van hierdie verhouding sny verskeie kritieke kwessies in verband met leierskap aan en stel verskeie uitdagings aan diegene wat by Christelike leierskap betrokke is.*

## 1. Introduction

When considering the leading figures of early Christianity, one quickly thinks of Peter, Paul, John, the other apostles, the authors of New Testament books or the co-workers of Paul, and only after some time one might also think of Joseph Barnabas. In the modern scholarly study of the New Testament, Barnabas had been neglected for a long time, quite in contrast to other prominent early Christians. Almost 90 years had passed, when after the first comprehensive portrait by Franz Xaver Pölzl (1911) a small volume by Bernd Kollmann (1998)<sup>1</sup> appeared and then, more recently, two substantial monographs by Markus Öhler (2002; 2005).<sup>2</sup>

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1 See the author's review in *European journal of theology*, 11(2002):147-150. I (CWS) have not had access to the English translation *Joseph Barnabas: his life and legacy* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2004).

2 See the author's reviews (2005) in *Novum Testamentum*, 47:305-308 and in 2008 in *Theologische Zeitschrift*, 64:203-205. For further bibliography cf. Gewalt (1998).

At first glance, Barnabas is by no means “the second man” in the background – and certainly not for Paul. On the contrary, Barnabas introduced Paul to the Jerusalem church, later brought him to Antioch, and went on the first missionary journey with Paul. However, a closer look reveals that Barnabas was also ready to take the second place when his “apprentice” Paul displayed amazing abilities and gifts (cf. Branch, 2007:4). Much of the later ministry of Paul can and must be understood against the backdrop of Paul’s own experiences as a co-worker of Barnabas that had a lasting and deep effect on him.<sup>3</sup> Let us follow the account in the Acts of the Apostles from the beginning.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Acts 4: Barnabas, a man of word and deed

Joseph, a diaspora Jew and Levite from the island of Cyprus, named Barnabas by the apostles, makes his first appearance on the stage of the New Testament in Acts 4. How and when he came to Jerusalem and to the Christian faith is unknown. After the second, more general reference to the early Christian sharing of possessions in Acts 4:32-35 (cf. Acts 2:44 ff.), Barnabas is presented as a positive example in Acts 4:36 ff., before the negative example of Ananias and Saphira is described (Acts 5:1-11). After Pentecost (cf. Acts 1:13 ff.), he is the first person mentioned by name who did not belong to the circle of the twelve apostles. When a material need arose in the church, Barnabas sold his field and put all the money he received for it at the apostles’ feet. Three things are noteworthy in this short mention of Barnabas:

- From the apostles Joseph had received the (nick)name Barnabas. This Aramaic word means son of comfort or encouragement, admonition or exhortation. It is difficult to determine the precise meaning of the Greek word *paraklesis* in this context (for the scholarly discussion, cf. Barrett, 1994:257-60). This designation points to a man who was gifted in speaking and knew how to find

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3 For an excellent survey, see Schnabel (2008). At least in the initial phase of their cooperation Barnabas was far from being indebted to Paul for choosing him and making him his partner, as Gregory of Nazianzus had argued. Rather, “Barnabas chose Saul/Paul and championed him” (Branch, 2007:24). For surveys of the co-workers of Paul and assessment of their significance for Paul’s mission, cf. Drews (2006) and Ellis (1993).

4 For discussions of literary characterisation in Luke-Acts, cf. Darr (1992; 1998). For the historical accuracy of Acts see the persuasive, yet nuanced treatment in Schnabel (2004:22-34); on the portrayal of Paul in Acts, cf. Porter (1999).

the right words on different occasions. However, when in this time of need not only comforting or exhorting words were needed, but (also) concrete action, he was equally ready to do what he could to meet this need. There are situations where mere talking is not sufficient and when leaders need to be ready to act.

- Barnabas acted in faith – faith both in God and in his church and its leadership. With the sale of his field he gave up his own means of production, possibly all of it, and trusted that God and his people would also provide for him in times of need.
- Barnabas distributed the money from the sale not according to his own whim and fancy in order to impress people, to gain their support and loyalty, or to create relationships of dependency. Rather, Barnabas handed the proceeds of his sale over to the apostles. By laying the money at the apostles' feet, Barnabas made it clear that the sum was now at their disposal. He trusted in their ability to distribute the money appropriately. It is likely that nobody beyond that circle knew where the funds that helped to meet their needs had come from.

### **3. Acts 9: an outstretched hand to Paul**

When Paul returned to Jerusalem after his calling and first missionary efforts in Damascus (Acts 9:1-25), the Christians in Jerusalem simply could not believe that Paul truly had become a follower of Christ (Acts 9:26). They were afraid of him – quite understandably so in view of Paul's past intensive persecution of the Christians in Jerusalem (cf. Acts 8:3) – and kept their distance from him. Paul the convert could not find the fellowship he needed, and stood alone.

In this difficult situation Barnabas had the faith that a persecutor could become a disciple of Christ. Thus he displayed courage and a willingness to take the risk of reaching out to Paul: "But Barnabas took him ..." (Acts 9:27, NRSV). Here there was an outstretched hand towards a former deadly enemy. And more than that: Barnabas took Paul to the apostles. Apparently Barnabas enjoyed sufficient respect and trust among them to be able to appear on their doorstep, even with a man like Paul at his side. On that occasion Paul did not even have to speak himself; Barnabas used his gift of speaking and gave a report of Paul's encounter with the exalted Christ and the immediate ministry of Paul in Damascus. Perhaps Barnabas was able to do so in such a way that the events made sense in Jerusalem. If Paul had previously been met with reservation, distrust and even rejection, now he was brought into the very

centre of the church. Such believing, trustworthy advocates, who are willing to take risks, who see people at the fringes, reach out to them and take them right into their fellowship are often lacking. Barnabas the leader was a man of faith and of courage, a man of the church and a man of sensitivity.

As a consequence of Barnabas' initiative, Paul moved freely among the Christians in Jerusalem and preached boldly and openly in the name of the Lord (Acts 9:29). Without Barnabas' intervention on his behalf, Paul may have become an insignificant figure, at least in Jerusalem. However, as it was he became firmly rooted in the church and later on in the mission going forth from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). When Paul experienced staunch opposition a short time later, because of his preaching (cf. also Acts 22:17-21), he had to leave the city and the Christians of Jerusalem sent him back to his home town of Tarsus (Acts 9:29 ff.).<sup>5</sup>

#### **4. Acts 11: Barnabas, the mentor – Paul, the apprentice**

After the first gentile Christian church was established in Antioch, the Jerusalem Church sent Barnabas there on a difficult mission. As "a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith" (Acts 11:24), he was qualified for the task in several ways. After his arrival and realisation that the God of Israel was also at work in this gentile Christian church ("when he saw the grace of God"), Barnabas went some 130 miles to Tarsus to search for Paul and bring him to Antioch. He had not forgotten Paul. After the previous introduction to the church in Jerusalem, Barnabas now took Paul under his wing and became his mentor. To what extent he had already done so during Paul's short stay in Jerusalem is unknown. It appears that Barnabas had recognised Paul's potential, remembered him and was ready to invest systematically in his development by bringing him to Antioch, by working with him, and by giving him his support.

Barnabas' action shows his humility and discernment. The text indicates Barnabas' overriding concerns were the needs of the people and the success of the gospel. Yet he must have realised that Saul's skills in debate and his incredible mind might overshadow his own qualities. However, the possibility of sinking into second place didn't seem to matter to Barnabas. (Branch, 2007:17.)

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5 For Paul's autobiographic sketch in Galatians 1 ff. with different emphases, cf. Hengel and Schwemer (1997); Schäfer (2004).

In doing so, Barnabas took some risk. The church in Antioch had started with Jews from Jerusalem who were scattered, because of the persecution of Christians (Acts 11:19). According to Acts 7:54-8:3, Saul had been heavily involved in this persecution: "Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison" (Acts 8:3). In Antioch it paid off that Barnabas had brought Saul to the apostles and the church on his return to Jerusalem (Acts 9:26-30). They had to recognise their former persecutor now becoming a Christian brother and had to forgive him; he had to face the people who suffered under him and ask for their forgiveness. The successful reconciliation in Jerusalem was the foundation for Saul's later ministry together with these people in Antioch.<sup>6</sup>

On Paul's arrival in Antioch, Barnabas did not withdraw and return to Jerusalem, which might have been a natural move. For a whole year, he and Paul taught the newly-founded church. Apart from what Paul knew from the public preaching of the apostles in Jerusalem and from his own activity as a persecutor of the church, it is through the ministry with Barnabas that he became acquainted with the traditions of the Church in Jerusalem, the life and teaching of Jesus and how to interpret the Jewish Scriptures in view of their fulfilment in the Christ, Jesus of Nazareth. All of this must have had a decisive influence on Paul's life and theology. He also learnt from Barnabas (and presumably other hellenistic Jewish Christians in Antioch whose role should not be underestimated) how to develop and use his gifts. Unfortunately, we have no record of the details of their ministry together in Antioch. There is, however, the brief note in the immediate context that it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called Christians (Acts 11:26). Presumably it was a name given to the disciples by outsiders who recognised that these people were the "partisans" or followers of the Christ (thus the literal meaning of the term *Christianoi*). This visible and recognisably Christ-shaped life of the believers in Antioch was a consequence of the intensive teaching ministry of Barnabas and Paul. Their relationship and co-

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6 I owe this insight to Branch (2007:17 ff.) who notes: "Barnabas clearly gave both Saul and the new Antioch converts room to grow." (Branch, 2007:18.) However, Branch misses that the reconciliation must have taken place already in Jerusalem. It is also unprecise when she speaks of "new believers" in the following sentence: "First, Saul needed to ask forgiveness and share his conversion experience; second, the new believers needed to practice forgiveness by forgiving their former oppressor." (Branch, 2007:18.) The Hellenists from Jerusalem had to forgive Saul, not the new converts in Antioch.

operation in Antioch gave the new movement the name that would go down in history.

Later the Church of Antioch sent Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem for a famine relief visit (Acts 11:27-30). The Christians in Antioch must have realised that these two men were a good team and could be trusted with the delivery of the (probably substantial) funds that had been collected in Antioch. The willing participation of all the Antiochene Christians in the collection (“... that according to their ability, each would send relief to the believers living in Judea”) was also a fruit of the intensive teaching ministry of Barnabas and Paul.

It is likely that this visit is the Jerusalem journey mentioned in Galatians 2:1-10. On this occasion the ministry of Paul and Barnabas (but also that of Paul in Arabia, Syria and Cilicia before his involvement at Antioch) was acknowledged by the leading figures of the Church in Jerusalem (cf. Gal. 2:9). Paul did not have to master this difficult situation without Barnabas. If this way of relating the accounts of Acts and Galatians to each other is correct, it would seem that Paul may already have had a leading position before the first missionary journey (note the use of the first person singular in Gal. 2:1-9). However, he went to Jerusalem together with Barnabas.

## **5. Acts 13-14: the change of leadership from Barnabas to Paul**

Some time after their return to Antioch, the Holy Spirit chose Barnabas and Paul from among the prophets and teachers of the Antiochene Church for a special task (Acts 13:1-3). With the selection of these men, a team was chosen for this challenging move, a team which

- had a common background in the Jewish diaspora;
- had known each other for some time;
- trusted each other and were trusted by others;
- were well experienced in co-operating with each other;
- had some experience in travelling together.

Commissioned by the Holy Spirit, they went to Cyprus, the island from which Barnabas came (Acts 4:36), at the beginning of their

missionary journey. Barnabas probably knew his way around there and might have had useful contacts.<sup>7</sup>

After describing the departure for the journey, Luke's account continues in the third person plural:

The *two of them*, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit ... (*they*) *went* down ... *they* arrived ... *was* with *them* ... *they* travelled through the whole island ... *they* met a Jewish sorcerer (Acts 13:4-6).

Then Luke mentions that the Roman governor of Cyprus sent for *Barnabas and Paul*. Should we conclude from the order of their names that up to this point Barnabas was the leading figure and that he led the journey? Was Barnabas the “team leader” and Paul and John Mark his co-workers (and not only because Barnabas was on home ground)?

When a sorcerer attempted to keep the governor from believing the Christian message, Paul took the initiative: filled with the Holy Spirit he addressed the man. The severe reproach, the announcement of divine punishment and its immediate realisation made a deep impression on the governor, who came to faith. For the first time since his preaching activities in Jerusalem (Acts 9:28), Paul is portrayed in Acts as acting independently (his activities in Tarsus are passed over in silence). We do not read of Barnabas' reaction to Paul's initiative, or of any other activities of Paul or Barnabas in Paphos.

After these dramatic events, an interesting change occurs in the account of Acts. Whereas Barnabas was previously mentioned first, there is now, in Acts 13:13, a turn-of-phrase to “Paul and his companions ...” – an expression which includes Barnabas, but puts him in a different position. Paul apparently stepped out of the shadow of Barnabas and assumed the leadership of the team. Barnabas and Paul had reached a critical point in their relationship – and came through it. Barnabas the leader became the “second

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7 A number of reasons have been proposed for the general North-Western orientation of Paul's mission starting from Jerusalem. The influence of Barnabas and of Cyprus as the first destination on the first missionary journey described in detail by Luke is often neglected. For Paul's early period and mission strategy, cf. Riesner (1998).

man". However, from the backseat, so to speak, he continued to accompany and support Paul faithfully.<sup>8</sup>

The *Laudatio on Barnabas* of Alexander Monachos from the sixth century AD praises Barnabas:

In spite of the God-inspired Scriptures mentioning him first everywhere, Barnabas himself passed the first place over to those around him and was content to take second place, carefully imitating the Lord who had said: 'Learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble-hearted' (Matt. 11:28; 25:463-478). (Kollmann, 1998:88.)<sup>9</sup>

Luke's account contains two possible explanations for this change in leadership. It might have been for geographical reasons: Barnabas knew his way about on Cyprus, while Paul would have been more familiar with Asia Minor, the area to which they departed from Paphos. In this context Luke also introduces a change of name: up to here Luke has referred to Paul by his Jewish name *Saul*; from here on he uses his Roman name *Paul*. The combination of a Jewish name and a Roman name was common among diaspora Jews in the first century. Was Paul, as a Roman citizen, better qualified or in less danger as the leader of the mission team in a largely Roman context than Barnabas (cf. Acts 16:37-39), who as a local and as a Levite had led the mission to the synagogues of the Jews in Cyprus from Salamis to as far as Paphos? The change in leadership may therefore also have been for pragmatic reasons.

This change in the order of the names and in leadership became the pattern for the subsequent course of the journey. In Pisidian Antioch, it was the Pharisee and Roman citizen Paul of Tarsus (a prominent town in that part of Asia Minor) who delivered a major sermon in the synagogue, even though both missionaries were asked to give a speech (Acts 13:15 ff.).<sup>10</sup> Paul healed a lame man in Roman Lystra

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8 Although Branch (2007:20) argues a similar case, she rightly cautions against far-reaching conclusions: "Paul from here in Acts becomes the more prominent or *at least vocal one*." Elsewhere Branch (2007:24) speaks of Paul emerging from Barnabas' shadow "as the primary, vocal advocate of a gospel that was gentile-friendly and did not require circumcision". There is no indication that Barnabas did not share this gospel fully.

9 Full treatment of the history of the reception of Barnabas will be provided in the forthcoming third volume of *Encyclopedia of the Bible and its reception*.

10 Did Paul preach on this and other occasions in view of the gentile God-fearers and proselytes in the Jewish synagogues? Would his Roman citizenship have

and later incurred the wrath of the people. While the verbs and pronouns still appear in the third person plural throughout the account (“they”),<sup>11</sup> activities particular to Barnabas are not mentioned as they are for Paul.

Obviously, this change of focus and the silence around Barnabas is also due to Luke’s overall purpose. In the form of a narrative Luke’s Acts intends to present a broad, apologetic defence of the much-debated Pauline gospel, and therefore of Paul and of his mission. It is, however, worthwhile to examine this situation more closely. Barnabas did not leave as John Mark had done (Acts 13:13 – what exactly caused that return is debated, see below), nor did Barnabas withdraw inwardly and distance himself from Paul and his particular ministry.

After the change in Acts 13:13, there is a first interesting exception to this order of names and the leadership pattern in the account of the first missionary journey in Acts 14:14.<sup>12</sup> After the healing miracle in Lystra (a man crippled from birth sprang up and began to walk), the local people imagined that in Paul and Barnabas their gods had appeared among them in human form (Acts 14:11 ff.). They identified Barnabas with Zeus and Paul they called Hermes (Acts 14:12). The logic of their identification is explicitly mentioned: “because Paul was the chief speaker”. Usually the speaker would be seen to be the leader of a group of people. Here, however, they identify Barnabas with the main deity (rarely inclined to communicate directly with mere humans). Because Paul appears to have served as his messenger, they identified him with Hermes, a god who fulfilled this particular role in the Hellenistic-Roman pantheon.<sup>13</sup> The order of names in Acts 14:12 reflects the assessment and religious values of the

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given the message greater credibility and underlined the politically non-subversive nature of their ministry? See the charge in Acts 16:20 against Paul and Silas in Roman Philippi: “These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.”

11 For example it is said that both of them proclaimed the gospel with considerable success in the synagogue of Iconium and performed signs and wonders (Acts 14:1-3).

12 For the other exception in Acts 15:12, see below. Compare also the discussion by Branch (2007:5) who notes: “The tradition in Biblical narrative is that the most important person is named first.”

13 For surveys cf. Martin (1999) and Graf (1999); for the combination of both deities in this particular area, cf. Breytenbach (1996:31-38).

local gentile population: to avoid ruffling any divine feathers one had better identify and acclaim the higher deity first.

Luke's following account of the missionaries' response to this identification also mentions Barnabas first: "When the apostles *Barnabas and Paul* heard of it, they tore their clothes ..." (Acts 14:14). Luke might have had any of several reasons for choosing this order (for detailed treatment of the whole Lystra episode, cf. Jervell, 1998:371-82; Bechard, 2000; Breytenbach, 1996:21-97). Was he simply following the order of Acts 14:12 and, in a sense, the local reasoning? Did he follow or revert to the "old" order of the names as this was not a matter of leadership, but of Jewish monotheism and piety (the main point being that both missionaries acted exemplary)? Did Barnabas perhaps first realise the local misunderstanding of the miracle and the intentions to worship them, and first express his utter disdain by tearing his clothes, whereupon Paul followed suit? As both men originally came from the Jewish diaspora, both were acquainted with gentile religiosity. Was Barnabas with his Levitical background and his resulting association with the temple cult in Jerusalem (cf. Acts 4:36) possibly more sensitive to such issues than Paul? Whatever the precise reasons, the intentions of the people of Lystra were so blasphemous to any Jew of the time (cf. Acts 10:25 ff.; 12:22 ff.) that action had to be taken immediately. Paul reacted as immediately and forcefully as Barnabas.

Barnabas was the kind of person who could step back if someone else – even if it was his own former "apprentice" – could do things as well as, or maybe even better than he himself, or when for other reasons it was wiser that these things should be done by Paul. Barnabas, the "first man" of this team, in his relationship with Paul became a "second man", who continued to join in as a second man, and seems to have done so readily. Barnabas did not embark upon a power struggle, nor did he withdraw to sulk – rather, he continued to support his gifted protégé. Whether he knew that Paul was God's chosen vessel to carry his name before the Gentiles (Acts 9:15; 22:17-21; cf. also Gal. 2:7) or had himself recognised Paul's potential, is unknown.

To this day, some mentors, teachers and leaders are privileged to share the experience of Barnabas. Few things could be worse for leaders than the failure or even the refusal to encourage and help people to develop their full potential. At times, the obstruction of others happens, thereby preventing them from surpassing the present leaders.

Barnabas was ready to adopt the second position in this mission team, but was by no means less active. Throughout the account, Barnabas was there whenever he was needed and supported Paul's ministry wherever he could. The missionary journey on which they had embarked under the lead of Barnabas remained their common mission, even if the tasks in the team were now distributed differently: for example, after Paul's sermon in Pisidian Antioch, he and Barnabas spoke to those in the audience who wished to discuss matters further (Acts 13:43). On the following Sabbath, Paul and Barnabas spoke boldly (Acts 13:46). Together, they shook off the dust from their feet and went on to Iconium (Acts 13:51) where they went to the synagogue to preach. They stayed for a long time, taught openly and worked miracles (Acts 14:1-3), et cetera.

## **6. Acts 13:13: the departure of John Mark and issues of leadership**

In the context of our study of the relationship between Barnabas and Paul, the brief reference to John Mark in Acts 13:13 deserves attention. John Mark is mentioned previously in the account of Acts. The house of his mother in Jerusalem was an important meeting place of the Church in Jerusalem (Acts 12:12; compare Gehring, 2004:128-196). Barnabas and John Mark were related to each other: John was the nephew or cousin of Barnabas (compare Col. 4:10). When Barnabas and Paul returned from Jerusalem to Antioch, they took John Mark with them (Acts 12:25). Presumably he was another person whose potential Barnabas saw and whom he wished to mentor.

In the narrative of the first missionary journey, John Mark first appears in Salamis on the island of Cyprus as the assistant of Barnabas and Paul (Acts 13:5), who had been commissioned by the Church in Antioch for the work to which the Holy Spirit had called them (Acts 13:2; this is not specifically mentioned in the case of John Mark). After the events in Cyprus (Acts 13:4-12), the crossing over to Asia Minor and the imminent journey into the interior, John Mark left Barnabas and Paul in Perge in Pamphylia and returned to Jerusalem (Acts 13:13). Branch says (2007:5): "Significantly in terms of the later working relationship between the two strong leaders Barnabas and Paul, John Mark leaves them in Pamphylia." Several explanations have been provided for this, but it was probably an unplanned departure (for summaries, compare Barrett, 1994: 627; Jervell, 1998:352; and Pesch, 1986:33). Barrett (1994:627), for instance, writes:

John Mark may simply have lost enthusiasm for the work on which the party was engaged; he may have found conditions harder than he expected; he may have been frightened by the prospect of work in a strange place (he was a nephew of Barnabas, a Cypriote, so that work on the island may not have seemed so forbidding);<sup>14</sup> Ramsay thinks that the cause was Paul's change of plan arising out of his illness (he determined to strike up into the hills as a relief from fever) ...; he may not have approved of a mission that was showing signs of turning more and more to Gentiles.<sup>15</sup>

In his important study *Servants of the servant: a biblical theology of leadership*, Howell (2003:233) asks whether there was a direct link between the departure of John Mark (reported in Acts 13:13b) and the transfer of leadership from Barnabas to Paul, which we have noted above (expressed in Acts 13:13a and in other following references) in the change of the order of the names and in the way in which those participating in the journey are described in relation to Paul ("Paul and his companions"; Acts 13:10, literally "those who were around Paul"):<sup>16</sup>

The narrative ... perhaps points to the change in leadership of the team from Barnabas to Paul to explain Mark's action. A shift in terminology occurs in 13:9 where Saul is designated for the first time by his Roman name, Paul. Until this point the two are always referred to as 'Barnabas and Saul' .... Upon arrival in Perga the group is identified as "Paul and his companions" (13:13). After this the regular order becomes 'Paul and Barnabas'. (Howell, 2003:233.)<sup>17</sup>

John Mark had likely been drawn to the work through his relationship with his cousin Barnabas. When Paul stepped

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14 Were some of John Mark's relatives also on the island despite the fact that his mother had a house in Jerusalem?

15 According to the *Laudatio on Barnabas* of Alexander Monachos, John Mark departed out of fear (22.403-16; cf. Kollmann, 1998:89). See also the presentation in the *Acts of Barnabas* 5-9 (Kollmann, 1998:77 ff.).

16 Volker Kessler, drew my attention to Howell's interesting study.

17 Cf. Acts 13:42 ff., 46, 50; 14:1, 3, 20, 23; 15:22, 35. For the exceptions in Acts 14:12, 14 and 15:12, 25, cf. Howell (2003:233):

The exceptions to the rule are when Barnabas and Paul are designated by the Lystran animists as the incarnations of Zeus and Hermes respectively ... and when they are viewed from the vantage point of the Jerusalem church ... Barnabas' home church.

forward as the more dynamic preacher (cf. Acts 13:16; 14:8) and aggressive trail-blazer, Mark became disillusioned. (Howell, 2003:234.)

What counts in favour of Howell's suggestion is the fact that it accounts for the departure of John Mark with reference to the immediate context (Acts 13:13b and 13a). According to this explanation, Paul's assumption of leadership of the team caused the departure of John Mark. Whether this was accompanied by an open conflict (which Luke is not hesitant to report elsewhere; cf. Acts 15:1-7, 36-40) we do not know.

If this linkage of the two events is valid, it would mean that John Mark was not willing to accept the change in leadership from his relative Barnabas to Paul to such an extent that he saw no alternative as to return to Jerusalem. John Mark's unwillingness and ensuing departure might have been caused by his insistence, from his point of view, on the greater status and honour of his relative, Barnabas: there might have been seniority in age; Barnabas' Levitical descent might have played a role – a privilege that possibly also applied to John Mark himself; and Barnabas had been a Christian long before Paul's conversion and had gained the respect of the leading figures in Jerusalem (cf. Acts 4:36 ff.). In addition, Barnabas had ministered in both Jerusalem and Antioch before Paul even came on the scene.<sup>18</sup>

John Mark may also have refused to acknowledge the leadership of Paul for various reasons, such as mistrust of the former persecutor of Jerusalem (cf. Acts 9:26), personal bad experiences with Paul (Acts 8:3: "Paul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison" – later the mother of John Mark is mentioned as the owner of a house in Jerusalem, Acts 12:12), greater trust in his relative Barnabas whom he had known so much longer, possibly also misgivings about Paul's mission theology, practice and strategy, or jealousy of this "other mentee" of Barnabas. Did John Mark see in Paul also "merely" an assistant of Barnabas, such as he himself was (Acts 13:5)? Possibly John Mark also felt that he had been passed over and he might have considered himself more gifted for

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18 Howell (2003:235) comments on John Mark: "His personal pride may have been injured if, as seems likely, Mark found it difficult when Barnabas began to cede leadership of the team to Paul."

leadership than Paul.<sup>19</sup> For John Mark, departure seems to have been preferable to submitting to Paul's leadership, whereas further collaboration with Paul under the leadership of his relative Barnabas might have been an acceptable option.

With his early departure, John Mark missed the opportunity to work together with Paul under Paul's leadership and to give Paul a chance in his new leadership role – even if for a limited time, or only as an experiment. Can the sharp disagreement between Paul and Barnabas about a further trip with John Mark, which led to their parting of ways, also be explained along these lines (Acts 15:36-41)?<sup>20</sup> Acts 15:38 states that Paul decided not to take with them one who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not accompanied them in the work. According to this statement of Paul, it was John Mark's failure to assist in accomplishing the task for which the missionaries had been commissioned that led to this decision, not strained interpersonal relationships or other misgivings (yet, would Paul have been aware of them?). Was Paul perhaps more task-oriented, while Barnabas was willing to consider the reasons for John Mark's return, and was this the reason for Barnabas' wish to give John Mark a second chance (Acts 15:37)?

If there really is a link between the change in leadership and the departure of John Mark, the reaction of Barnabas is even more surprising. He did not depart with his relative John Mark to Jerusalem (from where he had come to Antioch – Acts 11:22 ff.), and John Mark's motives and reservations against Paul did not influence Barnabas' own stance towards Paul. Barnabas' personal principles and past experiences with Paul, the commission of the Holy Spirit and the leaders in Antioch to do the work which was not yet completed, and his long-standing relationship with Paul (including the active ceding of leadership to him, or allowing him to assume the leadership) were more important to Barnabas than a harmonious relationship with his relative during the journey and with the extended family at home. Barnabas' loyalty to Paul is a challenge to

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19 John Mark's obvious disadvantage was that Paul had been set apart and called by the Holy Spirit and commissioned by the leaders of the Church in Antioch. We cannot be certain that John Mark was aware of this.

20 According to Acts 15:39, Barnabas took John Mark on a further missionary journey to Cyprus (for later accounts of this journey, cf. Kollmann, 1998:66-93; John Mark is the fictitious author of the *Acts of Barnabas*). Howell (2003:234) seems to assume that John Mark later sought to rejoin the missionary team of his own accord ("... only to return later to see a second chance").

leaders in societies that value and cherish family relationships above all else. Continuing with Paul and letting John Mark depart on his own was Barnabas' answer to John Mark, and his challenge to contemporary leaders.

If we take Barnabas' nickname and its interpretation in Acts 4:36 as "son of encouragement" into account, we might presume that Barnabas – either before departing for Jerusalem or at a later stage – attempted to motivate John Mark to further work under Paul's leadership. Whether this happened and what arguments were employed, we do not know. Barnabas' suggestion in Acts 15:37 of taking John Mark along seems to imply that John Mark would have been willing to join the team once more.

Experienced and new leaders should expect reactions like those of John Mark to the transfer of leadership responsibility. When leadership is handed over consciously and in an orderly manner, care should be taken that the move is communicated clearly and sensitively. It should also be done in such a way that others can understand when and for what reasons changes will be made (does the incidental change in the order of Barnabas' and Paul's names possibly suggest a lack of clear agreement? Were the change and the reasons for it – if it was a deliberate change – clearly communicated to John Mark?). Colleagues who for various reasons, be they legitimate or not, refuse to accept a change in leadership will have to consider other work or employment. They should do so only after a period of careful examination (of themselves, of the new leaders, of the reasons for the change, and of the overall situation). During this period they should give the new leadership a fair chance.

## **7. Acts 15: Paul and Barnabas in Jerusalem and their separation**

After their return to Antioch, Paul and Barnabas continued to serve in the church. Together they got into trouble with some Jewish Christians from Jerusalem who had other convictions regarding the inclusion of Gentiles in the company of the people of God. For them, the Gentiles first had to become Jews: "This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them ... So Paul and Barnabas..." (Acts 15:2). Perhaps the order of names suggests that the change in leadership was not limited to their time away. As a consequence of the conflict, Paul and Barnabas and some others travelled together to Jerusalem. On their way through Phoenicia and Samaria, and also in Jerusalem, they reported about God's gracious

dealings with the Gentiles (Acts 15:3 ff.). What God had done was affirmed by these two witnesses.

At the so-called apostolic council, Barnabas and Paul told the assembly of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles. It is noteworthy that in this context (a meeting of Christians in Jerusalem, a church with which Barnabas had a long-term relationship) Barnabas is again mentioned before Paul: "... and listened to Barnabas and Paul ..." (Acts 15:12). Does this change of order suggest that Paul respected Barnabas and his relationship with the Christians in Jerusalem and could also step back, rather than insist on taking the lead in a situation where the testimony of Barnabas might be valued more than his own? Or did Barnabas realise that Paul was a controversial figure in Jerusalem and that it would therefore be wise for him to take the leading role? Once before Barnabas had pleaded Paul's case in Jerusalem (Acts 9:26 ff.).

After the council, the ways of Barnabas and Paul parted (Acts 15:36-40). Despite their long and successful co-operation, they had a disagreement which became so sharp that they parted company. The dispute causing this parting was about whether or not to give John Mark (the relative of Barnabas), who had deserted them earlier (Acts 13:13), a "second chance" by taking him along on a further journey. Paul eventually went with Silas on his second missionary journey. Barnabas took John Mark and sailed with him to Cyprus, where they had ministered together before.<sup>21</sup>

While Barnabas had been prepared to take the second place and to leave the lead to Paul, and while Paul seems to have respected Barnabas' prominence and role in Jerusalem and Antioch, both men still had their own convictions, which eventually brought their direct co-operation to an end. We do not read of a consultation between Barnabas, Paul or both of them and John Mark (or others). We do not know whether a compromise was considered. Barnabas' decision underlines that he was by no means a weak man. The incident further shows that co-operation and mutual acceptance of leadership can (and perhaps should) end, when it would affect core con-

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21 John Mark seems to have coped with the mission in Cyprus during the first journey. He deserted the team once it crossed over to the mainland of Asia Minor (Acts 13:13). For suggestions about John Mark's motivation, see above.

victions which it would be unwise to deny.<sup>22</sup> In the case of Barnabas and Paul, the result was not a disaster, but the establishment of two mission teams. Further references to John Mark in the New Testament suggest that Barnabas' more lenient attitude to John Mark bore its fruit later on.

## **8. Later references to Barnabas in the New Testament**

Other references to Barnabas in the New Testament are limited. The precise time of Paul's argument with Peter in Antioch, which Paul mentions in Galatians 2:11-14, is difficult to determine. Presumably it happened before the council of Acts 15 (are the "brothers who came from Judaea" mentioned in Acts 15:1 identical to those who "came from James" in Gal. 2:12?). We know of the event only through Paul's account of it. The issue was whether the gentile Christians should keep the Mosaic Law and whether even Jewish Christians may set it aside in order to have table fellowship with gentile Christians. The latter seems to have happened before certain people had come from James to Antioch: "for Peter used to eat with the Gentiles". On their arrival the Jewish Christians withdrew from this table fellowship (cf. Paul's interpretation of it in v. 12). How Peter, the other Jewish Christians and Barnabas justified their behaviour we do not know. Presumably they regarded their withdrawal from the gentile Christians as a pragmatic step rather than as a matter of principle, as Paul understood it to be. Paul reproached Peter and the other Jewish Christians, including Barnabas, of hypocrisy in their dealings with the gentile Christians.

In any case, as far as Luke tells us, Barnabas had the magnanimity not to be put off by Paul's reproach and not to start an argument (after all, Antioch was the place to which Barnabas had brought Paul and where he had mentored him). If this incident is to be dated before the apostolic council in Acts 15, then Barnabas later on went to Jerusalem with the same Paul to defend their case and practice – despite what had happened. In addition, Barnabas later planned a

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22 Another factor in this separation might have been a difference in focus of ministry. Did Paul see his task in apostolic mission and church planting, while Barnabas was perhaps more geared toward pastoral ministry? Was it also a difference in personality – being more task-oriented vs. focusing on encouragement? However, Paul's initial purpose for the second journey was to return and visit the Christians who had come to faith during the first journey (Acts 15:36, "to see how they are").

further missionary journey with Paul. Apparently Barnabas harboured no grudges against Paul.

In 1 Corinthians 9:6 Paul asks rhetorically: “Or is it only I and Barnabas who must work for a living?” Paul could be referring to his and Barnabas’ experiences during their first missionary journey or during later periods of collaboration (which we do not know of otherwise), or even to their practice when they were not or no longer working together. If the latter is the case, this apparent exception among the early Christian leaders (cf. 1 Cor. 9:5) suggests that Paul remained faithful to the principles of his mentor even after their ways had parted – Paul continued to follow the pattern they had established together. However, it could also mean that Barnabas continued to follow their common pattern in his own mission (which Paul was familiar with), or even that Barnabas remained faithful to the principles he had adopted from Paul. If, in 1 Corinthians 9:6, Paul refers to their previous ministry together, he remembered the decisive time with Barnabas in some detail years later, and still followed the practice he came to know then (the first missionary journey took place in about 47/48 AD, and 1 Cor. was presumably written in 54/55 AD).

Later in the New Testament, the name of John Mark appears in a list of greetings towards the end of Paul’s letter to the Colossians (Col. 4:10; John Mark identified as a relative of Barnabas). Barnabas had mentored and contributed to the development of John Mark, his own co-worker (Barnabas and John Mark had gone back to Cyprus after parting ways with Paul; Acts 15:39) so that John Mark later wanted and could be part of Paul’s mission – the mission on which Barnabas had had a strong influence in its early stages. The references to John Mark in 2 Timothy 4:11 and Philemon 24 also suggest that there was some kind of reconciliation later on between him and Paul. Probably both men had learnt their lesson.<sup>23</sup>

In addition, Barnabas was no stranger to the Christians in Colossae.<sup>24</sup> Despite parting ways with Barnabas and being on the verge of the second missionary journey himself, Paul must either have

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23 John Mark is possibly identical with Mark, the “son” of Peter mentioned in 1 Peter 5:13.

24 Detailed analysis of the references to Barnabas in the literature of the ancient church (especially the apocryphal *Acts of Barnabas* and the *Laudatio Barnabae* of Alexander Monachos, of which German translations appear in Kollmann, 1998:76-101) is beyond the scope of this article.

spoken to the Christians in Colossae about Barnabas (had Barnabas become so much part of his biography and/or theology?) or Barnabas was personally known to some of them in that he had met them in Colossae or elsewhere. This may also indicate that at a later stage Barnabas was again involved in Paul's mission.

## **9. Summary and epilogue: Barnabas the mentor, the leader and the servant**

Barnabas appears in the New Testament as a man

- who knew when to talk and what to say, but who also recognised when concrete action was needed instead of, or in addition to his words;
- who could submit to others and forego gaining status for himself;
- who had faith that even fierce persecutors can become followers of Christ;
- who showed the courage of faith and the readiness to take a risk in order to bring people from the fringes right into the centre of the church;
- who looked for people to join the ministry, who promoted them and fostered their development;
- who was able to serve in the first as well as in the second position;
- who could accept it when his own role changed and others moved to centre stage, or when his co-worker took over as main leader;
- who was present and ready to help, even when his own role had become less prominent;
- who challenges "first" and "second" persons to be good and spiritually-minded "first" and "second" people, just as he, who became and remained both a "first" and a "second" man was.

All of these leadership qualities were embedded in a pastoral concern: "Barnabas clearly and consistently recognised God's grace in unlikely people – the murderer Saul, the uncircumcised Gentiles at Antioch, and his cousin John Mark who seemed a fearful ... deserter." (Branch, 2007:23.)

The island of Cyprus, from which Barnabas came, is situated between Europe and Africa.<sup>25</sup> This is where he ministered and where important changes took place in his life and ministry. It was to Cyprus that he later returned with John Mark, in order to give him a second chance in an environment where he had previously ministered successfully. Thus it is appropriate to concentrate on Barnabas, the servant-leader, in this African-European collection of essays on issues of leadership in context.

Luke's account of Barnabas and Barnabas' relationship to Paul raises several crucial issues and poses challenges for leaders and mentors, for men and women in primary and secondary roles, both in Africa and in Europe. Many of us will have to leave the beaten track in order to reach the high standard set by Barnabas (and Paul). Yet, if we dare to move to meet Barnabas and Paul, we will also meet each other, which will allow us to learn with each other and from each other.

Barnabas challenges us to rethink our experiences and convictions about leadership and our journey of faith and to become the leaders and mentors that our churches, educational and other institutions, and our societies at large so desperately need. On this road, may Barnabas, whose humility in many ways is at odds with the methods and values of leadership in our cultures, inspire us.<sup>26</sup> This humility is beyond our nature. However, it comes (and grows) as the fruit of the Holy Spirit who starts to work in us as we come to know and submit to Christ, who Himself set the supreme example of humble service.

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25 For the history and significance of Cyprus, cf. Schollmeyer (2009).

26 In the Greco-Roman context of the New Testament humility was not a virtue, but rather something shameful. In contemporary culture humility is often misunderstood to mean an unhealthy self-abasement. Kretzschmar (2005:163) offers a challenging definition based on insights from St. Benedictine's writings:

Humility, in order to be correctly understood, must be linked to the Latin word *humus* meaning earth or soil. Thus the essence of humility is to recognise and admit our creatureliness and our dependence on God for our very existence and also for our continual survival. Humility is closely linked to facing the truth, admitting we are neither self-sufficient nor sinless, 'humility is recognizing the truth'. This is where the inward spiritual disciplines of meditation and prayer are so important. True humility is learned through these spiritual disciplines (cf. also Vest, 2000).

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